

Region of Peel's Position Paper for the: Ontario Social Assistance Review (SAR)

Preface:

The social assistance system in Ontario has experienced a number of changes since its last major review in the 1980s. These changes have led to qualified success in achieving its key objective of adequately protecting and developing Ontario and Canada's human capital to positively impact society. The ability of the social assistance system to respond appropriately to the dynamics of a fast changing society has been a constant challenge. This review presents a great opportunity for changes and improvements to Human Services delivery in Peel, Ontario and Canada. The Region of Peel supports the Province's direction on this issue and is pleased to participate in the review.

Background on the Region of Peel

Peel is one of the fastest growing municipalities in Ontario and Canada with one of the most diverse populations and high levels of immigration. Key areas of focus for the Region include establishing partnerships with other governments and community agencies to ease economic and social disparities, and strengthening the self-sustaining abilities of individuals, families and communities. Social assistance is one tool available to the Region to support this process.

In addition to social assistance, the Region of Peel has worked with senior governments and civil society on a number of initiatives to improve the quality of life of its residents and promote equity, social stability and growth. Some initiatives include: The Canada Ontario Immigration Agreement (COIA), Peel Newcomer Strategy Group, Peel Labour Market Survey, Community Grant program, neighbourhood development, not-for-profit leadership development, Volunteer Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon, Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy, Patent Research and Analysis on Competitive Intelligence and the Human Services Integration Model. These actions support the Region's Strategic Plan objective to "build a community that is stable, responsive and adaptable".

These approaches have combined to promote better human services outcomes in Peel. However, the low transition rates from social assistance to the workforce, high rates of recidivism, low quality of life of some individuals on social assistance and increasing demand for social assistance, present significant challenges that need to be addressed.

Process

Further to being invited by the Commissioners of the Social Assistance Review (SAR) to participate in the review, the Region of Peel consulted with over 100 persons receiving social assistance, staff, businesses and community agencies. The responses from the participants provided great insights into the challenges associated with the social assistance system and the possible approaches to address these challenges. These responses, along with the Region's perspective have informed the content of this position paper.

The key themes that emerged from the consultations that must be observed in a redesigned social assistance system are as follows:

I. System based on trust

Establishing a partnership between individuals receiving social assistance and the service system managers must start from a position of trust that individuals have a genuine interest in their personal development and advancement. Social assistance programs should never contribute to eroding people's dignity by being intrusive, prescriptive and punitive. The system needs to be redesigned in such a way that supports individual choice, treats people with respect and dignity and is non-intrusive. The system must be accountable and manage risks on a person-by-person basis with built in checks and balances.

II. Simplicity

The current rules and processes are too numerous, complex and difficult to administer. There needs to be fewer rules that are easy to understand and apply. The administrative burden on social system managers should be reduced. Respondents support a move away from the current needs testing model to the more simple and effective yearly income testing approach.

III. Greater level of Integration among Provincial Ministries

There needs to be greater integration among Provincial ministries that provide services to the most vulnerable in our society. In that vein, the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, The Ministry of Community and Social Services, The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, The Ministry of Transportation, The Ministry of Education and The Ministry of Child and Youth Services should establish collaborative programs aimed at deriving a single understanding of the labour market and the social and ethno-cultural patterns of communities. This will help to inform the development and implementation of complementary programs.

IV. Empowered Consolidated Service System Managers (CMSMs) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs).

Tinkering with the current system will not address the long-term requirements of social assistance in a dynamic and changing society. As such, there has to be greater focus on developing a robust and accountable system involving more autonomous and empowered municipalities. Municipalities are where persons go first for help and as such, municipal governments are strategically placed to better understand its citizenry. The solution to social assistance lies in the ability of service managers to quickly identify needs and timely provide the required solutions. We are dealing with moving targets and our ability to forecast changes and proactively implement strategies will determine the success of Ontario social assistance system. There must be more local planning autonomy and decision-making ability provided to service system managers. This will strengthen their ability to manage service delivery at the local level.

V. Adequacy

Basic needs of housing, food, clothing and health services must be provided at adequate levels to ensure that persons can maintain a good quality of life while they transition into the workforce. Universal access to stable and affordable housing is a key platform to promote the transition towards self-sufficiency.

VI. Human services integration

The many programs in Canada that currently provide income security assistance operate in silos and produce unsatisfactory outcomes as a result. Service integration will be a necessary strategy for any social assistance system in the future and the Region of Peel is committed to supporting efforts towards service integration. However, service is only one component of integration. Integrated planning and policy direction from senior orders of government is essential to facilitating true service integration.

