

**Ministry of Community
and Social Services**

Assistant Deputy Minister
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April 13, 2015

Catherine Matheson
President
Ontario Municipal Social Services Association
1 Dundas Street West, Suite 2500
Toronto ON M5G 1Z3

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter of March 4, 2015 regarding the implementation of the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS). As always, I appreciate our continued dialogue as we move toward improving the system.

I would like to start off by assuring you that we are continuously evaluating the resource complement required to continue to stabilize and support the implementation of SAMS. We have continued to maintain the same SAMS Team capacity in order to ensure timeliness of priority defect fixing activities, the ongoing transfer of knowledge to ministry resources, and the planning of ministry commitments such as the Reloadable Payment Card.

However, a planning exercise is currently underway to examine the resource capacity going forward, in terms of continuing to make functional improvements and to implement potential enhancements in both the short and longer term. Consultations with our municipal partners and other stakeholders will play a crucial part in this planning exercise.

As you know, the ministry retained PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in early March, as an independent third-party advisor, to evaluate, advise on and assist with the implementation of SAMS. PwC submitted its Progress Report to the ministry on March 31, 2015, and its final report is expected at the end of April 2015.

The progress report includes initial observations on the progress of SAMS implementation and feedback from initial consultations with stakeholders, including front-line staff. It recognizes that progress is being made while highlighting a number of opportunities for improvement.

We will be examining the advice and observations of both reports carefully to continue our work on improving the transition to SAMS.

I would also like to provide you with a more fulsome overview of the Front-Line Staff Working Group, to more clearly identify its purpose and makeup, and to let you know what we heard at the group's first meeting.

The Front-Line Staff Working Group will support ongoing improvement efforts on SAMS implementation by providing direct input on the supports, tools and business processes needed to improve the front-line staff experience.

This working group is expected to provide input on:

- System improvements and fixes, including priority setting
- Learning and training supports and strategies including both content and approach to delivery
- Business processes improvements
- Approach to communication to front line staff
- Other supports

It is important to note that the Front-Line Staff Working Group is an information seeking forum and not a decision making body on modifications to the system and/or development of tools. It is expected that valuable input from this working group will be referred to the Technical Working Group or the ministry and/or OMSSA business recovery working groups for further analysis and decision making.

The working group is not a forum to discuss local issues between staff and the employer.

The Front-Line Staff Working Group held a very productive first meeting on Wednesday, March 25. As you know, two OMSSA members, Dave Landers and Dennis Holmes, were able to participate as observers. The third-party reviewer, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, also attended and led a significant engagement with members to gather input on key areas of focus which will help to inform their interim and final reports.

Meeting participants shared some of the challenges and frustrations they have been dealing with during the transition to SAMS, but also described many of their own promising resources, approaches and ideas.

At the meeting, ministry staff presented upcoming plans for streamlined and revitalized communications related to SAMS. These plans were very well-received by front-line members, who particularly emphasized the need for a single, central storage location that all staff can access, so that they can retrieve the right information, at the right time, for the right task.

While the ministry is more than willing to improve its existing Social Assistance Municipal Operations (SAMO) Extranet site for this purpose, its utility after these improvements are implemented is limited by the fact that not all Ontario Works delivery

staff are able to access this key central resource. We would be happy to discuss this further with your members at our upcoming call on April 14, 2015.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Front-Line Staff Working Group to identify opportunities for moving forward together. The group agreed to delve more deeply into topics in future meetings, to be held in April, May and June. Future topic areas that the group agreed to address include content and business processes related to client letters; content and usability of job aids and other communications from the project; and development of province-wide standards and best-practices for certain aspects of SAMS, such as notes.

I would like to reinforce the ministry's commitment to continue working with our municipal partners and OMSSA in order to return to regular business processes.

As you are aware, on March 19 there was an announcement to Ontario Works Administrators that the ministry will be providing an additional \$5 million in one-time funding for the period to March 31 in order to help them with costs related to the implementation of SAMS. This will bring the total provincial funding to support the operational costs associated with SAMS implementation to \$15 million.

The ministry will be keeping the lines of communication open to consider additional assistance for costs that may be incurred in 2015-16. It is expected that any discussions will include plans for transitioning back to a normal state of operations. The nature of the transition plans and approaches to allocating any future funding, as well as the final amount available, will need to be discussed with our municipal partners, including OMSSA and the Association of Municipalities on Ontario. Any decisions will be informed by these discussions.

With respect to training, the ministry is committed to working together on a comprehensive SAMS training strategy. As you indicated, this will require consultation and I welcome your suggestion that OMSSA, CMSMs and DSSABs participate and provide input. This will serve all of us well in the development of this strategy. In a recent discussion with Petra Wolfbeiss we agreed to establish a working group to discuss training needs moving forward. I have asked Jeff Bowen, Director of the Social Assistance Municipal Operations branch to be the ministry's lead on this group. I'm sure you understand that the development of a comprehensive strategy will take some time to achieve and in the meantime it will be important to identify immediate needs and how that can be addressed.

As always, I look forward to our continued partnership in transitioning our service delivery partners to SAMS, with aim on returning to business-as-usual as expediently and effectively, as possible.

Sincerely,

Richard Steele

Assistant Deputy Minister
Social Assistance Operations Division

C: Bohodar Rubashewsky, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Community and Social Services
Laurie LeBlanc, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Pat Vanini, Executive Director, Association of Municipalities of Ontario
Gary Scripnick, Chair, Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association
Kira Heineck, Executive Director, Ontario Municipal Social Services Association