

Issues and Ideas

Responses to the
Commission on
Social Assistance
Reform from
Greater Sudbury

August 2011

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Message from the Sudbury Team..... | 2 |
| PART 1 | 3 |
| Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment..... | 3 |
| Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure..... | 6 |
| Issue 3: Easier to Understand | 7 |
| Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term | 10 |
| Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security | 11 |
| PART 2 | 12 |
| Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment..... | 12 |
| Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure..... | 15 |
| Issue 3: Easier to Understand | 18 |
| Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term | 22 |
| Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security | 23 |

Message from the Sudbury Team

In response to the invitation from Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh to provide input into the Social Assistance Review that they are undertaking, Community Soundings were organized in Greater Sudbury on Friday August 19 and Tuesday August 23, 2011.

The Sudbury Community Legal Clinic, the City of Greater Sudbury Social Services Division, and the Social Planning Council of Sudbury partnered to engage community stakeholders in a discussion of the questions posed by the Commissioners and to hear feedback on any other information that the community wanted to share.

On Friday August 19 a group of individuals (16) who receive Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program benefits met with team members to discuss the questions. On Tuesday August 23 a group of community stakeholders that included staff from the OW/ODSP office as well as service providers from community agencies and a few ODSP recipients came together (67 people). Community stakeholders broke up into one of four small groups to discuss the issue that was most pertinent to them. The groups reconvened, presented ideas and further points were brought forward.

What follows are **Part 1**: the voices of those who live the real experience of trying to survive the social assistance system; and **Part 2**: the voices of those who try to navigate the social assistance system to deliver services.

Many thanks to all who took the time to participate in the discussions. Your input is invaluable and we look forward to hearing from the Commission in regards to recommendations.

Marie Lalande
Sudbury Community
Legal Clinic

Janet Gasparini
Social Planning Council
of Sudbury

Luisa Valle
Social Services Division,
City of Greater Sudbury

PART 1

Voices of those who live the real experience of trying to survive the social assistance system

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers? Can you suggest ways in which the skills of people receiving social assistance could be better developed to meet the needs of employers? What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access? What would improve services to people receiving social assistance who face multiple barriers to employment? How can Ontario's social assistance system better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they may need?

Services required by OW and ODSP to secure and engage in employment activities:

Communication

- Access to telephone and internet services – to enable employers to call recipients for job interview; to enable recipients to search for employment and complete applications online; to enhance computer skills and other transferable skills that can be updated online; to enable recipients to follow and participate in training opportunities online

Transportation

- Ensure availability of transportation to seek and maintain employment
- Ensure that transportation (bus, taxis, gas \$) is provided to recipients and students to enable them to seek employment and participate in skills development and ensure that some form of transportation is available in their area

Child care

- Ensure that subsidized and non-subsidized child care services are available not only during the day but also in the evening and during graveyard shifts in communities where there are jobs available that require individuals to work

different shifts; ensure that funding is available for informal childcare when day care hours are not available

Housing

- Ensure better housing and more subsidized housing stock (given the difficulty in accessing adequate housing and the high cost of housing, it is too often difficult to attend work regularly if not sleeping well due to the noise in the unit next door; or because rent wasn't paid in full; or because you are being evicted so that the landlord can increase the rent by renting the unit to someone else)

Benefits

- Better supports/longer transition periods for individuals that are leaving social assistance because of employment activities
- Continue with the employment start-up allowance to enable recipients to obtain required clothing , material for work and include a grooming allowance just prior to commencement of employment
- Remove the Trillium Drug program and develop a universal drug program for all low income families (whether or not they are in receipt of social assistance or in low income jobs)
- Develop a micro loan program to allow social assistance recipients to purchase home furniture, transportation, additional clothing (or items that they deem necessary)in view of starting employment activities
- Stop penalizing failed work attempts by suspending benefits if the person quits or is fired from the employment

Community Infrastructure

- Provide incentives to private businesses, non-profit and charitable organizations to hire disabled individuals (including those who are aging and/or who may have mental or cognitive impairments)
- Continue with wage subsidy programs with reputable employers who are prepared to provide long-term employment opportunities after the completion of the subsidy
- Give tax incentives to large employers who are prepared to give benefits to their employees (so that low income employees do not revert back to OW

for vision, dental and health care services)

