isarc FAITH COMMUNITIES IN ACTION AGAINST POVERTY

Faith Communities Prepare to Vote

Key issues and questions for voters in preparation for the 2025 Ontario provincial election

This resource is designed to inform and engage Ontarians in the critical issues shaping the 2025 provincial election at a time of political and economic uncertainty. It outlines key concerns, including decent work and income supports, homelessness prevention, climate action, and workers' rights. It provides faith-based guidance on civic engagement, encouraging informed dialogue, advocacy, and voter participation. By highlighting pressing challenges and suggesting key questions for voters to ask candidates, this document empowers individuals and communities to make values-driven electoral decisions that promote justice, equity, and sustainability across Ontario.

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Ontario Votes

The Ontario election is being called at a critical time. We face political and economic uncertainty both at home and around the world. Our communities are already facing deepening crises of affordability, inequality, and opioid toxicity, farmland and ecosystem loss, and a failure to meet even our modest emissions targets. Climate-related disasters are increasing in number and severity. We need Ontario communities to be strong, resilient, and cohesive in the face of these challenges.

A provincial election has been called for Thursday, February 27, 2025. As Ontarians, we have this opportunity to elect leaders who will address the multiple crises before us. Will we invest in helping people meet their basic needs in housing, public health, clean energy, healthy farmland, and ecosystems? Or will we leave more and more Ontarians behind, fracturing communities and exacerbating the climate crisis, leaving us more vulnerable to existing and future threats?

As members of faith communities, we understand that we are called by our sacred texts to care for our neighbours and the Earth. Participating in elections is one of the ways in which we live out that call. They also give us the opportunity to have conversations about how we can best build up our common life. We have provided this resource to assist you with the issues that we believe need to be addressed in our provincial election.

How to use this resource

Learn about the issues

Much current attention is focused on the potential impact of US tariffs on Ontarians. While this is an important issue, it is not the only one. Issues of poverty, inequality, and environmental health often take a back seat to macro-economic issues like tariffs. Yet failing to address these underlying issues will increase our vulnerability to tariffs and other shocks.

Pray

Pray that all candidates and voters may be guided by genuine concern for the well-being of all, especially those who are most marginalized and vulnerable in our communities.

Engage in dialogue

Use the materials in this resource to engage with candidates at your doorstep, on the phone, or through social media. Talk with your neighbours, friends, family, and fellow faith community members about your concerns and how your values are informing your vote.

Vote

It has been said, "A winter election is cruel and unusual punishment." It may seem difficult or unnecessary but don't let the winter weather allow others to make this important decision for you! Only 44% of eligible voters – a record low turnout – cast ballots in the 2022 provincial election. Visit the Elections Ontario website to find out how to get on the voters' list, where and when to cast your ballot, and more. Offer a ride to those who need transportation to the polls. Encourage students 18 and over to vote for the first time. Unhoused Ontarians are also able to vote: use this helpful infographic[1] to find out more.

Income Supports

Over one million Ontarians relied on food banks last year – up 25% from the previous year and 86% since 2019-20, with the number of visits up 134% over 2019-20.[2] Both Ontario's social assistance programs, the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW,) deliver financial support well beneath the poverty line, trapping recipients in poverty. In particular, OW rates have been frozen since September 2018, during which time the cost of living in Ontario has gone up more than 20%.[3] While the minimum wage and other provincial income support programs have been indexed to inflation, OW rates and earnings thresholds have remained stagnant, eroding the value of these benefits. The OW rates are so low that a single person cannot afford to rent a bachelor apartment anywhere in Ontario, much less pay for food, clothing, and transportation.

Moreover, the separation between "basic needs" and "housing" benefits means that a social assistance recipient who becomes homeless, loses the "housing" component of the benefit. Instead of supporting people in crisis to rebuild their lives, Ontario's social assistance program drives them into deeper poverty, from which it is harder to recover, contributing to rising homelessness, hunger, and demand for social and health services.

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[1] Diana Chan McNally. (2025). *Voting When You're Unhoused* [infographic].

