



INFORMATION REPORT

TO: Chair and Members Emergency & Community Services Committee	WARD(S) AFFECTED: CITY WIDE
COMMITTEE DATE: September 21, 2011	
SUBJECT/REPORT NO: City of Hamilton's Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario (CS11081) (City Wide)	
SUBMITTED BY: Joe-Anne Priel General Manager Community Services Department	PREPARED BY: Kerry Lubrick (905)546-2424 Ext. 4855
SIGNATURE:	

Council Direction: Not Applicable

Information:

On September 1, 2011, the Community Services Department made a submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. This submission is attached as Appendix A to Report CS11081.

As part of the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Ontario government committed to reviewing social assistance, with a focus on removing barriers and increasing opportunities for people to work. It subsequently appointed the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council to provide advice on a proposed scope for the review. On November 30, 2010, the government announced the appointment of Frances Lankin and Munir A. Sheikh to lead the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario.

The Commission is tasked with carrying out a comprehensive review, and providing specific recommendations and a concrete action plan for reforming the social assistance system to the government in June 2012. Their review will lead to recommendations which enable the government to:

- *Establish an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers and supports people's transition into, and attachment within, the labour market*

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- *Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation*
- *Simplify income and asset rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance*
- *Ensure the long-term viability of the social assistance system*
- *Define Ontario's position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security for Ontarians.*¹

The Commission released a Discussion Paper in June 2011 and requested submissions by September 1, 2011, to confirm the key issues in social assistance today and to identify possible solutions. In addition, the Commission attended 10 communities across the province to join their community engagement sessions. The Commissioners visited the City of Hamilton on July 4, 2011 and met with a variety of key community stakeholders and attended the discussion forum arranged by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. On the same day, Hamilton City Council heard and supported a presentation by Dr. A. Kubursi and Craig Foye which requested “the immediate emergency need for an evidence-based mechanism for setting social assistance rates that will meet basic needs and allow individual and families to live with dignity.”²

Community Services Department staff have worked hard over the years to open two-way communication with people relying on the OW Program in Hamilton. On June 24, 2011, conversations continued with the Employment and Income Support Division of the Community Services Department hosting the 5th Annual Ontario Works (OW)/ Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Operational Advisory Town Hall. 211 individuals attended which included recipients of OW/ODSP, service providers, staff and other interested members of the community. During this Town Hall, round table discussions were facilitated to gather issues and ideas for the review of social assistance. During July and August 2011, focus groups were held with staff and management of Ontario Works, Housing and Homelessness, Social Development and Early Childhood, and Recreation to obtain input to the key outcome statements. In addition, staff unable to attend the focus group, were able to submit ideas and recommendations to be included in this submission.

The following themes continue to emerge from these ongoing conversations:

- Clear and consistent communication and access: one administrator role for OW/ODSP; easier rules regarding financial dependent and spousal/cohabitation;

¹ <http://socialassistancereview.ca/about-the-review>

² General Issues Committee, Report 11-023

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greater incentives for earnings; simplifying self employment rules; and, increase to asset limits.

- Need for increased benefits and adequacy of rates: including the cost of nutritious food; annual indexing; shelter cost based on the geographic area; including transportation, telephone and child care; and, standardized dental care and vision care.
- Improved supports and resources: employment services which can assist through the continuum of employment (pre and post); specialized supports for persons with barriers to employment; and, tools to capture employer needs and the skill sets of the unemployed or underemployed.
- Enhanced education and training: supporting more long term training and post secondary education; and,
- A more person-centered customer service approach to delivery.

These themes, ideas and recommendations formed the basis of the submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. The Commission will use input from all submissions, along with the findings from research, to develop an Options Paper, which is to be released in November 2011. Further input and advice from stakeholders and communities will occur between November 2011 and February 2012.

Staff are committed to conducting further engagement once the Option Paper is available and will bring recommendations to Council for review.