- Raise the current minimum wage by 75 cents annually for the next 3 years to ensure that there continues to be a gap between those who are working and those who are in receipt of social assistance

Support required to access training and skills development opportunities:

Counselling and Assessments

- Provide free psychological assessment in order to determine realistic educational goals; provide assistance to individuals with regards to determining the path to employment (based on interest, rate of demands for specific types of careers, remuneration of certain jobs, etc); provide both financial counselling as well as emotional support/counselling to enable student to complete the training program

Literacy and Upgrading

- Continue with free academic upgrading through colleges and other avenues; provide transportation in order to access upgrading; give a clothing allowance as an incentive to enable individuals to prepare for a return to school
- Encourage colleges to allow extra time to complete schooling activities when students have barriers such as learning difficulties

Training

- Authorize access to long term training programs for recipients of social assistance
- Encourage colleges and universities to develop training opportunities for people in second careers; ensure easy access is provided to enable middle-age people to participate in programs that are less strenuous or physically demanding as far as the physical layout of the space within the college or university
- Encourage skill development for middle-aged individuals for jobs that pay higher than simply minimum wage
- Continue with good training and apprenticeship programs

Education Funding

- Ensure that rules for OSAP provide better accessibility for all; rework policies and regulations to enable even those with large debt loads which are not

associated with prior educational programs to access training opportunities'

- Encourage bursaries and grants be given to not only to the higher achievers but those who are in receipt of social assistance or who have physical or mental barriers to engaging in skills development activities
- Have a certain percentage of seats in all college and university program provided free of charge by colleges for people in receipt of social assistance

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

How should social assistance rates be determined? How should benefits be designed to deal with the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people are better off working? Considering the potential for increased costs, what new benefits, if any, should be provided to all low-income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance? Should asset limits and exemptions be changed to improve the social assistance system? How should benefits for people with disabilities be designed and delivered?

Local Cost of Living

- Social assistance rates should be determined based on what part of the province a recipient resides in. Both the basic needs allowance should reflect actual costs based on the healthy food basket based on Canada's food guide and studies conducted by the local Health Unit. Shelter benefits should be paid based on the actual costs in each area based on annual studies of each geographical area. Recipients should not be forced to use their basic needs allowance (food money) to pay for rent. Shelter benefits should also include, cost of heating, natural gas, water and content insurance
- Rates should be increased annually to meet with the LICO

Benefits

- Benefits should include basic telephone and/or internet services
- Benefits should continue to be provided for dental (expand this benefit beyond simply emergency benefits), vision and drug benefits. List of drug benefits should be provided to health care providers so that they know what is and is not covered by the plan

- Benefits should include an adequate amount for transportation so that recipients can access medical appointments and travel to stores that are offering the best prices
- For OW recipients, benefits should be provided for such things as counseling for emotional or mental health issues, financial issues, physiotherapy, chiropractic treatment, eye examination; all of which would assist recipients to access health services, which provided, may mean the difference between moving to employment activities or moving to ODSP
- Rule pertaining to asset limit to qualify for OW should be increased so that OW recipients continue to have some saving to enable them to access in case of emergencies or employment opportunities

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

Are the rules meeting their objectives? Are there rules that are not working? What changes do you suggest? How can special-purpose benefits be delivered more efficiently and equitably? Should some be delivered outside of the social assistance system? Have the key issues related to making the system easier to understand been identified in this section?

General Rules:

- The current rules are not meeting their objectives. In addition, the objectives are out of date and do not meet the current needs of the people. Due to the high cost of living, we should not be looking at the shortest route to employment as this often means that recipients will continue to have to rely on OW or ODSP as income from the current minimum wage may not be sufficient to meet high shelter costs and healthy food baskets. More thought should be given to ensuring that educational programs are more accessible so that recipients can compete for higher paying jobs which will enable them to exit the social assistance scheme on a permanent basis.
- Generally, rules are complicated and favour those who are highly literate. Basic information about the rules is provided verbally and in writing at the time of application to recipients. By the time the recipient has access to his or her first appointment, his situation has attained a crisis situation hence the need for social assistance. Most often, the person is overwhelmed with the amount of rules and information provided to him and therefore does not understand or remember a great part of the information given. For this reason, information should be given in small bits by way of community

information sessions and delivered by OW and ODSP workers in concert with different services provides (could include the Legal Clinic, the Social Planning Council, volunteers or current or previous recipients). This would ensure that available services are known to the community. The language of the rules (Directives, Regulations and Act) should be simplified to ensure that recipients can understand.