[2] Feed Ontario. (2024). *Hunger report 2024.* https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/FEED_Ontario_HungerReport24.pdf

[3] C.D. Howe Institute. (2023, December 15). *Brian Lewis: Fully indexing Ontario social assistance is long overdue.* https://cdhowe.org/publication/brian-lewis-fully-indexing-ontario-social-assistance-long-overdue/

Questions for candidates:

- What is your party's position on Basic Income? Would you bring back the Ontario Basic Income Pilot or implement its measures?
- Will you raise OW and ODSP rates to the level of the Low Income Cut-Off?
- Will you index OW rates and earnings thresholds to inflation?
- Will you combine the basic needs and housing components of social assistance into one flat rate?

Protecting Low-Wage and Precarious Workers

Good jobs are – or should be - enough to keep people out of poverty, yet 24% of households accessing food banks in Ontario this past year cite employment as their primary source of income, double the percentage of employed food-bank users before the pandemic[4].

Minimum Wage

While the minimum wage, set by the provincial government, benefits from yearly indexation, at $17.20 an hour it remains $2.30 to $8.80 per hour less than living wages calculated in Ontario communities.[5] Living wages for 2025 range from $19.50 in London/Elgin/Oxford to $21.30 in Hamilton to $26.00 in the GTA. To afford the average rent for a currently listed apartment in Ontario, a minimum wage worker would have to work 106 hours a week.[6] An employee paid minimum wage who works full time for the entire year earns only $33,540, while the province's own low income cutoff is $50,000.

Question for candidates:

- Will you commit to adopt within 1 month a gradual move to raise the minimum wage to the level needed for a living wage to be achieved prior to the next provincial election?

Paid Sick Days

Unlike B.C., Quebec, P.E.I., and the federal government, Ontario does not have paid sick leave for all workers. For low-wage and precariously employed workers, the lack of paid sick leave

[4] Feed Ontario. (2024). *Hunger report 2024.*
[5] Ontario Living Wage Network. (2024). *Updated 2024 living wage rates.* https://www.ontariolivingwage.ca/updated_2024_living_wage_rates
[6] Feed Ontario. (2024). *Hunger report 2024.*

can all too often lead to financial hardship. Workers must go to work sick or forfeit a day's pay. Going to work sick has negative public health impacts and can also worsen health conditions for the employee, leading to potential medical complications, possible job loss, and a greater burden on our healthcare system.

Question for Candidates:

- Will you require employers to provide 10 paid sick days to all workers?

Gig/Digital Work

These workers do not have the ability to meaningfully bargain over the terms of their work contract and yet are treated as independent contractors instead of dependent contractors who do have full legal rights.

Question for candidates:

- Will you commit to legislate that gig/digital and similar types of personnel providing services are employees with all the legal rights of other employees?

Workers' Rights

Unlike candidates seeking to become MPPs, workers seeking to unionize are denied access to the list of voters until after they submit their equivalent of a nomination paper. And unlike candidates wishing to become MPPs who only need a small percentage (1%) of eligible voters to sign their nomination papers with the help of having the voters list, workers wishing to unionize require 40% support from eligible workers whom they have to identify, find and approach without the support of having the voters list. Finally, unlike MPP elections, there is no opportunity for workers seeking unionization to achieve this by acclamation.

Question for candidates:

- Will you commit to change the rules for employees in votes on whether they want to be represented by a union to not have any hurdles that do not apply to votes for election of representatives to the provincial legislature?

Preventing and Ending Homelessness

Over half a million households in Ontario face affordability challenges, spending more than 30% of their income on shelter. Renters account for 62% of these households.[7] Indeed, in Toronto 1 in 5 food bank users spends 100% of their income on housing.[8] Loopholes in Ontario's rent control system, such as the exemption on units built or converted after Nov. 15, 2018, vacancy decontrol, and Above Guideline Rent Increases, result in asking rents increasing at a rate much higher than inflation, and far higher than tenants' incomes. These loopholes give landlords an incentive to displace tenants, as they can charge far more to a new tenant, or even to demolish existing rental housing and build new rental housing that is not subject to rent control. The result is an overall loss of affordable units beyond what is being created, as well as increasing housing precarity among tenant households, as people face an ever-greater risk of homelessness.

