
Summary Report: **Community Feedback on *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario***

Background

In the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Ontario government committed to reviewing social assistance, with a focus on removing barriers and increasing opportunities for people to work.

In December 2010, the Minister of Community and Social Services announced the appointment of two Commissioners from outside the government to lead a review of Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

On June 9, 2011 the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario released its first report, *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas*. Over the summer the Commission encouraged people across Ontario to come together in groups to engage in a discussion on the pressing issues facing social assistance. The Commission received more than 700 submissions in response.

The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, along with a number of community partners, gathered feedback from our community by hosting a community conversation and an online survey in August 2011. The information collected was submitted to the Commission on September 1, 2011.

On February 2, 2012 the Commission released its second report, *Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform*, which discusses different approaches to improving some of the key areas of the social assistance system. Through this paper, the Commission invited further input and advice from stakeholders and communities to help frame recommendations to the government.

Again, the Poverty Task Force and community partners organized community input via an online survey and a number of focus groups. The information collected was submitted to the Commission in March 2012.

On October 24, 2012, the Commission released its final report to the government, *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*, which includes 108 recommendations to transform social assistance.

The final report was released several days after former Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty announced his resignation and prorogued parliament. While legislature was recalled on February 19, 2013 by Ontario's new premier Kathleen Wynne, political response to the Commission's final report has been limited.

On February 21, 2013, approximately 50 community members from Guelph and Wellington gathered to provide feedback on the Commission's final

recommendations. This report provides a summary of the discussions from this gathering based on three broad topic areas: Enabling employment, building a better benefit structure, and strengthening accountability.

Enabling Employment:

Commission's recommendation:

"We recommend that the Province develop a strategy for supporting and enhancing alternative forms of employment for social assistance recipients, such as self-employment, social purpose enterprises, and peer-led employment and training programs"

Community feedback:

In general, community conversation participants supported the recommendation, particularly for clients with ample employment experience. In terms of supports, the Province should consider providing social assistance recipients interested in pursuing alternative forms of employment, participants recommended:

- Provide hands-on opportunities for those pursuing alternative forms of employment, including job shadowing, interning, and placement opportunities.
- Provide case-workers with a comprehensive tool to properly assess clients interested in pursuing alternative forms of education to ensure they have the appropriate skills and abilities.
- Provide clients interested in pursuing alternative forms of employment with local labour market research to help them make informed decisions.
- Extend the supports to Employment Insurance recipients

Commission's recommendations:

"We recommend that the Province support employer-driven initiatives and the establishment of employer

councils to advise on employment services design and to facilitate testing of sector-specific models"

"We recommend that the Province partner with corporate leaders to champion the hiring of people with disabilities"

"We recommend that the Province, municipalities, and not-for-profit organizations lead by example in hiring more people with disabilities and other social assistance recipients."

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants strongly supported the Commission's recommendations aimed at engaging with employers and suggested that it would help:

- Increase the value employers place on client's diverse experiences, including non-traditional training, in determining their suitability for employment opportunities.
- Encourage the adoption of more inclusive hiring policies.
- Reduce the stigma associated with hiring social assistance recipients based on a deeper understanding of the experiences and expertise of people living in poverty.

Building a Better Benefit Structure

Commission's recommendation:

"We recommend that the province adopt a rational methodology to provide the necessary information for setting social assistance rates in a manner that aims to achieve a balance among three objectives: adequacy of rates to cover healthy food, securing housing, and other basic necessities; fairness between social assistance recipients and people with low-incomes who are working; and financial incentive to work."

“We recommend that the Province develop a new Basic Measure of Adequacy (BMA), based on the costs of food, clothing and footwear, a basic list of personal and household needs, transportation, and shelter, taking into account the differences in the costs of these items in different Ontario regions, including the region north of the 50th parallel, and use this BMA as a benchmark for the adequacy of social assistance rates.”

Community feedback:

While community conversation participants supported the recommendation that a rate methodology be adopted, there was discomfort with the term “adequacy,” suggesting that it is a vague concept that can be subject to personal perspectives.

Commission’s recommendation:

“We recommend that, initially, the Province set the standard rate at \$100 per month over the rate, at the time of implementation, for a single adult renter receiving Ontario Works. The standard rate should be adjusted in the future, with changes to the minimum wage and tax credits, to move recipients to the BMA level.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants agreed that while higher rates are needed, \$100 per month is NOT enough. Further, an increase is required for ALL social assistance recipients and should be put into place immediately, rather than waiting for a new standard rate to be implemented. Participants were discouraged by this recommendation, noting that it does not reflect the principles of adequacy and fairness that the Commissioners refer to throughout the report.