- Directives should be written to conform to the Regulations and the Act. Examples should not be provided in the Directives as too often the examples are used to limit the issuance of benefits (if it is not in the list of examples, it cannot be provided). Caseworkers are either not provided with the authority or are unwilling to go outside of the examples.
- Rules should be universal to alleviate the inconsistencies throughout the province. Any benefits that are deemed to be discretionary should be appealable. Municipalities should not be given the authority to determine discretionary benefits and how these are distributed as this, too often, results in unfair delivery of certain benefits and make other inaccessible.
- Program is not efficient. Too often when recipients need something, there is some urgency. Because of red tape, recipients are unable to obtain the necessary item in a timely fashion (access to funds quickly to purchase a necessary appliance second hand)
- It was felt that OW and ODSP staff are not provided with sufficient training in order to explain benefits available on the program. In addition, they are ill prepared to administer the payment of benefits and answer questions posed of recipients. Many workers are not held accountable for their mistakes and errors are not always corrected in the client's favor (i.e. 100% of retroactive benefits are applied to existing overpayments – therefore, if a worker makes a mistake which resulted in an overpayment to the recipient and the error is discovered at a later date, the recipient is penalized given that any retroactive benefits owed to him will be applied to the outstanding overpayment). Workers should be held accountable for their mistakes. In addition, staffing should undergo testing and evaluations on a regular basis to ensure that they continue to be up-to-date with ongoing changes (this can be done by other staffing or by way of “ghost or mystery” clients). Staff should receive empathy and sensitivity training as it was felt by some that attitudes and stigmas by workers towards recipients were often demoralizing. It was felt that information about options and opportunities were not given to

recipients. It was only when recipients spoke with other recipients that they were made aware of opportunities that were available to them.

- It was also felt that there are too few staff for the number of cases and the time that it takes to provide proper services (and to ensure that recipients understand the information that is given). Either the rules and services need to be streamlined or additional staff needs to be hired to ensure the provision of services that are personalized to the applicants' or recipients' needs. The relationship between the recipient and the worker needs to change to allow the recipient to maintain a sense of dignity
- Services are not always available in both English and French
- It was felt by some that the rules and the language are difficult to understand, even by health practitioners (shouldn't have to compete with most dramatic story to access assistance).

Specific Rules:

- ODSP rules should not penalize the person with the disability for actions of a spouse or dependent children (i.e. failure to have a dependent sign a participation agreement)
- ODSP recipients should not have to sign a Participation Agreement in order to secure disability benefits. If the recipients were able to partake in a number of activities, they would not need disability benefits.
- Without special diet allowance or adequate budgetary allowance for food, recipients are going to die, the rate of crime will continue to increase, there will be alterations to children's behavior and health care costs will continue to increase.
- ODSP vs OW – re: RDSP (registered disability savings plan) and RRSP (different rules) Why can ODSP recipients plan for their futures but OW recipients cannot save RRSPs for their future?
- People who have cognitive difficulties and who are in receipt of OW should not be penalized for being unable to adhere to Participation Agreements
- Suspensions for failing to participate in activities and bans for committing fraud should never be reintroduced as social assistance is a program of last resort. When people have no income whatsoever, people become homeless,

lose their belongings, and become desperate or despaired. It is impossible to maintain regular employment in those situations. People become discouraged and the rate of suicide rises. In the alternative, health care costs continues to rise.

- Too often people are cut off for failing to provide information or for not being accessible to the worker. Often recipients aren't even aware of the information they have to provide or do not have access to the information or the means to be able to obtain the information (i.e. birth certificates). If the recipient does not have a phone (which is not part of the basic needs), a letter is sent to the recipient advising that his benefits are suspended for failure to provide information. This creates undue hardship and severe anxiety for some individuals. Depending on the time of the month, this may jeopardize an individual's housing. Generally, staff of OW and ODSP offices is too quick to cut off people's benefits.
- There should be mediation between the people who make the decision and the people receiving services. Internal reviews should be made by third parties. Mandatory internal reviews should be eliminated and replaced with a prehearing step in an attempt to resolve issues prior to a hearing by the Social Benefits Tribunal
- ODSP forms should be changed and written in plain English to ensure that both recipients and health care providers can understand the forms. Use terminology that is consistent with language used in the Act.

Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

What should Ontario do to address the short-term income support and training needs of people who are not eligible for EI? What should the interaction be between income-tested benefits, such as WITB and child benefits, and the social assistance system? Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance?

Have the key issues related to an integrated Ontario position on income security been identified in this section?

- The province and federal must work closely together to improve affordable housing and control the escalating cost of housing so that it is maintainable for low-income families or individuals on fixed incomes (youth, seniors), whether in receipt of social assistance or not.

- Programs must be streamlined, easy to understand and accessible
- Some recipients are not ready to enter the work force because of issues related to living in poverty (i.e. stress, difficulties with coping, addictions). The layers underneath are things such as hunger, malnutrition, poor housing and missing basic necessities of life which manifest in the things that the economic sector is telling us → weak link = perpetual cycle of poverty

Possible solutions:

1. Deal with the crisis (food, clothing, income, housing and transportation);
2. Support for Mental Health/Addiction, disabilities and literacy (important to understand that not everyone will be able to move past step two- therefore, need to consider our socially moral responsibility to protect dignity)
3. Look at barriers to participation (transportation, social connection and belonging, child care, education, etc)

Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance? What additional data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of social assistance benefits and services? For example, should ethnocultural and racial data be collected in order to evaluate and improve supports for people from racialized and ethnocultural communities? What can the provincial government and municipalities do to better integrate services?

- Whatever program is developed and adopted, it much serve to empower people vs. penalizing people
- Must promote respect and dignity
- Must encourage self-reliance and achievable goals
- Treatment programs such as rehab and/or healing programs should be made available but not mandatory. People will not succeed if they are forced into treatment. People who do not want to change, will not. There is better use of tax dollars.

PART 2

Voices of those who try to navigate the social assistance system to deliver services

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?

.....

- Ensure Ontario Works delivery agents connect with economic development at the municipal level, the local chambers of commerce; any business groups; unions to get a good understanding of what skills and education/training is available
- Provide a marketing strategy that highlights the viable pool of clients and ensures they are connected to the larger Employment Ontario Network as barriers are removed
- Continue to fund and allow for local flexibility to provide employment placements with subsidy (WSIB coverage and funding for training)
- Convene annual meetings that share best practices (example the local Personal Support Worker Initiative/partnership was in Sudbury how did it happen and can it be replicated in other areas – YMCA Employment Services gets calls)
- Find out who is surveying business about what they want and tap into those results (like the Training/Adjustment boards)
- Improved connection with community agencies (Employment Ontario network), common data base
- partner/share information with training boards across the north (ie succession planning)
- share information about Ontario Works program with agencies; share agency info with Ontario Works staff

.....

Can you suggest ways in which the skills of people receiving social assistance could be better developed to meet the needs of employers?

.....

- Provide opportunity for people to learn life skills; introduce early and build an essential skills passport
- build on best practices like the OSAP project in Kirkland Lake so people can attend OSAP seats even if they have OSAP debt
- Provide financial support to hire staff who can support clients with job retention issues; funding to divert people away from social assistance(emergency funds for

transportation issues or informal child care when a child is not well enough to attend formal child care)

- Create a portal that helps people to find and understand local labour market information
- Offer financial support for French as a second language in the north by having it offered at low or no cost in the community they reside in
- Help educate people returning to care for aging parents about what employment there is in the community
- Support the development of social skills (positive attitude; coping) and introduce self care at the high school/post secondary level
- There needs to be more mental health supports available in the community people reside in (most of service centralized to the hospital or down town or in Sudbury transportation a huge challenge)
- Along with the Best Start initiative there should be employment/career planning intervention at an earlier age; have employment planners connected with local schools (use tools to help students discover who they are ie true colours ; mbti; career cruising)
- Start linking Ontario Works and ODSP dependants (children 13+) in grade 9 with employment supports
- Matching skills of the participant with those needed by the employer through a better data base; build on the success of community forums like Making the Match to Mining where employers could share with potential employees what skills, education and experience are required
- Ministry of Education and Employers need to be connected too
- Better understanding of the employers needs (seasonal, contract, part time) and that people may not move off the system
- Look at high school as a way to try things out – offer more than just auto mechanics
- OYAP needs to be promoted better across the high school system and to parents
- Need to have seamless systems (Min of Ed; MTCU; OW and Min of Labour)
- Role for employment Ontario in the education system
- Need to know what the job needs are (essential and soft skills)
- Disconnect for adults with MTCU and how apprenticeship works
- Need to put education, employers, planners and potential employees in the room to understand common ground, opportunities