VII. Client centred services

We need to create a system that is less prescriptive. The system must be nimble enough to respond to individual needs. Issues of accessibility and program design and delivery need to be addressed. The redesigned system must be grounded in the philosophy of true partnership between persons receiving social assistance and service delivery agents. Services must adequately address the unique and changing needs of individuals.

VIII. Leveraging modern technology

The redesigned system needs to incorporate increased opportunity for self-service including utilizing new technologies such as social media. The redesigned social assistance system must provide individuals with more autonomy to manage the delivery of services. The ultimate goal is to develop a partnership among persons receiving social assistance, services managers and potential employers to foster an environment of understanding, trust and cooperation.

Responses to the Social Assistance Review Questions

Please see below the Region of Peel's position in relation to the questions outlined in Commission for Social Assistance in Ontario's discussion paper "Issues and Ideas", June 2011. The responses to the questions will first outline the general concerns with the social assistance system followed by recommendations to address these issues.

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports Employment

What Do You Think?

(1) What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?

Many respondents feel that employers see them as unskilled and unfit for the workforce. Currently, there is limited coordination and integration of programs aimed at skills development and job matching.

These issues will be adequately addressed only through cross dimensional approaches involving integrated engagements among all orders of government, service managers, persons receiving social assistance and employers. Provincial ministries must break down silos by developing and establishing a system of integrated service delivery. This approach should be complemented by greater coordination with service managers and deeper engagement of potential employers. This will establish a framework for continuous information sharing among stakeholders, towards a better understanding of the needs of the labour market.

To these ends, it is recommended that:

- Service managers and provincial ministries together conduct continuous research and analysis of the labour market to identify the demand and supply of particular skill sets. This research and analysis will further inform the development of skills training programs at colleges and universities for persons receiving social assistance.
- Innovative approaches be utilized to better connect available skills with jobs in the market. The Region of Peel for example, has initiated Patent Research and Analysis on Competitive Intelligence. This initiative seeks to utilize patent intelligence to help highly educated people to explore the hidden jobs market. This approach has immense potential for supporting the social assistance system and should be closely examined by senior levels of government and other municipalities.
- The system be strengthened to reflect a stronger employment outreach focus. This will intensify employer engagement and promote a better understanding of the potential benefits of employing persons receiving social assistance. In addition, this will provide an avenue for employers to express what they want

and further strengthen partnerships between employers and the social assistance managers.

(2) Can you suggest ways in which the skills of people receiving social assistance could be better developed to meet the needs of employers?

There is the general perception that employers view persons receiving social assistance as untrained and lacking the necessary hard and soft skills to participate effectively in the workforce. However, regional staff experiences with persons receiving social assistance have revealed that there is no unique skills profile of individuals receiving social assistance. Persons receiving social assistance reflect the wide dimensions of society including, for example, people with varying levels of post secondary education.

As part of the process to address these issues, it is recommended that:

- Service system managers facilitate processes that encourage employers to share their workplace cultures with the public. This will provide valuable information to help persons receiving social assistance better prepare to respond to the needs of particular employers.
- A mechanism be developed to better align programs with the needs of individual receiving social assistance. This approach will promote better overall outcomes.
- Greater autonomy be given to municipalities to establish targeted skills development programs suited to its constituents. These programs should be further supported by internship programs jointly coordinated by municipal and provincial governments. This will help to ensure that these programs reflect the needs of the municipal communities.

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

The general view among all respondents is that employment services are not effective and accessible due to limited understanding of needs and a fragmented service delivery system. In addition, as outlined by Regional staff, key supports of health services, affordable housing and childcare are not sufficiently accessible.

The overwhelming view is that the system needs to ensure that there is adequate provision of the key foundations of health, affordable housing and childcare. These foundations should be supported by the necessary hard and soft networks of information, communication and transportation technologies.

It is recommended that the system establish:

- A one-stop shop approach in the delivery of services.
- More community based programs for easier accessibility.
- A system to increase awareness of social assistance programs.
- Easier access to transportation (i.e. provide transit tickets for individuals receiving social assistance for the entire period they are on social assistance).
- Creative mechanisms that will elicit the necessary information from persons receiving social assistance without being inappropriately intrusive.

- Programs that will ensure support for persons receiving social assistance through to the completions of their training.

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

As articulated by many respondents and supported by Regional staff, there are a number of barriers to employment including: the lack of recognition of international credentials, age and sex discrimination by employers, the general perception that persons receiving social assistance including persons receiving ODSP supports are ill-equipped to function in society and the complexity of the rules and processes associated with the social assistance system.

To adequately address these issues there must be a holistic approach to supports and services. Persons receiving social assistance need individualized attention to build trust towards a partnership that will result in their self-sufficiency.

