

February 3, 2012

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario released its second discussion paper this morning. The paper, entitled *Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform*, is accompanied by *What We Heard: A Summary of Discussion on Social Assistance*, a document summarizing the input they received in response to their first "Issues and Ideas" document. *Approaches for Reform* is organized according to the review's five stated outcomes. An additional chapter is provided relating issues for First Nations. The paper also poses for discussion much more specific and detailed questions than the first paper did.

OMSSA members will recognize a number of ideas from the association's submission to the Commission in the discussion document. For example, it is encouraging to read in the opening message from the Commissioners they have "come to the view that we need to transform the social assistance system." The OMSSA submission in the last phase was one of the few that spoke to transformation and attempted to put forward a vision for systemic transformation. There is also a strong emphasis on the role that labour force attachment and effective access to a full range employment services for everyone, play in transformed system.

Other points from the report demonstrate an understanding of the more complex and interconnected context in which social assistance sits: their recognition that some of the solutions lay outside the social assistance system itself, including the inter-play with other areas such as housing and child care, and that their final report will speak to these too; that the recommendations they will be formulating over the coming months will be for a system that is sustainable for the future; and their emphasis in many parts on integration as a way forward – be it for service delivery, program development or client-experience.

Finally, it is important to note that this is truly a document to further and deepen the dialogue around the Commission's work. Conversations with the Commission have confirmed that no decisions have been made and that input will help shape their final report which is due in June.

The timeline for this current phase of discussion and input is March 16, 2012.

During this time, the Commission has been clear that they are focused on practical solutions, including implementation issues and ideas to overcome barriers to successful implementation.

OMSSA is in conversation with the Commission on the best way to engage the association and members in this crucial phase. In preparing our responses, OMSSA will draw on the many submissions made by members, an analysis of which is found on [our website](#). We will be careful to analyse and balance the opportunities for CMSMs and DSSABs in final recommendations with what is required for success, including the appropriate accountabilities, supporting legislation and regulations and provincial funding models. We will also be working closely with AMO to align any municipal advice and positions.

The following is a summary of the information in the paper prepared after our first reading. More analysis and responses will follow in the coming weeks.

Summary of discussion paper

The paper identifies four key features of **effective services and supports** for people receiving social assistance:

- consistent assessment and case management;
- integrated pre- and post-employment services and supports;
- access to the same level of services for people with disabilities; and
- strong connections with employers.

Underpinning these features is the need to be able to effectively access these employment services and supports, with an emphasis on increasing coordination or integration in order to be more effective. The paper identifies three potential approaches:

- improved provincial-municipal/First Nations collaboration;
- municipalities/First Nations deliver all employment services; or
- Employment Ontario delivers all employment services.

In this area, the Commission wants to continue discussion on whether Ontario should adopt a means to better assess work capacity and set participation requirements for people with some capacity for employment, or whether the province should wait to introduce such requirements until substantial progress has been made on removing barriers to employment for people with disabilities, including the full implementation of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (OADA)

Under the discussion of an **appropriate benefit structure** for social assistance, the paper notes that many trade-offs that must be considered. It states that to arrive at a rate structure an adequacy measure, reference wage and benefit withdrawal rate must all be considered. The paper notes that the trade-offs are even more pronounced in designing a benefit structure for people with disabilities. Several approaches are highlighted to possibly address trade-offs including:

- extended health benefits for all low-income Ontarians;
 - o varying the rate structure over time;
- universal income-tested benefits such as:
 - o an earned income supplement; and
 - o a housing benefit.

The **complexity of the current benefit** structure and method of calculating benefits is also addressed. The Commission suggests that benefit calculation should reflect actual costs and that complexity might be reduced through one or more of the following elements:

- combining basic needs and shelter (or board and lodging) into one standard rate for adults reflecting regional variation;
- eliminating the category of “dependent adult” with adults applying separately for benefits;
- merging some special benefits into the standard rate.

The report speaks to tensions between the desire to ensure “compliance” and the time consuming nature of the verification process. It mentions an audit based process of verification as a possible approach that would be less time-consuming for staff and invasive for clients. In its discussion of the treatment of assets, the Commission notes a number of possible approaches including:

- for OW asset limits to match ODSP;
- increase asset limits for an initial period of time when someone first receives benefits;
- limits on longer term assets intended to create financial security - such as RRSPs - could be raised;
- limits should reflect realities of First Nations and Northern life that may require equipment to hunt or for cultural purposes.

The Commission was also charged with making recommendations regarding **long-term viability of the system**. The paper lays out three possible approaches to improving integration and service delivery to ensure long-term viability.

- Continue current model of separate delivery of OW and ODSP, but integrate employment services and supports for everyone receiving social assistance
- Provide employment services and income support through a one-stop delivery model that would integrate OW and ODSP at the local level
- For municipalities to deliver human services components of social assistance including case management and employment services while the Province delivers administrative services such as issuing cheques.

The paper raises the question of whether it may be better to move responsibility for Temporary Care Assistance and Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

The Commission’s paper highlights the interconnections between varieties of programs outside of social assistance that together are intended to provide

economic security for Ontarians. The rules are collectively complex and often produce contradictory results for the people they are intended to help. One specific rule mentioned is the interaction between rent scales for Rent Geared to Income Housing and social assistance.

The Commission outlines its consultations with First Nations communities across Ontario. The report highlights a number of recommendations laid out by the Ontario Native Welfare Administrators Association (ONWAA) which emphasize a central role for First Nations people in designing, running and delivering programs for themselves. The paper notes a number of issues unique to First Nations and Northern communities including high costs of living and a lack of job opportunities in some areas.

LINKS

[The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario](#)

[Toronto Star article](#)

[OMSSA's material including members submissions and summary](#)

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