.....

What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access?

.....

- Need to connect families with the best start network and build on this model

- Greater flexibility to fund transportation (Sudbury East has huge challenges) funding for bus; parking and gas, when there is a ride; taxi – need to think of what it means to travel outside of community for service (lunch etc)
- More options to use financial supports in child care and recognition that the formal system may not work for all (informal ends when OW ends)
- Safe housing; good food and medical coverage that is not difficult to maintain
- Need to think about the supports that single clients need
- Create one window access to services, create e-portfolio's for clients
- Better way to market programs
- Services need to be seen as integrated - all levels of government (Fed, Prov and municipal)
- Ministries need to stop funding formulas that create “ownership” of file issues
- Use full functionality of technology
- Embrace the use of social media and create an app for employment Ontario
- Provide funding for phone, computer, internet
- Promotion of on line services to all partners
- Don't work in silos
- Look at how to deliver service in the new era (2011)
- Connect front line service workers

.....

What would improve services to people receiving social assistance who face multiple barriers to employment?

.....

- more specialized Employment Counselors - ie addictions, mental health; trades
- having the warm hand off between agencies (more than a paper referral)
- remain connected
- challenges with FIPPA; client telling the story twice; need to case conference
- increase agency networking opportunities

.....

How can Ontario's social assistance system better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they many need?

.....

- easier access to resources
- ODSP mandate needs to be clear that clients can work
- Advertise more about the opportunities to hire ODSP clients
- OW AND ODSP needs to ensure that staff are providing/understanding what is possible in each program
- Build on the success of the Supportive Approach to Innovative Learning (SAIL) training that all front line Ontario Works staff received and ensure the directives/legislation build on this approach
- Funding for pre employment training (goal clarification; self assessment; secondary school completion) of ODSP clients

- Ow/odsp under one delivery (either provincial or municipal)

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

How should social assistance rates be determined?

.....

The group working on this question spent most of their time discussing the following two issues:

Cost of Living

- Should be determine based on appropriate level of what people need to live
- What is the cost vs. how much people get?
- Don't give as much as we should – would like to see enough dollars for rent, food and transportation
- If basic needs were met what could Case workers could focus on with their clients?

Housing

- When people come onto Social Assistance (SA) there is a discrepancy between housing costs and amount received – creating housing instability
- Make sure the people can afford where they live
 - Rent has gone up 35% since 97, SA rates have not
 - Landlords can increase rent, SA rates no.
- How can people find an apartment with \$300.00
- When was the last affordable housing built?
- Housing needs to be sorted out – only then can we move forward
- We are forcing people to live together – may live with others on addictions and those who are recovering get pulled back.
- Landlords are increasing rents inconsistently
- Solution – build affordable housing

.....

How should benefits be designed to deal with the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people are better off working?

.....

Employment and Education

- Need to make jobs sustainable and liveable for people to keep them.
 - There aren't enough (paying) jobs available for parents
 - School system is failing as they are passing kids rather than holding them back
-

Considering the potential for increased costs, what new benefits, if any should be provided to all low-income individual and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance?

- Drug card extended to working clients was a help
 - Universal Health benefits should be implemented (dental, medical, vision etc.)
-

Should asset limits and exemptions be changed to improve the social assistance system?

- 50% exemption is good – better than the stepping stone system
 - They should be using up their savings before welfare
 - The regular person would use their savings to live
 - Investments should be exhausted first before going on assistance.
-

How should benefits for people with disabilities be designed and delivered?