To mitigate the barriers faced by persons receiving social assistance, it is recommended that:

- Adequate staffing resources be provided to facilitate a more comprehensive assessment of individual needs. This will enable the development of more customized case plans.
- The number and complexity of rules in the system be reduced.
- Service system managers pay upfront for training expenses instead of individuals having to pay and getting reimbursed.
- Relevant communiqués be provided in multiple languages.
- Internet services be more accessible.
- Graduated coverage/support including continued medical supports be provided for persons receiving social assistance.
- More government incentives (financial and social) for employers who take on persons receiving social assistance be provided.
- Accountability in the delivery of programs be strengthened.
- Service system managers work collaboratively with employers including small and medium size enterprises (SME's).
- Service system managers engage professional associations in developing strategies to eliminate barriers to employment such as lack of recognition of international credentials.

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

Some individuals receiving ODSP supports outlined that from their experiences, there is the perception that persons with disabilities cannot function effectively in the workforce. However, the nature of disabilities varies and different forms of disabilities provide opportunities for the individuals to participate in different forms of productive employment. The current rules for ODSP are counter-productive as they require individuals to repeatedly confirm their limitations, in order to remain eligible for benefits. In addition, persons receiving ODSP supports are grouped rather than

individualized. Further, there is limited education and awareness of the nature of disabilities and some disabilities such as mental illnesses may not be easily detectable.

Disability screening must encompass an assessment of functional capabilities that can be matched to skills required in the workforce. For areas of skills deficiencies, training should be geared towards assisting individuals to develop and match their skills to levels required in the workforce. There should be programs aimed at developing new awareness tools that can be individualized for persons with disability.

It is recommended that the process be further supported by:

- Assisting individuals receiving ODSP to identify areas in which they can contribute. This would increase the opportunity for individuals to re-engage the workforce.
- Establishing more provincially run programs for rehabilitation. Further, there should be incentives to rehabilitation and more access to treatment centres and physiotherapists. These supports, if offered up-front will contribute positively to the employability of persons receiving ODSP supports.

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

What Do You Think?

(6) How should social assistance rates be determined?

The overwhelming view by Regional staff, persons receiving social assistance and community groups is that current levels of financial support do not enable individuals to attain a reasonable standard of living and secure the necessary tools to transition into the workforce. One of the basic foundations of life - that of housing, cannot be secured with the existing shelter allowance. It is therefore widely agreed among respondents that current rates are too low and need to be increased. The world has changed but our programs have not. There is now more non-standard and precarious employment (contract, casual, temporary work) and many workers in these kinds of employment do not qualify for social assistance or Employment Insurance (EI).

It is recommended that rates be determined as follows:

- Utilize the Minimum Wage, Market Basket Measure, Low Income Cut Off (LICO) or some other low-income measure to determine rates. The cost of living varies across the province and the rates should be indexed accordingly and aligned with poverty reduction measures used at the provincial level.
- Continually assess and adjust rates based on the changing dynamics of the workforce.

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

Regional staff are of the view that the transition rates from social assistance to the workforce is unsatisfactory. There must be an effective transition strategy so that people

do not feel vulnerable. Persons receiving social assistance, staff and community agencies think that the main reasons for this situation are as follows:

- The supports provided are not sufficient to build capacity to re-engage the workforce and;
- The high levels of precarious employment in the workforce combined with the immediate claw-backs on transition to work mitigate the monetary incentive to work.

It is recommended that:

- The financial positions of persons receiving social assistance be assessed on an annual basis. This will provide room for persons to transition from social assistance to paid employment without immediate claw-backs.
- Social assistance benefits be tied to income level as opposed to the current means testing for social assistance eligibility.
- Childcare benefits and other supports be made readily available to all parents in need.

(8) 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?

Persons find themselves in low income generally as a result of their limited capacity to explore their potentials. This challenge can be further exacerbated by barriers such as discrimination by employers. Social assistance must be geared towards assisting persons in low income to build these capacities.

This will require adequate provisions of the key foundations of health, affordable housing and childcare. These foundations need to be supported by easy access to education, information technologies and transportation. As recommended by the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults, supports for persons in low income must include:

- A seamless and integrated child benefit platform that pays child benefits to all low-income parents with children, including those receiving social assistance.
- Providing prescription drug and dental benefits to low-income workers.
- Improved training and employment supports for social assistance recipients and all low-income workers.

In addition, the federal government needs to enhance the refundable tax credit and working income supplement to support low income Canadians. Further, transit passes should be provided to all low-income persons who rely solely on public transit.

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

Overwhelmingly, respondents feel that current asset limit requirements are counterproductive. These requirements not only reduce individuals' quality of life but also reduce their capacity to transition into the workforce.

