

2025 Ontario Caregiver Coalition Election Platform

The Ontario Caregiver Coalition is the voice of caregivers in Ontario. Since 2009, we have been advocating for recognition and support for the family, friends and neighbours whose unpaid care is the hidden backbone of Ontario's health system.

Caregivers are the unsung heroes of our health care system. Sacrificing their own mental, physical, and financial wellbeing, caregivers provide an irreplaceable amount of work for their family members, friends, and neighbours. Their collective contributions save health care systems across Canada an estimated \$30-40 billion annually.

Around 3.3 million Ontarians are unpaid caregivers, which is nearly 30% of our province's population. Of that, 850,000 provide over ten hours of care per week. Despite this, they are not getting the support they need. One-in-three caregivers in Ontario say they need additional help, more than in any other province.

Ontario can't afford to replace caregivers, so must do all it can to support them. The Ontario Caregiver Coalition has three recommendations to do just that:

1. Create an Ontario Caregiver Support Benefit, alleviating financial distress among caregivers while reducing admissions to our long-term care system;
2. Create a comprehensive respite strategy to guide the development of a respite services system for caregivers, with additional funding going to support existing programs; and
3. In alignment with Ontario's mental health strategy, allocate additional funding to existing mental health services for caregivers allowing for increased access to those vital programs.

Recommendation 1 – Alleviating Current Caregiver Financial Hardships:

Caregivers are struggling with the rising costs of living in our province. They often incur high costs for medical supplies, home modifications, travel, and private services not covered by public funding. Some even have to leave their jobs for their caregiver responsibilities, further adding to their financial distress. The OCC's 2024 Survey revealed that nearly half of unpaid caregivers experience financial hardships, with many dipping into savings or taking out loans to cover caregiving costs.

Financial strain not only impacts the quality of care caregivers are able to provide, such as making necessary therapies harder to access, but adds strain to our overburdened health and long term care systems. As individuals' finances break down, they are forced to turn to the health and long-term care system. This contributes to early or potentially avoidable admissions, leading to increased costs.



Current financial supports for caregivers are limited and complex. Tax credits and self-directed funding programs provide some relief, but for many, are insufficient and difficult to access. The vast majority of caregivers receive no financial support from government.

To create a provincial financial support system for caregivers that works, the OCC calls on all candidates to support the proposed Ontario Caregiver Support Benefit.

The Ontario Caregiver Support Benefit (OCSB) Would:

- Enhance financial support for caregivers. This is essential to improving their quality of life and sustaining the care they provide. The OCC proposes the introduction of the OCSB, a monthly direct financial support that will alleviate financial hardships and reduce strain on the healthcare system. This benefit could replace up to 7.8% of Ontario's long-term care beds, resulting in substantial health care savings for the province.
- Target support directly to caregivers already recognized as in need, such as those receiving or waitlisted for existing programs like Passport or Special Services at Home, as well as those that have difficulties accessing the existing caregiver tax credit.
- Provide meaningful financial assistance giving \$1,000 per month to eligible caregivers to cover their expenses.

- Be accessible with a simplified application and eligibility processes to ensure that all caregivers who need financial support can benefit.

Recommendation 2 – Providing and Enhancing Respite Services for Caregivers:

Caring for a loved one in need is a difficult, emotionally exhausting endeavour. The stress and strain it puts on individuals can lead to burnout, physical health decline, and mental health issues. In fact, caregivers who struggle to take breaks are twice as likely **to have** to cope with mental health struggles as those able to access respite care.

Respite care is essential for caregivers to maintain their well-being and continue providing high-quality care. It offers temporary relief from caregiving responsibilities, allowing caregivers to rest, recharge, and attend to their own health and personal needs. However, many caregivers struggle to access adequate respite services due to limited availability, high costs, and complex application processes.

Without adequate respite care both caregivers and the ones they support can suffer. When individuals are unable to access such support, it can lead to increased calls to 911, emergency room visits, hospital admissions, and early or preventable admissions into our long-term care facilities.

This is not a sustainable situation. Caregivers are past their breaking point.



Providing and Enhancing Respite Services for Caregivers Would:

- Provide immediate relief, by allocating additional dedicated funding to respite services to support caregivers in need.
- Repair our current fractured system, by committing to the development of a comprehensive and coordinated respite system for Ontario.
- Our government must create a **comprehensive respite strategy** to guide the development of the system. This strategy would be developed in collaboration with caregivers and local communities, while engaging all relevant bodies of our provincial government. It must promote collaboration across our government to ensure that caregivers have uninterrupted access to flexible, accessible, personalized and high-quality respite care. Our province must collect data on these services over time, to ensure that they are continuously improved.

Recommendation 3 – Strengthen Caregiver Mental Health Services:

The need for mental health supports among caregivers is critical. Caregivers often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to the demanding nature of their roles. They can often feel overwhelmed and isolated, as their duties can limit social interactions and personal time. The emotional strain of watching a loved one struggle with illness or disability, combined with financial pressures and lack of support, can exacerbate these feelings.

Without adequate mental health resources and respite, caregivers are at risk of burnout, which can further compromise their well being and the quality of care they provide.

Many caregivers who need mental health supports struggle to access them due to financial constraints, limited availability, and long wait times. There is a lack of mental health services that address the specific needs and experiences of caregivers. While there are examples of such services, they serve only small numbers of caregivers. Evaluations of mental health services for caregivers, such as those offered by the Ontario Caregiver Organization, shows that such services can be highly effective in reducing caregiver distress, as well as strengthening their confidence and capacity to maintain their extremely demanding roles.

How Can Mental Health Services for Caregivers be Improved?

We know that supporting mental health is an important concern for the government of Ontario, but much remains to be done. We believe that there are programs that can be built upon. However, there is a desperate need to increase access.

While it is important to spread awareness of mental health services and ensure they are easily accessible to caregivers, regardless of their location or financial situation, the impact is limited if caregivers simply find themselves waitlisted.



Allocating additional funding to expand capacity and increase access to mental health services targeted at unpaid caregivers will help to sustain care in our community for as long as possible.

Endorsements:



We can be contacted at ontariocaregivercoalitionocc@gmail.com. For more information about the OCC please see our website at www.ontariocaregivercoalition.ca, or follow us on social media.