- Need doctors attached to our clients for the ODSP pending clients – to help complete paperwork and medical forms to move into system
 - Lots of people that apply but are ineligible
 - Letters are not in basic laymen's terms-
 - clients can't understand what is being sent to them
 - Many clients have learning disabilities
-

Additional Issues:

- Complex system/ Best use of \$\$
- Now we have band aid solutions with smaller programs rather than in one pot – EEF Rent Bank

- What do municipalities want to put their money into? Currently need to choose between fridges vs. bus passes.
- Look at people services vs. repairing roads (long term investment in people)
 - i.e. London borrows money for social services –look to bigger cities
- If we gave more food/shelter \$ up front then we don't need back up programs – Good Food Box etc.
- Need consistency on who gets what i.e. family of 4, all should get same amount

Programs

- Life skills, budget programs would help recipients transition into workforce
- We need to teach life skills in the school system
- Clients are not accountable
 - Barriers to client accountability
 - We do it for them, client isn't learning to do things for themselves
 - Clients don't like case workers who make them do things. (look at school list etc.)
- Need to have a value village for OW/ODSP clients that is free for support

Rules and Functions

- Accountability varies depending on who you are – Case worker vs. Clients
 - Case workers are accountable: need to make sure all documentation and recording is done. Ensuring recipients are declaring what they are suppose to
- Caseloads counted as One, could have many people in a family.
- Case workers being pulled in too many directions – too many rules and benefits
- The whole system encourages fraud -
 - need to close one eye in order to have people access the system
 - Case workers `Work the system` – know the loop holes
- System is too punitive when clients are convicted of fraud
- Sometimes grey areas are nice but Black and White might be better – (Consistency)
- Clients network when someone gets benefits and others don't
 - Workers need to be cautious on what benefits are given to ensure they are applicable.
- Challenge to get Health Cards, Birth certificates and Licenses – difficult to understand
- MIFPA legislation does not allow the workers to speak about issues regarding system and clients in most instances (workers feel gagged)
- Can only do the best we can with the legislation and directives given to us to help clients.
- Living with parent rule needs to be tossed out.-

- Some are adults with kids and need to pay Room and Board to Mom and Dad (impeding independence)

Public Awareness of Poverty and Social Assistance

- We need to educate not only kids but employers, taxpayers etc. about realities of social assistance
- Need politicians to experience poverty – live in poverty
- Public perception is huge
 - Agencies need to educate the public about life on social assistance need a cultural change to “investing in people”
- Stigma starts in school
 - can’t afford the supplies/uniforms, participate in school teams, lockers, student fees etc.

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

.....

Are the rules working? Are some rules dysfunctional? What changes would you suggest?

.....

- The terminology of mandatory special needs should be eliminated given that if these benefits are mandatory, they need not necessarily be special. This is but one of many examples of poorly written rules that tend to confuse both recipients and those who work with recipients (i.e medical community, community organizations, etc)
- At one time, caseworkers were able to provide “special assistance”. These were benefits for people in a buffer zone. Applicants would be provided with a card for drug coverage, vision and dental services. Recipients would not receive a cheque. This is a benefit that was extremely important to those working in low paying jobs and assisted greatly in providing some security to recipients that although they were employed and getting some income, they knew that if unreasonable health expenses occurred, these could be met despite their employment income not being sufficient to meet their housing and basic needs and that of their family AND the cost of dental, vision or medication. It was indicated that this is one of the rules that should **be brought back** as it enabled people to stay in employment situations. It was further explained that it was thought that this “special assistance” was removed from the social assistance program when the Trillium drug program came into effect. However, for people who are employed, having to pay a deductible under the Trillium program is at times difficult. Simply completing the forms can be difficult for many, especially given the fact that the forms have to be renewed annually. Also, the Trillium

Drug program is not always effective given that the calculated deductible that is based on the previous year and does not necessarily reflect the Applicant's current situation.

- One message that was consistent throughout is that there are **far too many rules** – workers don't have time to explain all the rules to the clients and clients get information overload especially when they first enter the system. A Rights and Obligation information sheet is provided at the time of completion of the Ontario Works application, the information contains a variety of rules that aren't clear or specific when read. At the initial meeting, clients are often intimidated at the process or embarrassed by their personal situation. Many are experiencing information overload and the information is lost to them as they are unable to comprehend the information given.