Appendices/Schedules

Appendix A to Report CS11081 – City of Hamilton Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

City of Hamilton
Community Services Department

Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

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September 1, 2011

Introduction and Summary

The City of Hamilton's Community Services Department is pleased to be able to provide a submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance. Over the past years, the City of Hamilton has been engaging in ongoing conversations with the community, consumers, local Ontario Disability Support Program staff, employment service providers and internal staff on potential measures to improve the operational and legislative delivery of Ontario Works. Action has been taken on some of the recommendations for which we have local administrative control. For items that are legislative/policy in nature, we have advocated for change through our City of Hamilton Council to the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

The Social Assistance Review has provided another opportunity to open discussions and reconfirm the issues that are facing the people we serve and the community. On June 24, 2011 the Employment and Income Support Division of the Community Services Department hosted the 5th Annual OW/ODSP Operational Advisory Town Hall. 211 individuals attended which included recipients of OW/ODSP, service providers, staff and other interested members of the community. During this Town Hall, round table discussions were facilitated to gather issues and ideas for the review of social assistance. During July and August 2011, we facilitated discussions with staff and management of Ontario Works, Housing and Homelessness, Child Care, Recreation and Social Development to obtain input to the key outcome statements. In addition, staff unable to attend the focus group were able to submit ideas and recommendations to be included in this submission. The following themes continue to emerge from these ongoing conversations:

- Clear and consistent communication and access
- Need for increased benefits and adequacy of rates
- Improved supports and resources
- Enhanced education and training
- A more person-centered customer service approach to delivery

There is no one size fits all approach to Social Assistance delivery as every person which accesses services has different needs, skills, abilities and supports and each community is unique and different in substantial ways. Hamilton's experience with Ontario Works participants would suggest that more emphasis should be placed on the delivery of an integrated person-centred case management approach. There are some employment ready people (approximately 20-30% of caseload) who can move through the system rapidly with income and employment supports, however, the majority of Ontario Works participants have a multitude of barriers that need to be addressed through a wrap around approach that includes health care, housing supports, mental health and addictions counselling.

The current social assistance rates are one of the greatest challenges to human services in the province. Inadequate income (social assistance rates, living wage, and improved security income) and absolute poverty impedes the individual's and family's ability to move beyond a crisis level to positive mental health, good physical health, participation in the community, safe and affordable housing and gainful employment. Many other programs and services have been created in the community to compensate for low social assistance rates for example food

banks, housing programs, discretionary benefits, to name a few. In addition, front line staff are continually confronted with urgent problem solving with participants (eviction prevention, utility disconnections, referrals to other resources) as the monthly OW benefits do not cover basic needs.

It is also clear that with having two different delivery agencies for social assistance (OW/ODSP) it is confusing for the people we serve, communities, service providers and vendors. We strongly recommend one administrator role for the delivery of social assistance which could simplify rules, offer continuity of service, reduce administration costs and offer this much need wrap around person-centered approach.

Over the past 14 years, discretionary programs funded by the Municipality have been expanded due to lack of services and benefits covered through OW/ODSP and Ministry of Health. Municipalities are responsible to deliver high quality services in a fiscally and socially responsible, compassionate manner. Hamilton like many other municipalities face many fiscal challenges associated with an aging infrastructure, high levels of poverty, an aging population and significant changes in the local labour market - significant fiscal challenges which are making it increasingly difficult to continue to deliver high quality services. It is critical that municipalities have access to local data and adequate funding to support the delivery and administration of social assistance and the creation of programs and services that will meet the needs of our community.

Please find attached the City of Hamilton's submission based on a well rounded community consultation. We thank you for visiting the City of Hamilton and listening to the needs and possible solutions. We look forward to reviewing the Options Paper.

Please do not hesitate to contact me directly if you require clarification on any issues or ideas.

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Issues and Ideas

Issue 1:

Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

- a) What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?
- Simplify employer requirements with respect to both the completion and processing of paperwork to receive incentives to hire social assistance recipients.
 - Support job retention strategies to ensure that once employers hire social assistance recipients they remain on the job. Retention Service could include one-on-one case management and coaching with the newly employed individual, support mechanism for the employers and assistance with job laddering/advancement.
 - Identify existing tools and database that capture both employer needs and recipients' skills sets to assist in making better and potentially more successful matches (e.g. Employment Readiness Tool, JobFit, etc.). It could aid in a readily accessible single point of access for match/screen to job opportunities, identification of skills requirements and trends in employment.
 - Increase funding for life skills development for people who might not be job ready in the short term. Often OW recipients have longer term barriers to employment that need to be addressed to enhance their success in obtaining and maintaining employment (e.g. Enhanced Employment Services, Hostels to Homes,).
 - Create campaigns to remove the stigma attached to Social Assistance e.g. Public education and good news stories. (Employers are already hiring OW/ODSP participants, but don't know it.)
 - Economic Development and Social Assistance and Employment Ontario need to work closer with each other to ensure relationships are quickly built with new employers.
 - Provide incentives to Municipalities, as employers, to hire social assistance recipients.
- b) Can you suggest ways in which the skills of people receiving social assistance could be better developed to meet the needs of employers?
- Encourage social enterprise opportunities to develop skills while working in a business like setting.
 - Expand Community Placement eligibility to include the private sector in order to provide a wider range of skill development opportunities for social assistance recipients. Any expansion to the private sector would need to include clear

parameters around number of Community Placements allowed, and a focus on areas that will hire permanently.

- Create more sector specific skill development opportunity programs that provide social assistance recipients the opportunity to not only learn specific job skills, but also basic job retention skills such as attendance, punctuality, team work etc.
- With the increase need for higher skills, offer social assistance recipients embarking on post secondary education the opportunity to take preparatory classes provided by colleges and universities with funding by Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. These classes will enhance the student's success during post secondary education and subsequent employment.
- Support social assistance recipients' transition to employment by recognizing the "costs" of working (e.g. transportation, clothing, etc.) in a more systematic and concrete manner.
- Expand the criteria for skills development funding offered through other levels of government to include OW/ODSP recipients. Requiring social assistance recipients to use OSAP funds exclusively creates a financial burden that may be more challenging for this target group to address once employed if they are even willing to go into increased debt.
- Revise the length of training courses eligible for funding beyond six months in order to ensure that social assistance recipients have access to a broader range of skill development opportunities to better meet employer needs.
- With the introduction of SSSMP (replacing SDMT), there is an opportunity to better capture employer needs (both immediate and forecast) and allow social service providers to obtain a better profile of social assistance recipients. This data can be used to develop programs and case plans that are better suited to meet the needs of both employers and recipients.
- Provide financial incentives to participants as they reach milestones (e.g. obtain grade 12).

c) What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access?

- Support a collaborative approach to referrals to employment programs in local municipalities; adopting a "no wrong door approach."
- Access to childcare and transportation benefits to all social assistance recipients (including a car allowance for those in rural areas).
- Expand retention strategies; programming required for:
 - Pre-employment service which may include life skills, training, networking
 - Start of Employment; providing coaching, benefits and supports to maintain employment
 - Post employment; continue supports for the participants and employer.
- Recognize that people have barriers and create a supportive environment. Expand services for multi-barriered participants (such as addiction, mental health).

d) What would improve services to people receiving social assistance who face multiple barriers to employment?

- Although Social Assistance delivery agents have discretion within their employment program funding to offer services to multibarriered clients, programs targeted to these clients are costly. Social delivery agents request that the Province consider increasing funding for employment programs specifically targeted to multibarriered clients to better meet their needs while also ensuring that current employment program funding is not compromised. An example of an effective version is the Enhance Employment Services model.
- A mandatory transportation benefit for all individuals on social assistance with multiple barriers to employment so they can access required community services to enhance their employability.
- Provide child care that is funded provincially.
- Access to a central employment database for tracking employment plans. With the implementation of the new Employment Ontario agencies, there is an opportunity to share access to the client case plans. This sharing of knowledge would assist in continuity of case plans.

e) How can Ontario's social assistance system better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they may need?

- Provide more training for OW staff to work with social assistance recipients with disabilities, in particular mental health issues.
- Access to functional assessments to determine capability of participants and assistive devices needed for successful placement.

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

a) How should social assistance rates be determined?

- Establishment of an Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board to be charged with the task of annually reviewing and adjusting social assistance rates, based on evidence. Mechanism for setting annual social assistance rates should meet basic living costs, including the cost of nutritious food, and allow individuals and families to live with dignity.
- Base rates should be reviewed annually and indexed to reflect inflation rates etc.
- Shelter costs should be based on the geographic area.
- Telephone allowance should be included to find employment.
- Allow higher rates for market rent for the first 3 months of receiving assistance.
- Provide additional benefits for being a caregiver (unable to work).
- Housing Allowances work well as they assure a better standard of living without impacting social assistance payments. They also contribute to the local economy by supporting private landlords. They work well in Hamilton because we have a lower than average vacancy rate.

b) How should benefits be designed to deal with the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people are better off working?

