

**Ministry of Children,
Community and Social
Services**

**Ministère des Services à
l'enfance et des Services
sociaux et communautaires**



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March 31, 2020

TO: Ontario Works Delivery Partners

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City of Toronto
OMSSA
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FROM: Susan Erwin
Assistant Deputy Minister
Social Assistance Programs Division

SUBJECT: Enhanced Discretionary Benefits – New Ontario Works COVID-19 Emergency Benefit

Last week, I wrote to you with information about the government's investment and expansion of Ontario Works emergency assistance and discretionary benefits. These initiatives were part of a larger announcement to support vulnerable Ontarians as the COVID-19 outbreak evolves across Ontario.

These changes enable delivery partners to provide additional discretionary benefits to those currently in receipt of social assistance, by removing the cap on these benefits for March and April 2020.

Expansion of discretionary benefits will provide additional support to Ontario Works and ODSP recipients who are facing one-time exceptional costs as a result of COVID-19.

Discretionary Benefits for COVID-19 related Costs

We have heard from you that we need to manage delivery capacity and demands on frontline staff. We have also heard that it is important to have consistency across ODSP and OW for discretionary benefits to prevent confusion between systems and for our clients.

The ministry is therefore directing a one-time, needs based discretionary COVID-19 Emergency Benefit for Ontario Works and ODSP. This will create a single, consistent benefit for COVID-19 related costs across both programs.

The maximum amounts that may be issued for COVID-19 related costs are \$100 for singles, and \$200 for families. The ministry will adjust the ODSP Emergency Benefit to match these amounts.

This one-time benefit is intended to improve client access to needed support and reduce the need for ODSP recipients to seek assistance for discretionary benefits through Ontario Works offices.

This benefit is to be issued on request when a recipient identifies additional expenses directly related to the COVID-19 outbreak. It should be provided based on needs identified by the client and not as an across-the-board payment. While verification of costs is not required, caseworkers should use their discretion to confirm that clients are facing extraordinary expenses before issuing the benefit.

Examples of these expenses include:

- Personal Protective Equipment required for hospital or clinic visits, e.g. for dialysis, doctors' appointments for an ongoing health-related issue
- Cleaning supplies for those who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or a family member who has been diagnosed.
- Delivery or travel costs for food or other essential supplies for recipients or families who are self-isolating.
- Additional costs for food as a result of food scarcity (e.g. not having access to lower cost staples).

The Emergency Benefit is intended to replace any previous COVID-19 discretionary benefits. Administrators can continue to work with partners to find solutions and provide support for COVID-19 through other funding streams.

While Ontario Works Administrators continue to have discretion to provide benefits to both Ontario Works and ODSP recipients, the ministry recognizes current demands on frontline staff that will limit your ability to respond to non-critical OW and ODSP discretionary benefit requests. The ministry is working with ODSP caseworkers to limit referrals to Ontario Works for non-COVID-19 related benefits during the emergency period to those that are necessary to prevent danger to health or safety.

Please see the attached Q&A for additional details.

Thank you for your feedback and advice as we work to meet the needs of our most vulnerable. We will continue to engage with you as our response evolves to the changing nature of COVID-19. Together, we will support our communities during this uncertain time.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Susan Erwin
Assistant Deputy Minister
Social Assistance Programs Division

Temporary Ontario Works COVID-19 Emergency Benefit Q&A

Note: A Q&A covering expanded discretionary benefits was issued March 24, 2020, titled Emergency Assistance for Vulnerable Ontarians: Temporary Changes Q&A. Where any discrepancy exists between this document and the earlier one, this document will prevail.

1. What is the Emergency Benefit?

The Emergency Benefit is a one-time discretionary benefit that is intended to provide emergency financial support to social assistance recipients for special services, items or payments, at the discretion of the caseworker, to address health and safety issues related to COVID-19.

For example, additional costs for personal protective equipment, staple foods, non-medical transportation, hygiene and cleaning supplies.

2. Why is the Emergency Benefit being implemented?

The Emergency Benefit is being implemented to improve access to additional financial support for Ontario Works and ODSP recipients, and to reduce the need for ODSP recipients to seek assistance for exceptional COVID-19 costs through Ontario Works discretionary benefits.

3. Who can apply for the benefit?

Any Ontario Works recipient currently in receipt of financial assistance (including those in receipt of Personal Needs Allowance) who identifies a need for additional support can request the Emergency Benefit on behalf of the benefit unit.

Note: ODSP recipients will apply for the benefit through their ODSP caseworker.

4. How will recipients apply for the benefit?

Ontario Works recipients will need to contact their caseworker to outline their individual situation and their needs.

