



September 25, 2018

Hon. Lisa MacLeod
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services
80 Grosvenor Street, 6th Floor, Hepburn Block
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 1E9

Re: Social Assistance Reform

Dear Minister MacLeod,

Thank you for accepting our delegation at the AMO Conference on August 20, 2018. Ontario's Service System Managers look forward to working with you on Ontario's social assistance reform plan to be released on November 8, 2018.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input and recommendations as the Ministry works towards finding efficiencies, integrating social assistance programs, improving employment outcomes, reducing poverty, providing additional mental health and addiction supports and reducing administrative and reporting burdens.

OMSSA also acknowledges the interest around enhancing SAMS and correcting any outstanding issues. We recognize that social assistance has been studied extensively in the past and that now is the time to act.

OMSSA called meetings with our 47 Service Manager Leads Table and solicited feedback on social assistance reform from our membership across Ontario. We have also coordinated with the Ontario Native Welfare Administrators Association (ONWAA), the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association (NOSDA) and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO). We also hosted an Employment Forum for our members in Kingston to share best practices around improving employment outcomes. The feedback received was targeted towards feedback requested from you at the AMO delegation, and is outlined in the attachment that follows.

OMSSA looks forward to the release of the Province's plan for social assistance reform on November 8, and encourages the Ministry to contact local Service System Managers for any additional information and comments as required.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on social assistance reform. We have a strong interest in partnering and working together with the Ministry to achieve mutual outcomes on social assistance reform. I or any of the OMSSA staff, are pleased to receive your comments or respond to any questions you or your staff may have.

Sincerely,

Elaine Baxter-Trahair
President, Ontario Municipal Social Service Association

Social Assistance Review: Feedback and Recommendations

Municipal Costs

We recognize that the government would like to reduce the provincial deficit and debt, and has just completed a line by line audit. It should also be recognized that any downloads cannot be sustained on property tax revenues alone. Any changes must be cost neutral to municipalities.

Better value will come from existing dollars with efforts focused on improving outcomes. Service System Managers have been working towards human services integration, social services modernization and finding efficiencies internally. These efforts and best practices must be acknowledged by the Ministry and implemented across the province as appropriate.

Human Services Integration

OMSSA's members have advocated for and have been working towards human service integration for several years. Algoma DSSAB, Oxford County and the City of Windsor are strong examples of where best practices can be drawn and shared. Integrating social assistance, child care and social housing will improve service for clients and results in significant efficiencies by reducing unnecessary duplication. It also improves the overall experience for clients.

We also support increased integration among Ontario Ministries to support work in social assistance, child care and social housing. The Ministries of: Health and Long Term Care; Labour; Training, Colleges and Universities; Seniors and Accessibility; Economic Development; Job Creation and Trade; Indigenous Affairs; Infrastructure; Transportation; Community Safety and Correctional Services; and the Attorney General are all important partners who have a role to play in human services integration, reducing poverty, providing housing, enhancing supportive services and improving employment outcomes for those on social assistance.

Current privacy legislation remains a barrier in reducing silos and sharing information in a social services context.

Enhancing Technology in Social Services

Ontario's Service System Managers have been working with the Ministry on social services modernization efforts. Technology has a vital role to play in finding efficiencies, reducing time spent on administration and improving service to clients. OMSSA encourages the Ministry to continue moving forward on social services modernization efforts.

It must also be recognized that some areas of the province (including First Nations communities) may lack reliable broadband internet or cell phone service. Electronic case files are a top priority across the Province and would have a major impact on reducing unnecessary administration.

SAMS was a major issue for Service System Managers in the past, but most of the issues have been addressed and the system is now working to the standards promised. However, additional coordination with employment systems and other systems relevant to the service manager should be a priority. It would also be helpful to provide First Nations Communities with access to SAMS as it could support prevention of duplicate applications across the Province.

OMSSA has prepared a list of potential enhancements and outstanding issues that will be submitted to the Ministry staff.

Better Integration of Ontario Works and ODSP

A potential merger of the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program into a single unified program delivered by CMSMs and DSSABs or the Province has been recommended in the past, including in the Drummond report.

A cautious approach and consultations with CMSMs and DSSABs should take place before a final decision is made on this issue. The objective of any merger of Ontario Works with ODSP must be to improve service and supports for those with disabilities and enhance employment outcomes. Importantly, it must be funded by the Province, and not the already stretched municipal taxpayer.

