

Leadership in Social Service Delivery

New program focuses on building capacity in Ontario's municipal human services sector

Since the signing of the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Agreement in 2008, the Ontario government has provided municipal governments increased local flexibility and responsibility in a number of areas, giving the 47 Consolidated Municipal Service System Managers (CMSMs) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) greater ability to develop local approaches to address local needs.

The 47 CMSMs and DSSABs are service system managers in the areas of affordable housing and homelessness prevention, as well as early learning and child care. CMSMs and DSSABs are also responsible for funding, managing, and delivering social assistance and employment programs.

As service system managers and key decision makers for human services in their communities, CMSMs and DSSABs recognize the importance of developing strong leadership to foster competent human services organizations. A strong staff component that understands and applies the principles behind service system management and integrated services planning and delivery helps CMSMs and DSSABs continue to support their municipal governments and boards in an environment of continuous improvement.

As noted by Keith Palmer, Director of Human Services for the County of Dufferin and Chair of the Education Committee for the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA), "Human services leadership has unique competencies that often ask leaders to simultaneously consider governance, fiscal accountability, innovation, community

capacity building, staff teams, and of course the provision of services for individuals and families. Creating an explicit educational resource for aspiring leaders in human services is not just a development opportunity, but the ultimate leadership responsibility that drives global achievement."

Effective leadership is essential for fostering competent municipal human services organizations and developing skills to support excellence in service system management.

Human Services Leadership Program

The Human Services Leadership Program (HSLP) is a capacity-building program developed by OMSSA that addresses this need for leadership development in staff working in human services organizations.

The HSLP recognizes the unique skill sets required by staff in CMSMs and DSSABs to fulfill their local stewardship role in engaging and working with their communities within the municipal decision-making process – skills such as systems thinking, service integration, and managing and working in a municipal decision-making environment. It also recognizes the need for succession-planning strategies to ensure sustained leadership within the organization.

The program provides participants with essential leadership tools to build competencies for managing people, organizations, and themselves. It builds on these leadership skills by creating a stronger focus on service system management and managing in an environment of change.

Work on this initiative began with needs expressed by staff in CMSMs and DSSABs and discussions at OMSSA's various committees, board of directors, and strategic groups. Feedback from OMSSA's 2011 omnibus membership survey identified the importance of leadership development, management skills, and organizational development for human services organizations to lead and manage a service system that provides the supports necessary for individuals and families to thrive. Feedback also recognized the need for succession-planning strategies to address the impending depletion of knowledge and skills as experienced staff approach retirement. This feedback and the subsequent discussions led to the identification of the competencies that are at the core of this program.

Flexible Options to Build and Demonstrate Competencies

The program lists almost 60 competencies across five learning outcomes that relate to themes of service system management, change management, managing organizations, relationship management, and personal skills development. A matrix charts the progression of competency development across different levels of a human services organization, making



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this program applicable to staff at all levels in their organizations and careers. It lists flexible options for participants to demonstrate or attain competencies, and requires a final evaluative assignment for participants to demonstrate their comprehension and application of the learning.

The program acknowledges that, as professionally employed adults, potential participants will bring existing skills and prior knowledge to the program, allowing participants to demonstrate equivalency to competencies upon enrolment.

Participants also have flexible options to obtain new competencies – they are not limited to attending courses through OMSSA to increase their understanding of concepts or skills. Their options include self-study assignments, work projects that address program competencies, as well as courses from other sources, including their own internal organizational training programs. One of the program's goals is to build key partnerships with other existing programs that increase the options available for participants to obtain effective training and to collaborate in building a common understanding of service excellence.

Coaching and Mentoring Embed Learning in Organizational Strategy

Since self-study assignments are an integral part of the program, it is important to ensure that participants are not learning in isolation. The program includes coaching and mentoring elements to provide program participants with a comprehensive perspective, balanced between local and broader understanding of issues.

By integrating coaching and mentoring into the curriculum, this program helps the participant move beyond merely gaining knowledge, to developing an understanding of complex issues and the application of competencies towards stronger leadership.

Coaches appointed from within participants' organizations help those participants dig deeper and better understand local, organizational, and community issues. By incorporating this as a program requirement, the program enables organizations to invest in the participants' learning and ensure that it fits with the organization's strategic direction.

Mentors, appointed by OMSSA from outside participants' organizations, help participants obtain a broader understanding of how municipal human services organizations address different challenges and issues. Mentoring conversations not only help participants, but also help mentors to get an enhanced understanding of their own experiences and knowledge, and to develop new insights through their conversations with protégés.

Moreover, by engaging senior leaders in the coaching and mentoring program, OMSSA will include their advice in the program in order to align the training with their organizations' strategic priorities. For example, a participant might find it useful to understand service system management through a self-study assignment to "chart the impact of implementation of recent housing allocations on other program areas and what it means to clients." This assignment will also help the participant develop resources

to support their own organizational work and to develop a plan for implementing the allocations.

Building a Knowledge Centre for Peer-to-Peer Learning and Organizational Excellence

Learning from collective experience is key in developing organizational capacity. Understanding how others conduct business helps organizations and staff identify potential for service improvement within their own business models. In its evaluation piece, too, the HSLP goes beyond measuring participants' comprehension of concepts. Through an evaluation that includes research-based studies and reports on key topics, the program seeks to ensure that these studies and submissions help increase the municipal human services sector's knowledge about real-world applications of research-based trends and strategies.

The HSLP supports municipal human services organizations in developing capacities to move their organizations towards service excellence. Organizational excellence first requires a capable and effective staff component. With this first step, OMSSA has begun a journey towards identifying what organizational excellence means for municipal human services. In order to support the outcomes of this program and increase value of the HSLP to the sector, OMSSA is pursuing accreditation options that help CMSM and DSSAB staff demonstrate their organizational and staff knowledge and capacity. **MW**

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