It was suggested that in order to better deliver information to recipients, information sessions could be delivered to those who want to attend. These sessions could be open to the public in general and could be delivered by staff of OW or ODSP offices as well as their partners in the community. It was believed that there would be no harm in educating the public at large of the realities of living on limited incomes so that they could better understand the difficulties and barriers faced by social assistance recipients.

- The **computer programs used to deliver OW and ODSP programs are not user or client friendly**. Letters that are generated from this computer do not provide any specific information about a client's actual situation or specific reasons for terminating or suspending benefits. These cause a great deal of anxiety for recipients as their only source of income is now being jeopardized without having been given a reason for the suspension or termination. This is also very problematic for people who have difficulty with reading and understanding letters. The letters that are generated by the computer system are very lengthy and in some ways very complicated. They are not client friendly in any way. In addition, often letters are generated by the computer system because of errors done by the staff because they did not check off a particular box. Often letters are sent out by the Toronto office when dealing with ODSP matters and the local staff members are not even aware that a letter was sent. These result in frustration and anxiety for clients and often a waste of time by other organizations that are trying to assist clients only to find out that the letter was sent out in error.
- What used to be clear areas in the rules have now become grey due to casework. For example, living with parent rules or spouse-in-the house rules used to be much simpler to understand. However, because of litigation work, these questions are much greyer therefore needing much more expertise in how to apply the rules. Because of the developing case law, rules need to be re-

simplified or further training on how to interpret the rules must be provided on a regular basis.

- Definitions are not consistent between laws. For example, a spouse has its own definition under social assistance and does not mean the same thing under the *Family Law Act* or Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), housing or to Revenue Canada. It would be great if there could be some consistencies between the laws.
- Discretionary benefits are usually quite problematic... there is little consistency in what is provided and it varies widely depending on where in the province you request the benefit. A recipient may obtain approval to follow long term training program if he/she is residing in Toronto, however, authorization may not be provided in other parts of the province.

Many benefits, particularly under the OW scheme, are discretionary and often authorization is not given for discretionary type benefits unless the City has already approved a pool of funds to allow for a specific type of benefit. An example that was given is as follows: recipient's fridge stops to work on Friday, person looks on Kijiji and purchases a second-hand fridge on Saturday so as not to lose the content of fresh products contained in the fridge. Recipient attends at the OW on Monday and requests the reimbursement of the cost of the fridge... This is denied because he did not have prior authorization. However, in a similar situation, had the recipient obtained approval prior to making the purchase, it is highly likely that due to delays in obtaining authorization from the OW staff, the fridge would no longer be available. Because of similar rules, many recipients are unable to take advantage of clearance sales or second hand items which can be found in local papers or even in yard sales.

- Benefits for singles are very problematic as the rates are too low and benefit rules are punitive with regards to single individuals. Single individuals should have similar rules to those of single parents in that they are provided with better opportunities for advancement. Monetary amounts are creating undue stress and anxiety. On a long term basis, OW recipients are unable to exit the social assistance program and find themselves requiring medical attention due to chronic stress, anxiety and depression. As such, they move from the OW to the ODSP.

Benefit rates need to be connected to the local cost. For example, the cost of local housing in Sudbury should be taken into consideration when the rates for shelter costs are calculated and provided out of Sudbury. The same thing is applicable for Healthy Food Basket. The benefits should reflect the actual reality of the location the recipient is residing in. Recipients should be able to continue to live in the communities of their

choice and not have to move to the least costly of communities. There are many advantages to having recipients continue to reside close to family and friends for both support and the connection they have to their communities

Special Benefits – Can they be delivered more equitably? Should some of these benefits be available or provided outside of the social assistance system?

.....

It was suggested that special benefits should be provided by the Ontario Works office. This would mean low income individuals and families would have one place to go for as many needs as possible. Consideration may be given to having all benefits available through one source (i.e. social housing, OW, ODSP, Health Unit, Employment services, medical services, etc) as it should be one stop shopping for people in need and would reduce difficulties with transportation issues and the cost of having to travel from one area to another. . There was also discussion with regards to special diets for not only people in receipt of OW and ODSP but also special assistance and special diets for low-income earners.