Opportunities may exist to centralize payments and eligibility. This would potentially allow case managers to spend more of their time with clients helping them to achieve better employment outcomes.

The work of case management is valuable and best managed at the local level. Case managers are essential to ensure that clients receive and are made aware of the local services that are available. They assess clients and then support them by referring them to the appropriate local services- mental health, addiction services, diagnostic services, pre-employment services/supports, job opportunities, volunteer opportunities, etc.

Case conferencing is also a practice that our members use and recommend. Clients have confirmed that these sessions allow them to access additional supports and new strategies to move forward.

Provincial support may be required at the municipal level to support the implementation of any major changes to these programs. Support for change management and consideration to

those operating in a unionized environment must also be considered as changes take place in social assistance.

Improving Employment Outcomes

Service System Managers share with the Province the objective of reducing Ontario Works caseloads and supporting individuals in finding employment. At the same time, labour markets are not the same across the province and issues such as automation, precarious employment, seasonal employment and changes happening within Ontario's economy have resulted in new challenges that service managers must adapt to locally.

Service System Managers would like to take a lead role in better integrating Employment Ontario with social assistance outcomes. Potentially, this could take the form of service system management or service delivery where local capacity exists, and where local Service System Managers have an interest.

Currently, Employment Ontario only serves clients that are labour market ready. An increased focus must be placed on those on social assistance that require further skills development, training or who face barriers to sustainable employment.

Better coordination must take place among Employment Ontario providers to avoid duplication and to ensure that individuals find the appropriate services needed to support them. We need a collaborative approach, not a competitive approach.

Service System Managers have relationships with their clients, understand local economic conditions and have experience working with employers, non-profits and relevant stakeholders within their communities. Service System Managers have had success finding employment for individuals and reducing caseloads for those labour ready.

Using a skills inventory of those on social assistance, the Nipissing DSSAB, is working with the local Chamber of Commerce to match jobs where there are labour shortages. Their system has resulted in \$1.9 million in provincial savings and a 6.5% drop in Ontario Works caseloads within the first year (www.gettrainedworkers.com).

Based on Nipissing's work in this area, Niagara Region has also implemented their BENN system and have found similar positive results. This approach has potential to be rolled out across the province for a very modest investment.

For those that have found employment, ongoing support to employers and clients is required to promote job stability. A significant percentage of those remaining on the caseload face multiple barriers and require additional supports. A standard employment readiness tool across the province would be helpful and the Province should move forward with implementing this initiative across Ontario.

Encouraging volunteerism to gain relevant work experience and build skills would have a net benefit for the client and the community. Participation agreements and job search forms have done little to improve employment outcomes but have increased administration. Recognizing part-time self-employment particularly in rural, Northern and first nations communities would be helpful given the state of their local economies.

Reviewing Ontario Works Directives is important to address local economic circumstances such as seasonal, contract and part time employment. Local flexibility is required to address local circumstances.

OMSSA also supports removing barriers and investing in incentives that encourage people to find meaningful employment without losing vital services such as dental and drug coverage that is currently received.

Increasing earnings exemptions would also provide incentive for people to find work. For example, allowing earnings exemptions and the Full Time Employment Benefit at month one and increasing the flat rate earning exemption from \$200 to \$400 would be helpful.

Policies must encourage social assistance recipients to find work, not encourage them to stay on the system in what is known as the “welfare wall.” Investing in literacy, training and skills development would help produce desired employment outcomes and help reduce caseloads and job retention for those who find jobs.

Mental Health, Addictions, Housing and Supportive Services

The needs of social assistance clients have become more complex and demographics have changed in recent years. According to the 2016 census, the average number of single people has quadrupled since the mid 1990s. For the first time in the country's history, the number of one-person households has surpassed all other types of living situations, and this has been clearly exhibited in the increase of single recipients applying for Ontario Works.

Many social assistance clients require mental health and addictions support, but Service System Managers are not designated as health providers and do not have the authority to refer those in need to appropriate support services within their community. Case managers are on the front lines and have an in-depth understanding of the services available within their community and could act as a knowledgeable liaison with health providers.

OMSSA is encouraged by your government’s commitment to invest in mental health services over the next ten years, funding that is sorely needed in communities across Ontario. Mental health is also a major factor impacting those homeless in communities across Ontario.

