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**Subject:** Ontario Works Caseload – Elimination of Federal COVID Benefits

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

**Report date:** Tuesday, December 7, 2021

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## **Recommendations**

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

## **Key Facts**

- The purpose of this report is to provide information on the expected surge to the Ontario Works (OW) caseload as a result of federal COVID benefits ending, and the strategies Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities (SAEO) has in place to respond to the anticipated increase in demand for service.
- Consistent with provincial trends, Niagara's 2021 average monthly Ontario Works caseload decreased by 18% from the 2019 pre-COVID average monthly caseload.
- The Province has forecasted a 25% OW caseload increase in 2021-2022 with the elimination of the federal COVID benefits.
- SAEO has experienced a 91% increase in demand for applications in November 2021 over July 2021 and as a result SAEO has realigned resources to respond to a surge in intake and demand for service.
- Strategies have been created to support co-ordination and human service integration across Community Services to assist with addressing emerging needs.

## **Financial Considerations**

There are no financial implications associated with this report. SAEO has an approved 2021-operating budget of \$128.4M (\$11.3M net tax levy). This operating budget is inclusive of program operating costs and income benefits paid to recipients.

## **Analysis**

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the expected surge to the Ontario Works (OW) caseload as a result of federal COVID benefits ending and the strategies SAEO has in place to respond to the increase in demand for service.

## **Caseload**

The federal government implemented a number of financial relief programs to assist Canadians impacted by COVID-19. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) launched in April 2020 and transitioned to the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) in the fall of 2020, providing a taxable benefit for Canadians experiencing unemployment or a 50% reduction in average weekly income.

For the period of January to September 2021, the average monthly Ontario Works (OW) caseload was 8,244 cases, representing approximately 14,099 individuals and families. Niagara has experienced a caseload decrease of 18% from 2019 pre-COVID average of 10,084 consistent with the provincial caseload.

The elimination of federal COVID benefits in October 2021 has created significant pressure on the social assistance system throughout Ontario. The Province has forecasted a 25% OW caseload increase in 2021-2022 with the elimination of the federal COVID benefits. As a result, Niagara's 2022 projected caseload is 10,780.

## **Intake**

In February 2021, the Province launched a centralized and automated eligibility application process for social assistance. Since launch, approximately 75% of all Niagara OW applications are submitted through the provincial centralized unit however, the province only grants 25% of these cases, with the remaining cases requiring intervention and assessment at the local SAEO office. Vulnerable individuals, such as those who are transient or homeless, youth and temporary care applicants, and those in crisis are referred directly to SAEO for immediate assessment with a casemanager. There has been growing concern with the amount of time the provincial unit takes to contact applicants and render a decision of eligibility. Consequently, applicants and community partners frequently reach out to SAEO for information with respect to social assistance applications that remain outstanding.

Due to the elimination of federal COVID benefits, SAEO has experienced a 91% increase in demand for applications in November 2021 over July 2021. The provincial centralized unit is unable to meet the significant increase in demand for applications resulting in a significant delay in processing time, often creating hardship for applicants and placing their housing at risk. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) has reached out to municipal delivery partners for assistance in processing applications. In September and October, MCCSS transferred 185

applications, and (at the time of writing this report) an additional 200 between November 1-17, 2021 to SAEO, to complete at the local level. The number continues to steadily increase and the surge is projected to last until spring 2022.

SAEO developed a comprehensive contingency plan to respond to an increase in demand for social assistance, once the federal COVID benefits ended. SAEO continues to effectively and efficiently implement rapid responses to address the unanticipated transfer of a significant number of applications from the Provincial Centralized Intake Unit.

### **Human Service Integration**

SAEO offers a responsive and integrated service delivery system, providing client-centred access and supports to a broad population of marginalized or disadvantaged groups across service sectors, including those on OW, ODSP and low-income individuals. SAEO has developed a policy framework to support coordination of services that address emerging needs and gaps. Transfer of knowledge across divisions has increased expertise across Community Services resulting in streamlined service and improved client experience and outcomes. The following paragraphs provide some examples of this work.

### **Homelessness Services and SAEO**

Housing Stability Benefits are an essential component in reducing homelessness, assisting individuals and families in establishing a new residence, maintaining an existing residence, and preventing eviction or discontinuation of heating or utilities. Throughout 2021, SAEO has assisted 2,500 social assistance clients and 74 low-income individuals and families to stabilize their housing. Assisting households, before homelessness, prevents negative economic, social, mental and health affects and decreases the reliance on emergency shelter and other emergency services in the community.

### **Seniors Community Programs and SAEO**

Seniors Community Programs and SAEO partnered to offer a comprehensive system of support to individuals involved with the Seniors Outreach program that provides an integrated continuum of community-based services for seniors to enable them to live healthy, independent lives in the comfort of their own homes. SAEO and Seniors developed a policy framework to administer a suite of housing and health related

benefits to address financial gaps in service delivery and stabilize living conditions to prevent homelessness. SAEO casemanagers provide support with system navigation and issuance of additional benefits as available, while Seniors Community Workers provide timely and comprehensive supports, addressing both health and social needs. In addition, SAEO has created a specialized caseload of individuals aged 60 and over to provide a targeted approach to prepare individuals for transition to available income sources such as Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security and the Ontario Disability Support Program. Intensive case management is effective in preventing homelessness, ensuring linkages to all available benefits and attachment to necessary services, thereby enabling seniors to age safely at home and reduce social isolation.

### **Housing Services and SAEO**

SAEO is piloting a dedicated case management model of targeted supports offered to families residing in a Niagara Regional Housing subsidized housing complex. Intensive supports across Community Services, access to appropriate community agencies and maximizing client financial benefits can be beneficial in managing a tenant's complex needs and barriers. Collaboration between SAEO and Housing Services staff intensifies the level of support, creating simplified and streamlined service delivery by establishing one contact within SAEO.

### **Children Services and SAEO**

SAEO and Children's Services offer an integrated model of service for Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) clients. One integrated intake/verification appointment by an SAEO casemanager determines eligibility for both OW benefits and childcare subsidy and continues to offer a full range of services in both areas while the client is in receipt of benefits. It means clients can access subsidized childcare more quickly and with fewer steps. This delivery of service also promotes consistent and positive client experiences across multiple services and ensures the client only has to tell their story once.

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provides the legislative, policy and funding framework for SAEO to deliver social assistance on behalf of the province. While Human Service Integration is a growing expectation by the province, (and still limited by a number of provincially determined policies (e.g. varying eligibility requirements for certain benefits), the progress and approaches taken vary amongst

municipalities across Ontario and often depend on the unique service relationships and organizational structure of each organization. Niagara Region now has the advantage of five distinct divisions within one department in which resources, knowledge and information sharing can occur in order to better serve Niagara residents.

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

This report aligns to Council's strategic priority of ensuring a "Healthy and Vibrant Community" by ensuring to continue to provide efficient and effective support to the clients on Social Assistance.

### **Other Pertinent Reports**

Not applicable

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#### **Prepared by:**

Lori Watson  
Director, Social Assistance &  
Employment Opportunities  
Community Services

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#### **Recommended by:**

Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner  
Community Services

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#### **Submitted by:**

Ron Tripp, P.Eng.  
Chief Administrative Officer

This report was prepared in consultation with Katie Macoretta, Manager of Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities and Stephanie Muhic, Program Financial Specialist.

### **Appendices**

Not applicable