Commission’s recommendation:

“We recommend that the current complex rate structure be replaced with simple building blocks:

- *A standard rate (a flat amount covering basic needs and housing-related costs) for all adults, with future increases to reflect the differences in living costs across Ontario, as the basic unit of income support in social assistance;*
- *A disability supplement, on top of the standard rate, to be provided to people with disabilities;*
- *A uniform children’s supplement, on top of the standard rate, to be provided to families with children, consisting of a flat amount per child, and a uniform sole-support parent supplement to be provided to sole-support parents.”*

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants were generally supportive of the building blocks structure. They deemed that the proposed benefit structure would:

- Support a more client-centered approach to determining benefits
- Create a simple process for determining benefits that is easy for clients to understand
- Cut down on administrative responsibilities for caseworkers

However, there were significant concerns expressed about integrating Ontario Works and ODSP, including questions about the rationale for doing so and the process that would be used.

Commission’s recommendations:

“We recommend that, initially, health-related special benefits such as adult dental care be harmonized and provided consistently to all social assistance recipients in all municipalities.”

“We recommend the Province examine ways to make prescription drugs, dental, and other health benefits to all low-income Ontarians give that the availability of these

benefits outside social assistance is an integral part of the fully transformed system.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants strongly supported both recommendations. There was some discussion about the need to focus on providing preventative health care, as well as the means to manage chronic health conditions. This strategy, it was noted, would reduce poverty-induced costs related to health care for the government.

Commission’s recommendations:

“We recommend that nutritional supplements for people with unintentional weight loss be provided by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, using the funding for these supplements currently provided through the Special Diet Allowance (SDA). We further recommend that the SDA be eliminated as a separate benefit, and the remaining SDA funding be reinvested into the standard rate to help improve adequacy.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants strongly disagreed with this recommendation and expressed major concerns about the potential elimination of the SDA. Participants remarked that it was difficult to understand the reasoning behind this recommendation and were frustrated by the lack of explanation provided in the Commission’s final report. Participants were extremely hesitant to accept the notion that a new standard rate would be sufficient to cover the dietary needs of those currently receiving the SDA.

Commission’s recommendations:

“As a priority, we recommend that the Province introduce a new disability benefit, outside social assistance, for all low-income working Ontarians with disabilities.”

Community feedback:

While community conversation participants were supportive of providing assistance to all low-income Ontarians with disabilities, there were a number of concerns raised, including:

- How “low-income” would be defined
- Who would administer the program and whether they have the capacity and expertise to do so
- How it would impact those currently on ODSP

Commission’s recommendations:

“We recommend that eligibility for social assistance for individuals in a spousal relationship continue to be determined based on combined income and assets; however, consistent with the definition in the Income Tax Act, we recommend that the definition of a spousal relationship be changed from three months of living together as a couple to one year of living together as a couple.”

“We recommend that all gifts received by social assistance recipients in the form of goods and services be fully exempt as income; infrequent or non-regular gifts of cash be exempt to a maximum of \$6000 per year; and gifts of cash to cover an extraordinary cost, such as a home repair or furniture replacement, be fully exempt and not count toward the \$6000 limit.”

“We recommend that child support payments received by social assistance recipients be treated as earned income (i.e., subject to an earnings exemption of 50 per cent instead of the current 100 per cent deduction), thus providing an incentive to pursue child support.”

“We recommend that social assistance recipients be allowed to choose whether or not to pursue child support, based on their individual family circumstances.”

“We recommend that the Province take immediate steps to harmonize the liquid asset rules, so the maximum of \$5,000 for a single individual and \$7,500 for a couple will apply equally to all social assistance recipients.”

Community feedback:

Overall, community conversation participants were very pleased with the recommendations and supported the immediate implementation of all. However, similar to discussions involving other recommendations, there were concerns about the implementation process and how it would impact current social assistance recipients.

Strengthening Accountability

Commission’s recommendation:

“We recommend that as the new Eligibility Verification Process is fully implemented, ongoing eligibility reviews move to a more risk-based approach, where thresholds for reviews are based on the actual risk profile of recipients rather than on a percentage of cases.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants supported this recommendation. They noted that the current system polarizes the client and service provider and suggested that a more risk-based approach would create more time and opportunities for caseworkers to operate with empathy and compassion.

Commission’s recommendation:

“As a priority, we recommend that the Province undertake a review to address the backlog of medical reviews for ODSP recipients and commit to performing ongoing medical reviews to improve accountability.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants agreed that is important for the Province to address the backlog of ODSP medical reviews, but commented that some cases do not require ongoing reviews. Participants were concerned that the recommendation did not capture or account for this reality.

Commission’s recommendation:

“We recommend that the Province extend to all social assistance recipients the exception based reporting model currently in place for ODSP recipients without earnings, so that all recipients are only required to report when there is a change in their monthly income.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants supported this recommendation.

Commission’s recommendation:

“We recommend that the Province offer social assistance recipients the option of reporting changes in their circumstances online.”

Community feedback:

Community conversation participants supported this recommendation, adding that it is important to provide multiple language options, aside from English and French.

Acknowledgements

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