

What the MS Society recommends:

Over thirteen percent of Ontarians live with disabilities.ⁱ Like everyone else, those living with disabilities depend on electricity to carry out their daily tasks. However, people living with MS and with disabilities have special need for utilities and other electrical devices to help manage their overall health and well-being. These individuals require the use of electrical devices such as air conditioning systems, scooters and in-house lifts/stair-gliders. For example, heat can trigger MS attacks, so the use of air conditioning throughout the day is important for managing the disease. In some instances, people living with chronic illnesses and disabilities, have personal support workers that come in during the day and use power during on-peak hour rates. Unfortunately these individuals are not able to pick and choose when they use electricity as easily as other Ontarians.

Currently, there is no policy or program in place to help ease the burden of on-peak costs of electricity use by those living with MS, and other chronic illnesses or disabilities. The increase in electricity prices - charging more for electricity use during peak hours - will unfairly single-out people living with MS and others who require devices powered by electricity.

Basic Facts:

- It is estimated that up to eighty percent of people living with MS will need to quit work as a result of their disease, which limits their income.ⁱⁱ Most people with disabilities have very limited incomes and rely on income support programs to make ends meet.
- According to government estimates, Ontarians will have a 46 per cent increase in their home electricity costs phased in over the next five years to pay for electricity system upgrades.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Mr. Mike Roche, a retired mathematician and volunteer who lives with MS, estimates that charging a scooter battery is about \$40 per year (when charged at night), a stair glider battery is \$20 per year, and air conditioning throughout the summer months will cost about \$540. Based on Mike's estimates, he will likely incur approximately \$600 of unavoidable electricity costs over and above his regular electricity usage simply because he depends on these items to help him manage his disease and disability.
- Mr. Roche provides further analysis on the impact increasing energy prices will have:

Consider a family of four living on \$20,000 per year, which is eligible for support (from the Ontario Clean Energy Benefits) and an equal family of four living on \$20,000 per year but one or more members have a disability. This second family has increased expenses of dealing with disability but does not get increased support.

Opportunities for Change:

The Ontario government has provided rebates and/or tax relief to seniors and northern Ontarians, but has not yet extended the same consideration to people with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

- The Ontario Clean Energy Benefit provides a 10 per cent rebate on electricity bills for the next five years to compensate for electricity system upgrades. However this will not be enough for those already struggling financially to manage the rising electricity prices.
- The government of Ontario is undertaking a province wide social assistance review, evaluating the Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Supports program (ODSP) and identifying areas that require improved coordination and greater transparency. We urge the Commission to recommend that the government investigate the effects on the cost of living for people living with disabilities and chronic illnesses as a result of the increases in peak-hour pricing. In its submission paper, the MS Society has asked the Commission to recommend financial support for ODSP recipients to help them offset the increased costs of electricity.

Recommendations:

To better support people living with disabilities and chronic conditions, the **Government of Ontario should:**

- Introduce financial assistance such as reduced on-peak pricing for electricity, a subsidy, a refundable tax credit or an expense reimbursement, to ease the financial burden that people with chronic diseases and disabilities face when it comes to increases in electricity prices. This could be easily administered by providing relief to those who qualify for the Disability Tax Credit or the Ontario Disability Supports Program (ODSP).
- Initiate price costing analyses of those on ODSP and those on the Disability Tax Credit to understand how fluctuations in time-of-day pricing affect those living with disabilities.

ⁱ Accessibility Directorate of Ontario, Ministry of Community and Social Services, *Making Ontario Accessible*. Accessed on June 17, 2011. http://cfdlearn.ca/courses/pwd_module/downloads/Making%20Ontario%20accessible%20Resource_English.pdf

ⁱⁱ The Canadian Burden of Illness Study Group, *Burden of Illness of Multiple Sclerosis: Part I: Cost of Illness*, *The Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences*, 1998, 25: 23-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hydro One, *The Ontario Clean Energy Benefit*. Accessed on June 27, 2011. <http://www.hydroone.com/MyHome/MyAccount/MyBill/Pages/OntarioCleanEnergyBenefit.aspx>