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**Subject:** New Provincial-Municipal Vision for Social Assistance, Part II

**Report to:** Public Health and Social Services Committee

**Report date:** Tuesday, May 11, 2021

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## Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

## Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to outline system changes underway in Niagara, achievements and early learnings, including challenges aligned with the province's New Provincial-Municipal Vision for Social Assistance.
- On April 15, 2021 proposed amendments to the Ontario Works Act were tabled in the Legislature aligned to the new vision.
- The new vision aims to create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on people by connecting them with a range of local services.
- The province intends to work collaboratively with municipalities to co-design the transformation, with a focus on developing a new operating model for social assistance, including updated roles and responsibilities, the revised human services approach as well as a new funding, performance and accountability framework.
- It is anticipated that municipalities will be responsible to deliver life stabilization and person-centred case management support to both Ontario Works (OW) clients and adults on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), resulting in over 15,000 additional people requiring service from SAEO between 2021 and 2024 when the system reaches a mature state.
- It is unknown if provincial funding will increase relative to the demand for service.

## Financial Considerations

There are no financial implications associated with this report. Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities (SAEO) has an approved 2021 operating budget of \$133.3M (\$11.9M net tax levy). This operating budget is inclusive of program operating costs and income benefits paid to recipients.

## **Analysis**

This is the second of two reports related to the province's New Provincial-Municipal Vision for Social Assistance.

The purpose of this report is to outline system changes that are underway and share SAEO's achievements and early learnings, including challenges aligned with the new vision.

## **Need for Change**

The new vision builds on previous system redesign efforts to modernize, streamline, reduce administrative burden and advance human services integration to improve client outcomes.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that a new approach is needed as more Ontarians are looking for help with basic needs, stabilizing their family's lives and returning to work, and financial security. Ontario's social assistance system must be poised to focus on supporting people back into employment, independence and stability when federal COVID benefits end.

## **Legislative Changes**

On April 15, 2021, the government proposed amendments to the *Ontario Works Act* (OWA), focusing on two key areas:

- Changes that would enable the re-alignment of Ontario Works functions across municipalities and the Ministry to support a new provincial-municipal delivery model; and,
- Changes that would support an enhanced focus on life stabilization to enable people on social assistance to achieve greater independence and financial resilience, connecting them to a network of supports that are right for them and connected to their communities.

These proposed changes would be critical enablers to implementing a new model that supports a whole-of-government approach to accessing human services that will not only help more people succeed in employment, but also support better outcomes in other areas of life including health and education.

## **Provincial – Municipal Roles and Responsibilities**

The new provincial-municipal delivery model for social assistance looks at provincial and municipal roles and responsibilities, not along the traditional program lines of OW and ODSP, but rather identifying who can best provide a service to get the best results for people.

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) has started the work of transformation by realigning the following roles and responsibilities:

MCCSS will:

- Deliver centralized intake for financial assistance
- Administer financial controls and back-office functions suited to centralization or automation
- Assume accountability for program decisions

Municipalities & District Social Service Administration Boards will:

- Deliver services such as life stabilization, including needs assessment, service planning, warm referrals, discretionary benefits (e.g. funerals, dental care)
- Person-centred, connected supports, and navigation of broader system (e.g. housing, employment, health)

Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLSTD):

- Deliver employment programs for OW and ODSP as part of the transformed Employment Ontario (EO) service system

In essence, the changes to the provincial-municipal roles and responsibilities result in the province taking over responsibility for how people enter and exit social assistance and the municipality maintains the responsibility for providing support and services to help people move through the system. Municipalities will be expected to deliver person-centred case management support to OW clients and adults on ODSP. The shift in roles and responsibilities from the province to the municipality to provide life stabilization case management support to adults on ODSP will result in over 15,000 additional people requiring service from SAEO between 2021 and 2024, when the system reaches a mature state.

## **System Changes Underway in Niagara**

### **Centralized Intake**

Individuals in need of assistance now apply through a provincial digital application or by contacting a provincial Centralized Intake Unit by phone. Risk based eligibility determination uses the applicant's self-declared information, including household composition, income, assets and living arrangements to validate against information available in proprietary or other government data sources. The assessment is used to determine the timeline for verification at the local level (immediate, within one month or three months). MCCSS has set a target of 70% of applications to be processed without intervention at the local level.

### **Achievements**

In February 2021, SAEO successfully launched centralized risk based intake. To date, approximately 60% of cases require no intervention at the local level. SAEO worked with community partners to explore alternate paths for clients who are experiencing an emergency or have urgent needs. High risk and homeless individuals continue to be assessed at the local level through a warm transfer from MCCSS or a direct referral from community partners. Youth applicants, those requiring interpreters and individuals applying for Temporary Care Assistance will also continue to have their eligibility assessed at the local level due to the increased potential for complexities related to their needs and circumstances.

### **Early Learnings and Challenges**

The shift in roles and responsibilities for the intake function is not, at this time, realizing administrative efficiencies at the local level as anticipated. The process generates a multi-page document outlining the tasks required by SAEO staff for each granted case through MCCSS. Post approval, there are significant technical components and activities required within the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) to complete the granting process. Staff are then required to contact new applicants within one to three months, depending on the outcome of the risk assessment to complete verification and offer other case management supports. In addition, applicants continue to reach out to SAEO seeking information on the status of their application with MCCSS. Time is also spent assessing individuals deemed ineligible through MCCSS and offering local intervention for applicants where additional information is required.