The costs and availability of shelter are all major barriers to those on social assistance. It is difficult to focus on employment when one is homeless or lacks adequate shelter.

Child care is also very important to improving economic outcomes and access to employment opportunities. Reducing the cost of child care enhances workplace participation and is vital to reducing poverty.

Reducing Administration and Reporting

OMSSA and Service System Managers welcome any effort to reduce administration and reporting burdens, while streamlining and better coordinating services and delivering people-centred outcomes.

This includes aligning all income tested programs including Ontario Works, rent-geared-to-income (RGI) and subsidized child care. This effort would dramatically reduce time spent on eligibility administration work and enhance human services integration.

Some additional suggestions from our membership on reducing administrative burdens include:

- Addressing current privacy legislation to better facilitate the sharing of information among departments and programs
- Removing unnecessary rules and reporting to free up time for case workers to spend helping individuals find employment
- Consolidating and reducing the number of transfer payment agreements
- Adopting a risk-based case management approach with priority based on need and risk (ie. accepting what the client reports as income and assets with periodic requests for verification)
- Allowing two-way email and/or text communication between clients and caseworkers, and permitting more flexibility around the completion of telephone updates and client self-reporting
- Implementing a flat rate for shelter and lodging so that front line workers are not constantly adjusting entitlements that have minimal differentiation
- Standardizing the definition of spouse
- Implementing a single application for those under 18
- Standardizing note templates
- Reforming absentee rules
- Harmonizing OW and ODSP payment periods
- Implementing income ceilings for all child support payments and aligning with the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO)

Reducing Poverty in Ontario

Statistics Canada data shows that in 2016, the percentage of Ontarians living in low-income exceeded the national average for the fifth straight year. This was despite the fact that in

2003, only 10.9 per cent of Ontarians lived on low incomes, well below the national average of 13.2 per cent at the time.

If we look at the statistics for children, the numbers are even worse for Ontario. From 2003 to 2016, the proportion of Ontarians under the age of 18 living in low-income rose from 13.3 per cent to 16.2 per cent. Meanwhile, children elsewhere in Canada fared much better, with the low-income incidence rate nationwide falling from 16.1 per cent to 14.0 per cent over the same period. We agree these numbers are unacceptable.

The economic cost of poverty has been well-documented. It is estimated that poverty costs \$32-38 billion per year, or \$2,300 per person. Poverty also has a negative impact on the social determinants of health.

A recent study in the Canadian Medical Association Journal found that, from 1981-2011, average per capita health spending was almost three times higher than per capita social services spending. The study suggested that if governments had spent one more cent on social services for every dollar spent on health, life expectancy could have increased by another 5% and avoidable mortality could have dropped an additional 3%.

To effectively reduce poverty and address the overall affordability of the necessities of life, the Province should consider benefit levels that are adequate to reduce poverty and indexed to inflation annually.

Efforts are being made locally to reduce poverty and homelessness. Service System Managers have been working on local poverty reduction plans and on updating their 10-year Housing and Homelessness Plans.

Poverty reduction efforts are also happening provincially and federally. Addressing this issue will require collaboration across all levels of government. Coordination is required to reduce duplication and maximize resources towards achieving a common objective.

Local Flexibility

A one size fits all approach will never work in a province as large and diverse as Ontario. Local flexibility is required to address unique local economies and local circumstances.

The Service System Management Role is critical for the long-term success of and positive outcomes for Ontario's most vulnerable residents. There is a growing recognition of the value of providing integrated services and supports at the local level – an approach that allows people to access financial assistance, employment supports, housing, child care, employment, public health, transportation, recreation and library services within their community.



Service System Managers have technical expertise and decades of experience in their field. They know their clients and their communities, and they have built important local relationships. They are accountable and have achieved tangible positive results. Service System Managers are ready and able to implement provincial plans locally and want to play a role in co-design and policy development.

OMSSA supports submissions from AMO, NOSDA, ONWAA and individual Service System Managers who have submitted comments on the plan for social assistance reform. OMSSA looks forward to the release of the Province's plan for social assistance reform on November 8th, and encourages the Ministry to contact local Service System Managers for any additional information and comments as required.

We have a strong interest in partnering and working together with the Ministry to achieve mutual outcomes on social assistance reform. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on social assistance reform.