According to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), an estimated 81,515 Ontarians experienced "known homelessness" in 2024, a 51% increase since 2016. Chronic homelessness has tripled since 2016, with more than half of people experiencing homelessness in 2024 being chronically homeless.[9] Nor is it enough to build more shelters: despite shelter bed capacity in Ontario increasing by 34% from 2019 to 2014, chronic homelessness has grown by 138%.[10] Unsurprisingly, unsheltered homelessness has skyrocketed in communities across the province, leading to friction between encampment dwellers, municipalities, and residents who want to use public spaces for recreation. However, without housing options available, unsheltered homelessness will not go away. Indeed, the AMO report warns that without significant intervention, homelessness in Ontario could more than triple in the next decade, particularly under an economic downturn. Criminalizing people who live in encampments overrides basic human rights and dignity while doing nothing to resolve the underlying issue. Moreover, incarceration is much less cost-effective than housing. The AMO report outlines two scenarios, one for ending chronic homelessness by investing $11 billion over 10 years, and one calling for a $2 billion investment over three years to end unsheltered homelessness. These are investments that will not only make our communities safer, but boost economic productivity and foster community cohesion.

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[7] Association of Municipalities of Ontario. (2025, January 8). *Ending chronic homelessness in Ontario.* https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2025/2025-01-08-EndingChronicHomelessnessinOntario.pdf

[8] Daily Bread Food Bank. (2024). *Who's hungry? 2024 report on hunger in Ontario.* https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/DB-Whos-Hungry-Report-2024-Digital.pdf

[9] Association of Municipalities of Ontario. (2025, January 8). *Ending chronic homelessness in Ontario.* https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2025/2025-01-08-EndingChronicHomelessnessinOntario.pdf

[10] Association of Municipalities of Ontario. (2025, January 8). *Ending chronic homelessness in Ontario.*

Questions for candidates:

- Will you close residential rent control loopholes by: extending rent controls to units built or converted since 2018; ending vacancy decontrol; and limiting Above Guideline Increases?

- Will you commit to increased and sustained investments in homelessness prevention and transitional, supportive and rent-geared-to-housing initiatives, such as those outlined in the AMO report, to end chronic and unsheltered homelessness in Ontario?

Addressing Ontario's Overdose Crisis

The overdose crisis claims the lives of seven Ontarians every day.[11] The death toll would be much worse if not for the heroic work of staff at supervised consumption sites, who have reversed more than 21,000 overdoses between March 2020 and January 2024.[12] However, this government has moved to close 10 supervised consumption sites in the province in the short term and to ban additional or replacement sites from opening. While additional funding for addictions treatment is welcome, the government's proposed HART hub model does not include either safe consumption services or needle exchange. These vital services save lives and promote public health by reducing public needle litter and reducing the transmission of HIV, Hepatitis C and other blood-borne diseases and infections. Far from making communities safer, closing supervised consumption sites will lead to more public drug use, overdose, and death, and put an additional strain on our already burdened emergency health services. Supervised consumption sites, along with enhanced access to addictions treatment, are part of a continuum of care not only for people who use drugs but for the public health and safety of all Ontarians.

Question for candidates:

- Will you reverse the planned closure of Safe Consumption Sites and the ban on new sites, expanding harm reduction, along with enhanced access to addictions treatment, to every community that needs them?

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[11] Ontario Drug Policy Research Network. (2024, December). *Occ opioid and suspect drug-related death data*. https://odprn.ca/occ-opioid-and-suspect-drug-related-death-data/

[12] Addictions and Mental Health Ontario. (2024, February 7). *Addictions and Mental Health Ontario calls for community-driven and evidence-based approach to expanding addictions care.* [Press release]. https://amho.ca/amho-news/addictions-and-mental-health-ontario-calls-for-community-driven-and-evidence-based-approach-to-expanding-addictions-care/

Safeguarding our Environment and Taking Climate Action

At a time when it is more important than ever to protect local food production, Ontario is already losing 319 acres of farmland every day[13]. Wetlands not only provide essential wildlife habitat, but help clean water, store carbon, and reduce flooding, providing over $50 billion in annual benefits to southern Ontario alone.[14] Yet unrestricted urban sprawl and mega-highway projects threaten Ontario's prime agricultural land, wetlands, and other significant natural ecosystems, particularly in Ontario's Greenbelt. This in turn threatens Ontario's food security, water quality, biodiversity, and flood mitigation – all of which are also at increased risk from climate change.