- The 100% earnings incentive should be applied when a participant starts employment within 3 months of qualifying for social assistance; the 50% incentive could then be applied.
- The Trillium program should be revamped:
 - Including provision of eye glasses and dental benefits; and
 - Reducing or eliminating the deductible for persons with income below the Low Income Cut Off Guidelines (even an inexpensive prescription is a financial drain on individuals and families with low incomes); and
 - Streamline referral to Trillium as part of job retention activities; more than issuing an application form. It can be a direct referral.

c) Considering the potential for increased costs, what new benefits, if any, should be provided to all low-income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance?

- Education supplement and/or benefit to make obtaining higher education more accessible and cost effective through the Ministry of Training, College and University or the income tax system.
- Utility rebates based on Low Income Cut Off Guidelines. Further discussions between the Ministry of Community and Social Services and the Ontario Energy Board should occur to ensure full implementation of the Low Income Energy Assistance Program.
- Dental Care, Special Diet Allowance, Extended Health Benefits, Childcare, recreation and transportation (bus or car allowance).

d) Should asset limits and exemptions be changed to improve the social assistance system?

- Raise asset limits similar to ODSP application, especially for singles, to enable them to plan/prepare to be self-sufficient.
- Raise asset limit for first six months of application to assistance to allow for savings.
- Provide a 3 month (or more) waiver for disposal of assets to allow people to try to become self-sufficient without having to be destitute.
- Tools of the trade for self employed should be exempt for up to 3 months with no limit.
- Expand the number and type of assets that can be exempt (e.g. life insurance with cash value)

e) How should benefits for people with disabilities be designed and delivered?

- Conduct more independent medicals to support doctor recommendations.
- Provide more assistive device rebates and supplements.
- Consider having OW/ODSP/ACSD programs administered by the same local program delivery method. Individuals currently eligible for ODSP with no medical review should continue to be delivered through a provincial delivery agent (Service Ontario) similar to pension. This simplification would ensure that cases are not sent back and forth (e.g. spouses/dependent adults' access OW employment, individuals that are no longer disabled must apply for OW, family of deceased ODSP applicant must apply to OW.)

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

a) Are the rules meeting their objectives? Are there rules that are not working?
What changes do you suggest?

- Simplify rules and the language.
- Review rules regarding:
 - Financially dependent vs. financially independent; complex and difficult for low income families that may not want to apply for social assistance.
 - spousal/cohabitation rules; Review criteria for determining “spousal” designation to ensure that the applicant is not negatively impacted by deeming a transitory relationship as being “spousal”
- Conduct literacy test at the first appointment after the application.
- Revise asset levels.
- Consider change to the OSAP deductions.
- 50% earnings exemption rule should be applied if employment started within 3 months of the application.
- Learning Earning and Parenting (LEAP) is very successful in supporting young parents. The program should be expanded to all participants, with or without children, under the age of 25. Youth require specialized case planning and attention.
- Suspend and termination letters need to be clearer and simple. There should be a reminder letter prior to a case being suspended.
- Support self-employment by simplifying the rules and milestones.
- Employment Insurance and Workers Safety Insurance Board is applied to period received, not intended. Assigning and monitoring claims requires high administrative controls. This monitoring takes away from claims processing and case planning.
- Eliminate employment requirement for spouses with non-school age dependents which may free up daycare spots but also provide incentive if both parents are participating.
- Simplify the extended health benefit criteria and extend period to determine eligibility. The income reporting should be determined annually, not monthly.

b) How can special-purpose benefits be delivered more efficiently and equitably? Should some be delivered outside of the social assistance system?

- Consideration could be given to have the extended health plan administered through Trillium or through the income tax system.
- Fund Temporary Care Assistance through Children’s Aid Society/Catholic Children’s Aid Society. This benefit should not be delivered through the social assistance system.
- Public transit benefits should be funded by the Province and free to all with income under Low Income Cut Off.