## **Life Stabilization**

There is enhanced focus on life stabilization as a component of the Ontario Works program. The purpose of focusing on life stabilization is to improve clients' individual circumstances by addressing barriers, and better enabling and preparing OW clients and adult family members on ODSP to participate in employment services and employment.

The province recognizes that municipalities have greater expertise in providing life stabilization services and supports, as this always represented a significant portion of their efforts previously with OW clients. Therefore, municipalities will be responsible to deliver life stabilization and person-centred case management support to both Ontario Works clients and adults on ODSP, resulting in over 15,000 additional people requiring service from SAEO between 2021 and 2024, when the system reaches a mature state.

Life stabilization supports are provided in four service areas:

- Basic Needs (food, housing, crisis),
- Health (mental health and addictions, physical health),
- Life Skills (essential skills, education, literacy) and;
- Community Supports (childcare, transportation, cultural, legal).

## **Achievements**

As part of the new operating model, MCCSS introduced a new digital Common Assessment Tool (CAT) to support the enhanced focus on life stabilization. The CAT is administered by OW and ODSP staff and captures information about clients including strengths, barriers to employment and life stabilization needs. Since January 1, 2021, SAEO staff have completed over 6,000 CATS with individuals in order to support life stabilization, service planning, warm referrals to community partners and provision of discretionary benefits.

## **Early Learnings**

SAEO is responsible for the provision of financial supports, for items such as bus passes and internet access to address life stabilization related needs for OW and adults on ODSP. SAEO has adapted local benefit policies to reflect the new operating model. Clients will continue to be assessed for participation benefits on an individual basis by SAEO staff. Further adjustments to policy adjustments will be necessary if provincial funding does not correspond with caseload increase.

## **Employment Services Transformation (EST)**

The vision of employment services transformation is to build a locally responsive employment services system, integrating employment programs for OW and ODSP into a transformed Employment Ontario service to create one system. The new employment services model launched in January 2021, beginning in three prototype catchment areas: Region of Peel, Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula and Muskoka-Kawarthas.

The integration of employment programs for OW and ODSP into EO resulted in the reallocation of 22% (\$4.4M per annum; inclusive of both staffing supports and client employment related benefits) of Niagara Region's OW Delivery Funding from MCCSS to MLTSD effective January 1, 2021. As a result, SAEO experienced a staff reduction of 14 permanent full time positions (1 non-union and 13 union) to respond to changes in funding associated with EST.

### **Achievements**

The CAT is used to help inform an OW and ODSP client's readiness for a referral to Employment Ontario for employment services. Of the 6,000 CAT assessments completed to date, approximately 35% of clients were assessed as being ready for a referral to EO for employment services. Prior to EST, approximately 30% of OW clients were referred to EO for employment services. Strong relationships have been fostered between OW, ODSP and the EO service system manager, FedCap, to resolve issues, share best practices and provide transparent service. Through joint collaboration, SAEO has already successfully influenced system improvements and facilitated access to employment services for clients.

### **Early Learnings**

As a prototype site for EST, SAEO has worked with the MCCSS and MLTSD to identify client service and benefit gaps. The provision of benefits/financial supports differ between OW and EO, creating a gap in benefits for clients for items such as transportation and digital access. SAEO continues to monitor the impact of system changes on client benefits. Thus far, the changes have resulted in a reduction in funding available for clients for items such as interview clothing and transportation to attend a job interview. Changes to local policy were required in order to stay within budget while striving to meet the needs of clients.

## **Provincial-Municipal Co-Design**

There is a comprehensive process of co-design and prototyping of the new provincial-municipal delivery model underway to gradually transform the delivery of social assistance across Ontario.

Phases will begin at different times in different regions between now and 2024 with the following timeline:

- Phase 1: 2021-2022. Learning, testing, prototyping the new model and engagement with municipal partners
- Phase 2: 2022-2024. Realign service delivery with human services model ready by the end of 2024

## **Achievements**

Throughout the pandemic and transformative change, SAEO continues to provide seamless, high quality service and support to Niagara's most vulnerable residents. SAEO successfully transitioned to a hybrid model with 80% of staff working remotely and providing uninterrupted service to clients. All five offices remain open and over 4,000 in-person supports have been provided to those in need since July 2020.

SAEO continues to focus on the components of change management in order to support staff through significant change. This has included sharing the province's vision, identifying change agents to support and champion change, sharing clear and frequent communication in various forums including town halls, Q&A's, Zoom meetings and dedicated email addresses to pose questions. SAEO has developed comprehensive in-house training for all staff on new provincial initiatives and frequent changes to the OW directives.

## **Early Learnings**

Social Assistance is undergoing an unprecedented amount of system change. There are factors that are likely to result in increased demand for service by the Region's Social Assistance team including the end of federal pandemic benefits (now anticipated for the end of September 2021) and the expansion of the population served (further to the provincial system transformation) to include adults on ODSP.

As transformation continues for employment services and social assistance, it is anticipated that the funding model will evolve alongside the system changes. The

transformed system is expected to include a new approach to funding and a new performance and accountability framework co-designed between the province and municipalities. As the caseload increases, it is unknown how or if provincial funding will increase relative to the demand for service.

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

Not applicable.

### **Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities**

The province's New Provincial-Municipal Vision for Social Assistance aligns to Council's strategic priority of ensuring a "Healthy and Vibrant Community" by creating an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system.

### **Other Pertinent Reports**

- COM 7–2021 New Provincial-Municipal Vision for Social Assistance
- COM C 4–2020 Provincial Employment Transformation
- CONF C 1-2020 Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development Plan to Transform Employment Services

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