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Demographics could cost North Ontario Works funding

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Demographic shifts in this and other parts of the province are going to have game-changing affects on the way social services are delivered in Northern Ontario, according to a ranking ministry official.

Frank Malvaso is the municipal and First Nations regional manager (Northern Ontario) the Ministry of Community and Social Services. He represents one of nine regions in the province in this capacity. Malvaso made a rare appearance before the entire Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (MSDSB) to deliver what he framed as something of a dire warning. He was at the top of the agenda for the board's regular meeting Thursday, November 26 in Espanola.

"I don't want to be an alarmist, because we will do whatever we can to help," he said. "I'm saying that because I have been doing this long enough, and I have seen the math, and the corporate culture behind it, I want you to be aware.

"The writing is on the wall."

The visit was unusual because regional managers usually correspond through the agency's chief administrative officer (CAO), who then liaises with the board, which consists of 15 or so elected municipal officials from across the region.

Most of Malvaso's concern is based on the issues facing Northern Ontario today, specifically as they are detailed in the government's Northern Growth Strategy, released in October. He shot from the hip during his 40-minute presentation, saying the issues are outlined in the document but the solutions are not.

"We are at a critical point," he said. "Make no assumptions. We need to walk into this with our eyes open. Is business going to be the same? Probably not – we need the right strategy for right now."

A career civil servant, Malvaso has spent decades traveling around Northern Ontario dealing with municipalities and First Nations. He said the exodus of young people from Northern Ontario he observed over that time, and the growing number of "urban Aboriginals" migrating from remote regions to urban centers such as Timmins, Toronto and Thunder Bay, is having an affect on how Ontario Works is delivered in the province today.

The bottom line is Ontario Works (OW) funding for the Northern district could be in peril. Malvaso said anyone with a stake in MSDSB needs to keep his or her head on a swivel, because funding is not going to get any easier to come by as the provincial pie is re-evaluated and re-distributed, he said.

"It is a little new for us to come to a board and meet at this level," Malvaso said. "But we are at a time when we need to work together. There is probably not going to be a better time for us to be closer on our strategy. At the end of the day, my message says 'Let's get together and see what we can do.'"

Demographic changes, i.e. the general shift of this region's population southward, have a negative affect on the tax base of municipalities in Northern Ontario, which has a negative affect on the level of infrastructure available to the remaining population, which has a negative affect on economic development and the ability of towns to attract new investment and create jobs. The phenomenon ultimately puts stress on Ontario Works and the agencies that administer it.

"We can't say this has nothing to do with us," Malvaso explained. "We're not the ministry that can fix everything, but we can make sure our little part is in the best shape it can be."

The MSDSB is responsible for about 6,000 OW cases at any one time. Districts such as Peel-Halton are experiencing the equivalent of 10 Espanolas (population of 50,000 people) moving in every year, about 6,000

OW cases among them.

Malvaso said despite his best efforts, the reality is when it comes time to split funding between the nine provincial regions, it is difficult to convince Toronto-area managers that a region losing OW cases needs more funding than those that are seeing increases.

But, that is his fight. In the meantime, Malvaso said he has told his top managers "now is the time for creativity and imagination.

"Because of the economic environment, on the employment side I am very hopeful that if we have a creative idea, we can tell them we need proportionately more (money) and more flexibility with it."

Beyond just funding formulas, Malvaso said the province has to look at how OW is administered. Handing over cheques is one thing, but is an agency such as the MS-DSSAB really addressing the needs of its clients with money?

"We are the ones who work on the ground to administer programs," he said. "The cheques are important, but that alone isn't a plan that changes some of the problems these people face. We have to hone in on what service going to look like. What does it mean to help this person?"

MSDSB board chair Gary Champagne agrees the face of social assistance needs to change.

"In many communities, the youngest people are 45 years old," he said. "We would like to return to a balance of young and older people, but we have to find ways to adapt because OW is a part of that. The concept of OW is good, but it has to be expanded to other areas, and there has to be more cooperation between ministries."

That message is getting through, according to Malvaso. He said his equivalents, regional managers in other ministries such as finance and northern development, "live here and understand" they cannot continue to operate in silos. He said he recently received an email from someone in the Ministry of Municipal Affairs that reinforced that point.

Champagne said the MS-DSSAB board would draft a letter to the ministry outlining its suggestions.

"Let's push the envelope and see what we can do," he said. "I think if we draft a letter ... while you're doing your work from the inside, we can get somewhere. But I agree, the way we are going now, we're not going to get anywhere."