

Lower social benefits likely to impact service clubs

<http://www.manitoulin.ca/2012/07/25/lower-social-benefits-likely-to-impact-service-clubs/>

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MANITOULIN—At the last meeting of the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB) before the summer break, the board learned of the DSB's revision to the Ontario Works policy on discretionary benefits—a revision that may see staff

turning down clients for health and non-health related benefits to which they are entitled.

“The change in policy would allow staff to deny discretionary benefits requests that would qualify under the policy, but are unable to approve as we have met or exceeded the provincial maximum on discretionary benefits,” explained Donna Moroso, director of integrated social services, to the board. This change took effect July 1.

In 2011, the DSB spent \$86,543 on health-related benefits (dental care, eye glasses, a portion of prosthetic costs, funerals and burials) and \$60,491 on non-health related benefits (vocational training and retraining, travel and transportation that is not for health-related purposes, moving expenses) for a total of \$147,034.

Previously, the DSB used the formula of \$8.75 per case for non-health related benefits, but as of July 1, that formula has been replaced with \$10 a case for both health and non-health related benefits combined.

“Based on our early analysis of these new rules, the DSB will have an annual allocation of approximately \$145,000 for health and non-health related discretionary benefits,” Ms. Moroso told the board. “Since our expenditures for 2011 were \$147,034, we may be able to manage within the new allocation.”

“However, the elimination of the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) on January 1, 2013 will put a lot of pressure on the discretionary benefits allocation,” she continued. “Based on the figures provided by Ministry of Community and Social Services, the DSB spent \$284,615 on the CSUMB benefit over a 12 month period from April 2011 to March 2012.”

According to Fern Dominelli, DSB CAO, the cancellation of the CSUMB is a major concern for his organization. Until January, CSUMB is a mandatory social assistance benefit that provides funding to eligible recipients to assist with the costs of establishing a new residence, preventing eviction or discontinuation of heating or utilities or maintaining an existing residence and is provided for victims of family violence, persons who are homeless, who reside in uninhabitable premises, persons leaving a residence due to incapacity or death, overcrowding, eviction, employment or training or a move to more affordable accommodations.

All Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program clients are eligible to access this fund, which provides a maximum of \$1,500 for recipients with one or more dependant children in a 24-month period, or up to a maximum of \$799 for those clients without dependant children.

“You've got a woman who's left a violent home—before she had \$1,500, now she has nothing,” Mr.



Dominelli told The Expositor. “When we lose CSUMB, we lose a tool in our tool box.”

He noted that the DSB has heard that a new government fund geared toward the homeless, which could potentially replace CSUMB, is in the works, but has not heard anything concrete.

Andrea Smith and Eleanor Charlton, co-directors of Manitoulin Family Resources (MFR), are also worried about the cancellation of CSUMB, sending The Expositor the following statement,

“Manitoulin Family Resources is deeply concerned about the recent provincial budget cuts to Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefits, which will result in significant reductions to the supplementary financial supports for people on Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program,” the co-directors wrote. “The loss of these supports will have a direct and harmful impact on many of the client populations we and other agencies in the Manitoulin region serve. Of particular concern to our agency is the impact on women and children and their safety—without these benefits, these families may no longer be able to leave abusive or uninhabitable home environments. The abolishment of the Community Start-up and Maintenance Benefit is shocking and will affect those who can least afford such devastating cuts. Manitoulin Family Resources, along with other groups and advocacy bodies, will continue to stand against the erosion of what have traditionally been considered mandatory benefits for those most in need.”

As for the new funding formula for health and non-health related benefits, Mr. Dominelli is warning service groups that this will likely mean more people will be coming to them to ask for help. He talked of getting together with area service clubs to determine a plan of action, noting that normally the DSB is a last resort, with staff encouraging clients to seek help from groups like the Lions or Rotary first. Mr. Dominelli encouraged the clubs to contact the DSB if they have any questions about what the board does and doesn't cover.

“Before they use their minimal resources, contact us first,” he offered. “We obviously can't tell them if a person qualifies, but can tell them what a program covers. We will work with them if we can, within the confines of confidentiality.”

“Be prepared that there probably will be an influx of requests,” the CAO warned service clubs.

Bruce Burnett, president of the Little Current Lions Club, said that influx has already started.

“We have been seeing more and more people come to us for health reasons than ever before,” he said.

“I know we're going to see a huge increase,” he added, after learning of the DSB changes. “This makes supporting events like Haweater Weekend and Winterfest, and all the other Island service club events, even more important. The money raised at these events goes directly back into the community and to people who need a hand covering certain health expenses.”

Dorothy Chapman, president of the Southeast Manitoulin Lions Club, said her club has also seen an increase. “Over the last couple of years, the club has been picking and choosing as there's only so much money to go around,” she said, explaining that her club has lessened their donations to larger charities. “We've come to the conclusion that we have to help our own.”

Mr. Burnett echoed these sentiments, saying that when his club meets again for its first business meeting in September, setting a budget for national charities would be first on the agenda.