- Eliminate the paper drug card and enhance existing Ministry of Health database to allow pharmacies access information to approve prescriptions based on Health Cards verses have a benefit card. In Hamilton, we replace over 400 drug cards per month as the original card was misplaced.
- Ministry of Health, Community Care Access Centres (CCAC) are well positioned to assist with funding of assistive devices not covered through the Assistive Devices Program verses administering through discretionary benefit. CCAC provides rental equipment while assessing if the item meets the need of the client. Once assessment is completed, the individual must purchase the devices. Often these referrals are sent to the discretionary benefit program.
- Urgent care items required for discharge from a hospital (casting, crutches, slings, medications) should be funded by the Ministry of Health. This funding could be similar to how ambulance fees are covered for people receiving social assistance.
- Implement a consistent provincial plan for adult dental and eye glasses (similar to ODSP). Currently, dental and eye glasses for OW adults and ODSP dependant adults are discretionary. Process is confusing for dentists and for clients.
- Expand items eligible through Ministry of Health Assistive Devices Program and funding approved. Hearing Aids are an example of where duplication of funding is provided. ADP will cover \$500 and balance must be paid by social assistance.

Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

a) What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?

- Ontario is a province where everyone has a home, good food to eat and the supports that they need to achieve their fullest potential and maintain good health.
- To ensure that dignity is maintained and fostered.
- Self-sufficiency.
- Decrease the number of people applying for social assistance by implementing proactive measures with other supports for all people below Low Income Cut Off.

b) What additional data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of social assistance benefits and services? For example, should ethnocultural and racial data be collected in order to evaluate and improve supports for people from racialized and ethnocultural communities?

- Employment Insurance statistics for the delivery area.
- Collect data on barriers to participation (challenges may be personal, environmental, health related or systemic.)
- Access to data on literacy levels.
- Collecting data on ethnocultural and racial data is a slippery slope and brings little value to the provision of benefits/supports; however, it does assist with developing programming and making appropriate referrals (e.g. increased community programming for aboriginals, but no mechanism to flag aboriginal participants).
- Statistics on returns to OW and why to ensure benefits in place to help protect from relapse.
- More thorough data on caseload profiles.

c) What can the provincial government and municipalities do to better integrate services?

- Ensure that all policies align; system integration and shared protocols between agencies.
- Develop a triage system to determine what services client may access based on need, take all required information (birth certificate, SIN, etc.) and input into a computer system so that even if applying for or utilizing more than one program the client only needs to provide info once.
- There should be one central phone line to answer questions and complete intake for various programs (CPP, WSIB, OCB, OW, etc.).
- The Ontario Works Emergency Shelter Program should not be part of the Ontario Works Program and the per diem payment model is not working. It is recommended that a new block funding be implemented in the Housing and Homelessness envelope with related administration funding.

- Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities are now positioned to provide skilled and job ready participants with job leads to potential employment. A Memorandum of Understanding and Consent to Exchange information could exist so that an exchange of information between the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and OW could occur. This exchange would allow OW case managers to focus on the high population of people with barriers and specialise programming for the pre-employment needs.

Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

a) What should Ontario do to address the short-term income support and training needs of people who are not eligible for EI?

- Triage intake (see question 4.) Referrals based on triage and info gathered at intake sent immediately to minimize wait time.
- Employment Ontario can work with Ontario Works to provide the wrap around service.

b) What should the interaction be between income-tested benefits, such as WITB and child benefits, and the social assistance system?

- Better policies with a focus on interactions.
- Policies between agencies/organizations need to align.
- Integrate application processes (e.g. when applying for birth registration, an application may be made for other income sources and benefits – similar integration of other processes needs to be implemented).
- Need system to outline a breakdown of all potential benefits (both provincial and federal.)

c) Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance?

- Bridge the wait period during EI application; OW issue EI pending payments like ODSP
- Collection of overpayment done through tax system.
- Greater consistency between CPP and ODSP
- Clarify the role of Interim Federal Health Program for Social Assistance recipients; another area of confusion for people we serve and service providers.
- Trusteeship Programs need to be funded adequately by the Province. In Hamilton, over 50% of the people using trustee programs are ODSP recipients.