

INFORMATION ALERT: ARTS GRANTS AND ODSP / OW

Social assistance rules changed to better support artists in Ontario

A recent change to the rules in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW) will be a huge step forward for artists in Ontario who get benefits from these income support programs and receive arts grants.

On December 13, 2017, the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) announced that, effective that day, arts grants are exempt as income and assets in both ODSP and OW.

This means that artists who are on OW or ODSP and receive an arts grant will no longer have the money deducted from their monthly benefits, and will not have to risk becoming ineligible for continuing support from these programs. This important change will give artists on ODSP or OW the ability to pursue the creation of their art without fear of losing their monthly income and the health and other benefits that ODSP and OW provide. It will also reduce the huge administrative burden that artists previously faced with reporting the funds to ODSP or OW.

The change will eliminate the disincentive that many artists on ODSP or OW used to face to even apply for an arts grant. It will also open up new opportunities for artists on ODSP or OW to make their art and to contribute to the vibrancy of the cultural life of their communities, the province and the country.

Now that many arts funders in Ontario have specific grants for artists who have disabilities, this change by MCSS will be of particular benefit to artists who are on ODSP.

The only exception is that any funds in an arts grant that are specifically intended to pay for living costs will not be exempt. Those amounts will be deducted from monthly ODSP and OW benefits and will count as assets. But the impact will be lessened because the new rules include pro-rating those funds over the entire duration of the arts grant. As a result, artists will be much less likely to be cut off ODSP or OW in the month after they receive their arts grant, but instead will see their regular monthly benefits lowered over the entire period of time that the arts grant is intended to cover.

What does this mean for me as an artist?

If you are an artist on ODSP or OW and you receive an arts grant, you will have to report the money to your caseworker. You should do this by giving your caseworker a copy of the Notification Letter that you receive from the funding agency.

The Notification Letter should state that the grant you received is intended to support the project that you outlined in your application. It should also state whether or not the grant includes any funds specifically intended to cover living expenses, as well as how much of the grant is for that purpose. That amount will be deducted from your ODSP or OW benefits and counted as an asset. If your Notification letter does not have one of these statements, contact the funding agency to ask them to re-issue it with the statement.

The ODSP and Arts Grants Coalition (see below) is currently updating its pamphlet about arts grants, which will have more information about this change for artists on ODSP and OW. The pamphlet will be available from the websites of the member organizations of the coalition.

If you have problems with the way that your arts grant is treated – for example, if your caseworker says your arts grant will be deducted from your benefits even if it isn't specifically for living expenses – you may want to contact your local community legal clinic for help. Take this backgrounder with you to help explain the change. You can find your local clinic at this website: <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/contact/contact.asp?type=cl>.

The new rules about arts grants are included in the ODSP and OW Policy Directives about income and assets, which are available on the MCSS website at <https://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/social/directives/index.aspx>.

What does this mean for me as an arts grants funder?

The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (MTCS) is doing outreach to funders to inform them of the new exemption for arts grants in ODSP and OW and to let them know that they will have to revise their Notification Letters to provide the information outlined above. If you are a funder and have not yet been informed of this change, please contact Winnie Ma, Senior Policy Advisor, Culture Division, MTCS at 416-212-0055 or Winnie.Ma@ontario.ca.

Are all arts grants exempt?

There are a number of agencies that provide arts grants to artists in Ontario, including the [Canada Council for the Arts](#), the [Ontario Arts Council](#), the [Toronto Arts Council](#), the [London Arts Council](#), the [City of Windsor](#), the [City of Mississauga](#) and the [City of Ottawa](#). The ODSP and OW exemption applies to arts grants from these and similar agencies. It does not apply to Prizes or Awards issued by these and other agencies.

The exemption does also apply to the Indigenous Culture Fund. This fund supports First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, culture and way of life and is administered by the Ontario Arts Council. More information about the Indigenous Culture Fund is available here: <http://www.arts.on.ca/grants/activity/indigenous-culture-fund>.

Why did MCSS make this change?

This change happened because of the direct advocacy of the ODSP and Arts Grants Coalition with the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (MTCS). MCSS makes the rules for ODSP and OW. MTCS gives money to the Ontario Arts Council to support arts grants. We thank MCSS Minister Jaczek, former MTCS Minister McMahon and officials from both ministries for working with us to resolve this issue.

The ODSP and Arts Grants Coalition (OAGC) started in June 2015 with the goal of getting arts grants exempted for artists with disabilities who are on ODSP. Members of the OAGC started advocating with the MCSS Minister's office in 2016, and representatives met with officials from MCSS and MTCS in September 2017. The OAGC also produced (and is now revising) a pamphlet to help artists navigate ODSP rules about arts grants.

The ODSP and Arts Grants Coalition is made up of individual artists who have disabilities and are on ODSP as well as representatives from [ACTRA Toronto](#), the [Canadian Actors' Equity Association](#), [CARFAC Ontario](#), the [Income Security Advocacy Centre \(ISAC\)](#), the [Media Arts Network of Ontario \(MANO-RAMO\)](#), the [Ontario Arts Council](#), the [ODSP Action Coalition](#), [ReelAbilities Toronto](#), [Tangled Art + Disability](#), the [Toronto Arts Council](#), and [Workman Arts](#).