Recipients are not required to complete a form or visit their local office to request the benefit. Recipients are not required to provide verification for expenses.

5. How much is a recipient eligible to receive?

This Emergency Benefit is a **one-time** discretionary benefit.

- Singles are eligible for a maximum of \$100
- Families are eligible for a maximum of \$200

6. How often can a recipient request the Emergency Benefit?

The Emergency Benefit is a **one-time** benefit only, however to provide maximum flexibility, caseworkers can issue partial payments up to the maximum amount of \$100 for singles and \$200 for families.

7. Why is the benefit discretionary?

The discretionary nature of this benefit is intended to provide maximum flexibility for caseworkers to address the immediate and varying needs of clients.

8. How long will the benefit be available?

The one-time benefit will be in place for two months (March and April). Within these two months, the benefit unit can receive the Emergency Benefit one time up to the eligible maximum (\$100 for singles, \$200 for families).

9. Can Ontario Works Administrators proactively issue the Emergency Benefit to the full caseload?

No. The emergency benefit is to be issued on request only and must not be issued as an across-the-board type payment.

10. Can ODSP recipients still get Ontario Works discretionary benefits if they receive the ODSP Emergency Benefit?

The Emergency Benefit is intended to eliminate the need for additional discretionary benefits payments **for COVID-19 related costs**.

While Ontario Works Administrators continue to have discretion to provide benefits to both Ontario Works and ODSP recipients, we understand that OW administrators are currently prioritizing urgent health and safety related requests for all social assistance clients. For non-COVID 19 related needs, the ministry is requesting ODSP caseworkers only refer clients with urgent health and safety needs at this time.

Ontario Works caseworkers will be able to check whether or not the ODSP caseworker has already provided the Emergency Benefit to the recipient (see instructions below).

11. Are there any changes to Discretionary Benefits policy or expenditures for First Nations delivering Ontario Works?

No, there are no policy changes to the First Nations discretionary formula.

Ontario Works First Nation Delivery Partners continue to deliver discretionary benefits that are culturally appropriate to reflect the priorities of First Nations. This means the province will cover 100% of all discretionary benefits expenditures, including, housing related needs that were added as part of policy changes that took effect in April 2018.

12. Will the ministry consider extending or allowing additional payments of the Ontario Works/ODSP Emergency Benefit beyond April?

Due to the temporary nature of this measure, the ministry will continue to monitor the evolving situation with COVID-19 and communicate to municipalities on the need to extend or allow additional Emergency Benefit payments beyond April 30, 2020.

SAMS

13. How can the Emergency Benefit be issued in SAMS?

To issue the Emergency Benefit in SAMS, staff must use the Additional Benefits Wizard to issue the benefit type “Discretionary Special Services/Items” and select the benefit name “Emergency Benefit”. Refer to the Issuing, Denying and Cancelling Benefits guide (page 5) for steps on how to create an Additional Benefit.

The Emergency Benefit has replaced the additional benefit “Chiropractic services”. Note: Until this can be updated within SAMS, this benefit will appear as “Chiropractic services” on the Determination screen.

14. How can Ontario Works staff check to see if an ODSP recipient has already received the ODSP Emergency Benefit?

From the Person page in SAMS, navigate to the Cases tab. From there you will find the Emergency Benefit case. Click on the Reference Number and then navigate to the Determinations screen. Under Determination Results, you can see the Emergency Benefit coverage period and the amount issued.

15. How do I issue the additional benefit “Chiropractic services”?

This benefit is very rarely used in SAMS. Ontario Works sites should determine locally the most appropriate Discretionary benefit to use.

16. Can caseworkers issue the Emergency Benefit as in in-kind benefit?

Yes. This benefit cannot be issued as a voucher; however, it can be issued directly as a payment to a third party. This can be completed in the same manner as all Additional Benefits. Refer to the [Issuing, Denying and Cancelling Benefits](#) guide (page 10) for steps on how to issue an Additional Benefit to another payee.

FUNDING/REIMBURSEMENT OF COSTS

17. How will municipal/DSSAB Ontario Works delivery partners be reimbursed for Emergency Benefits expenditures?

All expenditures for Emergency Benefits will be reimbursed through the subsidy claim process and the rates \$100 per single person and \$200 per family will apply based on the caseloads for the

month. Additional reconciliation will be performed to ensure that the Emergency Benefit has been applied according to approved policy.

18. Is the previously announced temporary removal of the discretionary benefits spending cap still in place?

The temporary removal of the discretionary benefits spending cap (for March and April 2020) remains in place, subject to the Emergency Benefit limitations for COVID-19 related items/services.