



Pre-Budget Submission

**Presented to:
Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, MPP
Minister of Finance
C/O Budget Secretariat
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SUBMISSION TO THE PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS MINISTRY OF FINANCE

From

Connect 4 Life

The Connect 4 Life community welcomes the opportunity to provide input as part of the 2025 pre-budget consultations. Our recommendations to the Ontario government are aimed at supporting families, business and employment opportunities for Ontarians with disabilities, all of which we are confident will continue to enhance our communities and will help build a strong fiscal foundation for future generations.

Connect 4 Life is a Canadian charitable organization, with offices in Mississauga, Scarborough and Durham, dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities by providing programs and resources aimed at fostering success and breaking barriers.

Connect 4 Life – In Brief

Connect 4 Life delivers some of the most innovative and results-producing programs in Ontario for people with disabilities, their families, workplaces, and other areas of the greater community, in areas that focus on:

- Mental health awareness;
- Employment pathways and opportunities; and
- Skills development

These core areas strongly reflect Connect 4 Life's commitment to creating an inclusive, accessible, and equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive through job readiness training, mental wellness programs and barrier-free workshops for businesses, schools, and organizations.

What are the Issues that the Connect 4 Life community most frequently confronts?

Limited access to mental health support because of physical sensory, or communication barriers i.e. lack of sign language interpreters, inaccessible facilities.

Even when employed individuals do not receive the necessary workplace accommodations, i.e. modified schedules, assistive technology.

Not enough businesses prioritize or fully understand the value of inclusive hiring, thus resulting in fewer jobs that actively seek to hire persons with disabilities.

Skills development programs for persons with disabilities lack sufficient financial support, leading to limited availability and scope.

Connect 4 Life Recommends

1. Broaden provisions to mental health support and education services by including more materials and workers.

- We recommend a consideration of how to enhance not only compliance with AODA standards, but how to encourage greater private sector application. More effective and pro-active compliance of accessible communication methods and materials would do wonders to advance accessibility, with such measures aiming to increase captioning services; sign language interpreters; documents in digital, Braille, large print or other formats upon request; assistive technology; and registered social service workers with unique and/or specialized training.
- The aforementioned recommendation extends to captioning services and sign language interpreters as a way to ensure that mental health providers and educators offer their services in various in-person, virtual, and hybrid sessions to facilitate open and honest communication for individuals of different abilities (i.e., like those who are blind or deaf).
- Similarly, the integration of assistive technology and devices, like speech-to-text/text-to-speech software, screen readers, and adaptive communication devices for individuals with sensory or cognitive impairments, would advance greater participation in professional, personal, and academic settings.
- We also recommend an increase in the number of registered social service workers (RSSW) and related support personnel, a measure that would help extend the personal care and choices of people with

disabilities. Registered social service workers are specialists who provide counseling and assistance to vulnerable groups, offering essential support systems while also addressing social justice issues and community concerns. An RSSW is a cost-effective interface between the needs and goals of a person with a disability and the broader community.

2. Implement stronger workplace accommodation policies and guidelines to ensure full, equal, and productive participation and mitigate exclusion.

- AODA Standards have certainly helped in this regard. We recommend considering an increase to the funding for compliance and enforcement measures at the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario. And while stronger enforcement is one thing, perhaps a more creative approach (using the tax system, for example, or broader promotional measures such as public service announcements), might encourage pro-active implementation by employers to create crystal-clear policies for providing workplace accommodations (including offering modified schedules, assistive technology, and flexible work environments).
- Modified Schedules and Remote Work Options allow flexible working hours or remote working opportunities for employees who may need them due to physical or cognitive disabilities such as autism, aphasia, attention deficit, and dyscalculia. These options not only help integrate people with disabilities into the broader workforce, but measures such as these will also increasingly benefit other groups in the populations, such as older workers. And perhaps this ideal is something that is ideally (and creatively) promoted through the Ministry of Senior and Accessibility.
- In sum, while the AODA requires workplace accommodation policies that are clear, transparent, well-documented, and readily accessible to all employees, we recommend ways to consider enhancing these Standards, perhaps through refinement and update, and perhaps through the creative use of other broader government measures to encourage pro-active compliance. Engaging a more active and participatory workforce by all Ontarians can only serve to enhance Ontario's economic prosperity.

