




Hamilton

INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Chair and Members Emergency and Community Services Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	February 16, 2023
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Ontario Works and the Impacts of Provincial Social Assistance Reform (HSC23010) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
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SIGNATURE:	

COUNCIL DIRECTION

Not applicable

INFORMATION

Report HSC23010 provides an overview of changes being implemented by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) to transform and modernize the delivery of social assistance in Ontario.

This Report briefly summarizes some positive changes including:

- the MyBenefits mobile application for Ontario Works clients;
- electronic document management;
- a stability support focus in case management

and focuses on challenges that exist with some of the changes underway, including:

- a multi-step application process for many clients;
- workload impacts for employees of Hamilton Ontario Works division; and
- budget pressures with frozen funding levels.

Background:

In July 2018, MCCSS released the Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Plan (Renewal Plan) with intentions to implement a new social assistance program to improve on

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the existing “patchwork” system for clients and administrators. Key deliverables of the Renewal Plan included a focus on improving access to person-centred services, developing new digital tools, and creating modern service options to process financial assistance faster.

On Feb 11, 2021, MCCSS outlined a renewed long-term vision for Social Assistance transformation in Ontario. Key elements of the vision include maintaining person-centred services within municipalities to better support life stabilization and improved outcomes, and a shift of some administrative services from municipal to provincial accountability, where such services were determined to have the potential to benefit from further automation by the Province.

Several significant changes introduced by the Renewal Plan have been implemented within Hamilton. These include:

- Employment Services Transformation (EST): February 2019, the Province announced its plan to transform Ontario’s employment services by introducing a new model to manage the Employment Services System for social assistance recipients and in 2020, delivery responsibility of employment services was transferred to a private consortium to act as the service system manager. The City of Hamilton no longer has accountability for employment and training services as of October 2020
- Technology enablers:
 - Electronic Document Management (EDM): A switch to EDM fully digitized client case files to make service delivery faster, simpler, and more effective for clients and staff, it provides case managers with instant access to case related documents electronically. This allowed the closure of three file rooms within OW
 - MyBenefits: MyBenefits is an electronic application that allows OW clients to submit routine information and updates to their case manager electronically and receive messages in a secure manner. It allows clients to reduce trips to our office to submit required periodic paperwork and has been adopted by over 60% of local clients.
 - Reloadable Payment Card: A reloadable payment card option to reduce the number of cheques issued monthly to clients without bank accounts.
- Stability Support Focus: Case managers spend time supporting clients through crisis. Their focus is on stability supports and developing a person-centred goal-based plan leading to employment, and since January 2021 Case Managers have access to flexible funds that can be used to help clients realize their employment goals.

Centralized Intake:

In addition to the changes listed above, in November 2020, MCCSS introduced a Centralized Intake application process in seven prototype sites across the province, including Hamilton. The process includes a new, online platform to apply for social assistance and provides initial automatic payments to those in need. The intent was to

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process applications quicker and reduce paperwork for front line caseworkers, giving them more time to support to focus on stability supports for their clients.

Key changes from the previous application process included:

- A commitment of approximately 70% of applications for Ontario Works financial assistance to be processed by the provincial Intake and Benefits Administration Unit (IBAU) using new digital tools. The goal is to reduce the number of documents the applicant needs to provide at time of application and is intended to get them financial assistance faster.
- Eligibility decisions are automated using a Risk Based Eligibility Determination (RBED) system. Applicants who are deemed eligible will begin to receive financial assistance immediately.
- Applicants are then assigned by the IBAU provincial staff to the local OW office for follow-up. Local case managers (our Hamilton Ontario Works staff) are then required to complete a post-grant verification to confirm the accuracy of client-provided information included in the original application. Case managers are also required to complete several additional forms with the client and begin person-centred case management services that focus on stability supports.
- All applications the Ministry determines to be too high risk or more complex, through RBED, are also referred to the local municipality for immediate verification and an eligibility decision.