- As part of the special benefits, dental coverage should provide for preventative maintenance needs and not only emergency type of benefits. These should also be standardized so that every community in Ontario has the same type of coverage. For example, in Sudbury both fillings and partial dentures may be covered on OW emergency card; however these may not be available elsewhere in the province.

.....

Did we miss anything?

.....

Internal Reviews and Appeals – Should it be a third party reviewing the information? Should it be a committee of people rather than a supervisor or someone who has trained the caseworker to make that decision? Could people from outside of the system be trained and volunteer to sit on committees to do internal reviews?

- The time frames for doing the internal review process is restrictive and should not be at the discretion of the case presenting officer, the Ministry or a Municipality as to whether or not it will provide an extension of time if the person has missed the limitation date for requesting an internal review. The time frame in the discretion to allow an extension of time should be appealable and the Tribunal should have an opportunity to listen to reasons and have the discretion to allow or accept that there were good reasons for providing an extension of time. We question whether the internal review has to be a mandatory step or whether it would be more expedient to remove the internal review process and have a right of appeal immediately. An internal review can

be mandatory between the time the appeal is filed and the time the hearing is heard to allow an opportunity for the parties to discuss the matter and try to come to some resolution. It should be noted that workers are not always provided all of the factual information and reasons when an individual is trying to have a decision reversed by a worker. Too often recipients are intimidated by the process, do not understand the process and cannot decipher what is important information and what is not. Perhaps this is caused by the rules... too many and too complicated. Recipients are often mistrustful of the system and embarrassed by their own personal situations.

Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

When asked what the **expected outcomes of social assistance** should be the group reported:

.....

- A system that is not solely focussed on getting people off the system but is focussed on improvement in people's circumstances - i.e. moving to casual work, part time
 - Understanding that in the new world of work full time work may only be 25hrs/week and that individuals will still need some support
-

There was significant discussion about the need for the system to move people out of desperate circumstances

- A system that meets people's needs – rent, food, medical
 - Earlier intervention before situation has become desperate
 - Insuring root issues are addressed i.e. health, addictions etc.
 - Emphasis on health – healthy food recreation etc.
-

A system that is supportive

- Allows for more flexibility in volunteering
 - Should support education for clients
 - Remove the demonization of the system
 - Work on self esteem
 - Stronger system for supporting single moms and children
 - A system that keeps people safe – i.e. domestic abuse
-

On data collection:

- People on assistance need to have their voices heard
 - Should capture ethno-cultural data
 - Care must be taken in collecting ethno- cultural data
 - Data should be qualitative – include information about client’s whole lives
 - Capture the Medical costs incurred by people on assistance
 - Capture data on the cost of living in individual communities
 - Look at improved methods of collecting data i.e. social media and other technological advances
 - How much did people have to lose to get on the system?
 - What is the health status of people on the system?
 - Evaluation (exit interview) of those leaving the system – what worked, what didn’t
 - Better sharing of already available data
 - Use the data to get to the root of the problem
 - Include indicators that show that people are getting help – not just on system or off system
-

On integration of provincial and municipal services

- We must develop something different from the current use of the health care system as the gate keeper for those moving onto ODSP – not enough access to doctors to make the current system work
- There needs to be an Advocate or Ombudsman for clients
- There must be adequate funding from the provincial government for services
- System is set up that funding gets attached to clients which contributes to silos

Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

How to address short term income and the use of EI

- There was agreement that there is a need to have short term income support
- 2nd career funding was described as a good start
- Extend the amount of time you can collect hours for EI

Interaction between income-tested benefits

- While generally a favourable idea the group was clear that interactions between income tested benefits should not negatively impact OW
-

Suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance

- Create a one stop shop for income supports so that they are managed universally
- Use the income tax system as the threshold – although the system must be able to respond to immediate circumstances (income tax is always a year later)
- Explore ways to extend support outside of OW to keep people out of the system i.e. health benefits that everyone is eligible for
- Create “Employment teams” – not unlike a Family health team that is inclusive of multiple disciplines e.g. Employment councillor, psychologist, social worker etc.
- Use Habitat for Humanity for training programs that allow individuals to learn skills while contributing to the housing stock
- OSAP forgiveness
- Support Housing costs
- The benefit structure rates should be based on where you live and the cost of living