3. Support skills development and employment pathway programs to help people advance and/or upgrade their current careers or switch to a new one.

- The Government of Ontario has made positive strides toward providing more training and certification programs that help enable individuals with disabilities to upgrade their skills in their current field, stay competitive in

the job market, or transition to new career fields. We recommend looking to the broader non-profit sector to explore how such programs can be enhanced and possibly be made more cost-effective, by partnering with organizations like Connect4Life (and there are many more highly capable nonprofit organizations working with Ontarians with disabilities.)

- Consistent with the aforementioned recommendation, we encourage the development of structured employment pathways that provide mentorship in the field, and possibly in post-secondary education as well. This is all about equipping individuals with the skills and tools they need to be effective in the workforce. These pathways should include but not be limited to, internships and job placements to help individuals enter or re-enter the workforce. Again, nonprofits represent a critical conduit in the process, and they have proven track records in partnering with educational institutions, private sector companies and other nonprofits.

4. Support initiatives to lower living costs of families and individuals with disabilities.

- We recognize that all Ontarians are facing increased living costs, and that the Government of Ontario is actively trying to address these concerns with limited resources. That said, Ontarians with disabilities already face higher living costs (due to medical expenses, for example, or the requirements of assistive devices). We do not have a simple solution. But we are confident that at least a few constructive and workable ideas can be found through dialogue with all relevant Ontarians. Therefore, we recommend the establishment of a task force, with a firm deadline and a mandate to ensure do-ability of all ideas, with the aim of considering how to lower the living costs of families and individuals with disabilities, particularly those costs related to housing and transportation.

Conclusion

Everything from the challenges of unemployment and underemployment, unintended discrimination, issues related to simply getting into a building, lower income and higher living costs, will exacerbate the challenges of any vulnerable population; this is especially true for Ontarians with disabilities. Apart from facing consistent difficulties accessing services and transportation, navigating various built environments, and applying for jobs, persons with disabilities contribute significantly to the local and national economy and GDP. The Government of Ontario and key legislative measures, such as the AODA, have helped make constructive steps forward. That said, in the

experience of Connect4Life, too many Ontarians with disabilities remain marginalized, perhaps more so than any other population. Together we need to do more.

Addressing these barriers faced by persons with disabilities in mental health support, employment, and skills development is not only a matter of fairness but also a crucial step towards building a more inclusive and productive society. Investing in accessible mental health services, ensuring workplace accommodations, fostering inclusive hiring practices, and expanding funding for skills development programs, we can create opportunities for individuals with disabilities to thrive.

These recommendations reflect an opportunity to continue breaking barriers to the meaningful participation of Ontarians with disabilities, as well as to advance our collective goals of continually building a society where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can access the support and opportunities they need to excel.

Nonprofit Contributions Matter: We Help Make a Positive Difference

Nonprofit organizations, like Connect 4 Life, are uniquely positioned to provide the much-needed programs and services to Ontarians with disabilities as well as their broader communities, employers and families. We are endowed with the lived experience, the integration in local communities, and the missions to effect positive change for the greater common good.

Connect 4 Life - In Summary

Connect4Life is a not-for-profit organization that offers programs and resources that set up individuals facing disabilities for success. The organization frequently delivers programs and training that address key challenges and engage people with the right tools and support. Connect4Life has delivered its programs and services for over 10 years and remains committed to fostering connections and promoting well-being continues inspiring and uplifting communities.



**Connect 4 Life is Passionately Committed to
Empowering Individuals with Disabilities**

Mission and Vision

Drive positive social change by equipping individuals with disabilities with the necessary support and frameworks to showcase their talents, make confident contributions to society, and overcome perceived limitations.

Vision

A world where every community recognizes and embraces the valuable contributions of individuals with disabilities.