- Strategies to support the accumulation of assets must be implemented.

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

It is unnecessary to maintain two parallel systems of ODSP and OW. The redesigned system must better meet the needs of persons with disabilities by providing appropriate, adequate and timely supports. The system must be flexible enough to address changing needs.

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

What Do You Think?

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

The current set of rules are too numerous, confusing and punitive. Further, the rules sometimes operate at cross-purposes and in some cases act as disincentives to transition to meaningful employment. Others act as obstacles to gainful employment. Some such examples as outlined by a cross section of respondents include:

- Volunteer placements that require placements in not-for-profit agencies only. In addition there are limits on the tenure of employment.
- Rules requiring the dissolving of all assets in order to meet eligibility criteria are "disempowering" rather than empowering.

It is recommended that:

- The system is developed to support an integrated relationship between Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), Employment Insurance, Ontario Works and ODSP.
- OSAP be disbursed in monthly increments rather than on a lump sum basis
- Social assistance staff be more empowered to exercise discretion.
- The length of stay on social assistance is capped for individuals who are job ready, educated, have current skills and have no clear barriers to employment.
- The outcome oriented focus of social assistance be changed to make it more feasible to work with high needs individuals over the long term.
- The rules requiring the dissolving of joint assets be removed.

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

If needs are recognized and addressed in the broader income support system, there will be no need for special benefits within the social assistance system.

Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

What Do You Think?

(13) What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?

Social assistance needs to promote self-sufficiency by empowering individuals to transition into the workforce. However, employment should not be the only expected outcome, as not all persons will become employment ready for number of reasons such as health constraints. Therefore, service system managers must seek to achieve improved quality of life for individuals while helping them to identify and improve their capacity to participate productively in society.

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

Overwhelmingly, respondents feel that the current system of data collections is too intrusive and attacks their dignity. Other concerns surround the risk of racial profiling and other improper use of data. However, data is important for the process of effective planning of programs and services to address needs. How data is collected and used require further examination.

It is recommended that a task force be established to develop a policy to govern the effective collection and use of data.

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

There needs to be Federal and Provincial discussions with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), Ontario Municipalities Social Services Association (OMSSA), the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and other sector organizations at the table. These discussions should focus on how to improve vertical and lateral integration of the system with the aim to improve service delivery, cost and administrative efficiencies and outcomes.

Currently, there are service integration initiatives at the local level that require senior government integrated planning and policy development leadership to ensure effectiveness. The Region of Peel is currently working towards the integration of Childcare, Housing and Ontario Works through our Human Services Integration model and would benefit from Provincial leadership in this area.

**Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security
What Do You Think?**

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

While newer immigrants have a number of newcomer supports available to them, immigrants who have been in Canada over five years have minimal supports and as a result are disadvantaged.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) should work with Municipalities to offer full suite centres including OW Services and Newcomer Services.

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

The rules governing the delivery of the different programs need to be better aligned. This will be achieved through greater integration among ministries, service managers and service agencies. In addition, technology must be used to merge and make more easily accessible, all available information relating to persons receiving social assistance. This will provide a platform for greater efficiencies and accountability in the delivery of services.

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

Municipalities are currently required to work with numerous ministries that generally are not in sync with the process of integration being promoted at the Municipal level. Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA) restrictions require individuals to provide the same information multiple times. These restrictions impact negatively on service quality and outcomes.

Provincial ministries need to co-operatively develop new approaches to the implementation of social assistance policies. This will promote better alignment of legislation at the Provincial level with the processes at the Municipal level.

It is recommended that:

- The integration of childcare, housing and social assistance at the Municipal level be supported by an integrated approach to program delivery at the Provincial level.
- Municipalities be encouraged to share best practices with each other to help address varying interpretations of rules in the system
- A Federal, Provincial, Municipal committee be formed to steer the process of social services integration.

Final Comments

The consultations with persons receiving social assistance, community groups, businesses and staff have provided great insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with the income support programs. These discussions along with the Region of Peel's experience delivering social assistance programs have guided staff to conclude on the following:

A sustainable, proactive, cost effective and efficient social assistance system is of fundamental importance to the prosperity of Ontario and Canada. As pointed out by Commissioners of the SAR, the current social assistance system is fragmented, rules based, difficult to administer and does not sufficiently address issues relevant to improving the quality of life and empowerment of individuals receiving social assistance. There has to be a comprehensive understanding of the needs of communities and properly informed policies need to be supported by the requisite resources. There is no short cut approach to achieving an effective social assistance program in the context of a broader income support system. Changes must be transformational, far reaching and must be based on the principles articulated in this document.