Climate change is already being felt in the increased number and severity of wildfires, flooding, droughts, and heatwaves in Ontario. The Provincial Climate Change Impact Assessment, released in 2023, warns of elevated risks to Ontario's food production, infrastructure, businesses, communities and ecosystems.[15] To reduce these risks we must take robust action to lower our carbon emissions. Yet Ontario's carbon emissions rose from 148.5 megatonnes in 2020 to 157 in 2022, of which the largest contribution by sector (40.9%) was from road transportation.[16] With the fast-tracking of mega-highways like Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass, the removal of existing bike lanes, and restrictions on municipalities seeking to create new bike lane infrastructure, it is increasingly unlikely that the province will achieve its carbon emissions target of 144 megatonnes by 2030.

The province's energy production is also moving us further from our climate action goals, with gas-fired power projected to account for 25% of Ontario's electricity supply in 2030, up from 4% in 2017[17]. Investing in renewable energy sources and storage would reduce carbon emissions while being cheaper and cleaner options for Ontario.

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[13] Ontario Farmland Trust. (n.d.). *Farmland loss in Ontario*. https://ontariofarmlandtrust.ca/about/farmland-loss/
[14] ALUS Canada. (2016). *Estimation of ecosystem service values for ALUS Canada projects*. https://alus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/estimation-of-ecosystem.pdf
[15] Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. (2023). *Ontario provincial climate change impact assessment*. https://www.ontario.ca/files/2023-11/mecp-ontario-provincial-climate-change-impact-assessment-en-2023-11-21.pdf
[16] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-carbon-emissions-ghg-inventory-1.7191765
[17] CBC News. (2023, December 6). *Ontario's carbon emissions drop, but more work needed, says new report.* https://www.cleanairalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Going-in-the-Wrong-Direction-Report-apr-15-v_01.pdf

Questions for candidates:

- Will you commit to protecting Ontario's farmlands, wetlands, and other ecosystems so as to protect Ontario's food security, water quality, biodiversity and floodwater management?
- Will you cancel the development of the 413 mega-highway and Bradford Bypass and instead invest in expanding and improving public and regional transit?
- Will you return decision-making about active transportation infrastructure to municipalities, and reverse plans to remove existing bike lane infrastructure?
- Will you significantly expand investment in renewable energy sources instead of ramping up gas-fired power generation?

APPENDIX

ISARC Values

Human Dignity. The right of all people and their communities to be treated with justice, love, compassion, and respect, and their responsibility to treat others likewise.

Mutual Responsibility. The obligation of communities to care and share with their people, ensuring that basic needs are met.

Social Equity. The right of all people to adequate access to basic resources, to full participation in the life and decision-making of their communities.

Economic Equity. The right of all people and communities to adequate access to the resources necessary for full lives, including access to worthwhile work, fair employment considerations, and our communal responsibilities to use such resources responsibly.

Fiscal Fairness. The right of all people, communities, and institutions to fair fiscal treatment and the responsibility of all to contribute fairly for the well-being of all.

Ecological Sustainability. The obligation of communities to practice responsible stewardship of the earth and its environment, so that creation might be preserved for generations to come.

About ISARC

ISARC represents Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other faith communities across Ontario, including the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, the Anglican Provincial Synod of Ontario, the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, the Canadian Unitarian Council, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Toronto, the Council of Imams, the Council of Canadian Hindus, the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Eastern Ontario District of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the Islamic Humanitarian Service, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Toronto Board of Rabbis, and the United Church of Canada.