Learn About DSO at Age 16: The First Access Point to Adult Developmental Services in Ontario

NorthStar Funding & Benefits Guide

Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) is the main access point for government-funded adult developmental services in Ontario.

For many families of children with autism and developmental disabilities, the most important message is: do not wait until after the 18th birthday to contact DSO.

1. Why Families Should Begin at Age 16

DSO officially recommends that families begin the application process at age 16. When the required information is available, eligibility for adult developmental services may be confirmed at age 16, although adult services do not begin before age 18.

The purpose is to reduce, as much as possible, the gap between the end of child services and the beginning of adult services.

2. What Does DSO Assess

When applying for adult developmental services, the following must be confirmed:

- A developmental disability
- Ontario residency
- The applicable age requirements

DSO places particular emphasis on a psychological assessment. The assessment generally needs to include:

- Cognitive functioning
- Adaptive functioning
- The required information about age of onset

Adaptive functioning includes conceptual, social, and practical everyday skills, such as literacy, money management, interacting with others, transportation, work, safety, health, scheduling, and daily living.

3. DSO Does Not Directly Provide “One Program”

DSO’s role is to confirm eligibility, complete a needs assessment, and help eligible people connect with available government-funded adult developmental services.

These services may include community participation, housing supports, caregiver respite, professional supports, and the Passport Program.

Completing the eligibility process does not mean that services will be available immediately. Official information also cautions that being found eligible does not guarantee immediate access to every service a person may need.

4. What Does the Application Process Generally Look Like

Step 1: Prepare the psychological assessment, proof of Ontario residency, and identity and age documents.

Step 2: Apply online or contact the DSO serving your area.

Step 3: If eligibility is confirmed, a DSO assessor will arrange the application package and/or needs assessment. DSO information indicates that someone familiar with the applicant will generally need to participate in the assessment process.

Step 4: Keep information up to date. If the family's address, contact information, support needs, or living circumstances change significantly, notify DSO promptly.

5. NorthStar's Suggestions for Families of 16-Year-Olds

Start an "Adult Transition Folder" now, containing:

- The most recent psychological assessment
- Cognitive and adaptive functioning scores
- The Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- The transition plan
- DTC information
- Medical and therapy reports
- Identity and Ontario residency documents
- DSO application and communication records

If an assessment is outdated or does not include information about adaptive functioning, confirm early whether it needs to be updated rather than waiting until the 18th birthday.

Important Notice: DSO is the access point for eligibility and adult developmental services, but not every person with autism will automatically meet the legal criteria for a developmental disability. Final eligibility is determined by DSO based on the applicable rules and documentation.