The Province has indicated that this automated and Centralized Intake process should result in a more streamlined granting process, however these benefits are not yet evident, and several issues remain that impact the client and our Ontario Works division:

Client Service Issues

The involvement of two separate groups (IBAU and the local office) to fully qualify the applicant for ongoing benefits negatively impacts clients, in the following ways:

- Only 56% percent of applications are processed by IBAU as intended by the new process. IBAU is unable to complete 44% of applications submitted by clients; clients who apply online and are unable to complete their application using the Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA) are referred to the local office for application completion and signature. This results in the client having to start the process over again and generally results in a delay to the client receiving assistance.
- Two Step Process: Being granted initial benefits from IBAU then requiring verification of information by the local office creates a two-step process to determining eligibility. This results in clients having to tell their story multiple times.
- Outsourced Telephone Support: Provincially, Service Ontario responds to telephone questions from Social Assistance applicants, however many of these calls are then being redirected to Hamilton Ontario Works local office, increasing client frustration.

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- Reductions to Financial Assistance: If clients provide incorrect or incomplete information at the time of application, the level of financial assistance initially granted by IBAU may need to be reduced at the local office. Overpayments that require repayment by the client or cancellation of the first payment can result. The related added workload is also borne by the local office and our staff.
- Suspension of benefits: If clients are unable to provide documents that corroborate the information they provided in the original application; their benefits must be suspended by the local office according to legislation. In some instances, these cases are closed, and repayment of benefits by the client is required, and this follow up action and workload are the responsibility of the local office.

Staff Workload Issues

On November 26, 2020, as part of the launch of the new Centralized Intake process, MCCSS communicated that the process would reduce the administrative burden for staff allowing them to focus on value-added results for people, rather than paperwork. While the nature of local staff involvement in the application process has changed, there has not been any significant reduction in time or effort. Examples of ongoing involvement not considered in the Centralized Intake concept include:

- Application Assistance: Hamilton staff actively support the referral of clients to the online Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA). This includes our staff warm-transferring phone calls, assisting with completing the online application and troubleshooting issues on behalf of clients with IBAU staff.
- High Referral Back to Local Staff: Although 85% of applicants applying for social assistance are using the on-line SADA application, 44% of these applications (October 2022) are subsequently referred back to the local office due to risk or complexity. The local work associated with these referred cases requires staff time to determine eligibility.
- Increased Use of Emergency Assistance: The Centralized Intake process has appropriately left Emergency Assistance applications with the local municipality. However, since the introduction of the Centralized Intake process, the number of clients applying for Emergency Assistance has increased significantly. On average, over 95% of applicants who apply do not qualify for Emergency Assistance. Staff redirect these individuals to apply for regular OW benefits through the Centralized Intake application process where they need to begin the process again and tell their story again. This results in frustration for applicants, a delay in benefits for those who ultimately qualify and the unnecessary increase in staff resources used to triage and deny these Emergency Applications.
- Significant workload associated with post grant work: The ongoing local responsibility for applications and post grant work to verify client provided information continues to be a significant workload. We do not anticipate any short-term time savings with this work.

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The last formal communication received from MCCSS regarding Social Assistance renewal was in a staff newsletter received on February 3, 2022. At that time, MCCSS indicated they were close to sharing a new model for social assistance. Ontario Works leadership has repeatedly asked MCCSS for updates on Social Assistance renewal however no response has been received to date.

Hamilton Ontario Works Division leadership continues to communicate concerns through the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) and to MCCSS directly, including suggested changes and updates to the Centralized Intake process that could work toward resolving the client service and workload issues identified. No response has been received from MCCSS to date.

Despite the challenges presented with social assistance reform and the lack of clear direction from MCCSS while working within a draft policy framework that lacks significant detail, Ontario Works staff continue to focus on providing a person-centred service to support clients with their goals to employment.

Budget Pressures

Ontario Works continues to operate with 2018 funding levels from the Province. Savings associated with the implementation of EST, EDM and other Social Assistance reforms have been consumed by inflationary pressures since these changes were implemented. To date, OW Hamilton has not experienced any savings from Centralized Intake, and in fact the decreased ratio of support from the intended 50/50 cost share creates a 1.5M pressure for Ontario Works as shared with Council during the 2023 budget process. We continue to communicate that it is important that provincial funding contributions keep pace with municipal requirements until the full impact of Social Assistance Reform is communicated, implemented, and understood. We believe that the Province anticipated savings at the local level and justifies the static funding on this basis, however savings have not been realized.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

None

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