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## About our presenters...

Jennefer Laidley is Policy and Research Analyst with the Income Security Advocacy Centre. She also coordinates ISAC's government relations, media work and online communications – including ISAC's website on the Social Assistance Review: [www.sareview.ca](http://www.sareview.ca). She holds a Masters degree from York University.





## About our presenters...

Dana Milne is ISAC's Provincial Organizer. She works closely with community groups, legal clinics, and people on low incomes across Ontario to push for changes to government legislation and rules, including improvements to social assistance. She has a Bachelor's degree in journalism and social work and more than a decade of community organizing experience.





# Purpose of these webinars

- Provide technical background information on some of the options we have been expecting to see in the Commission's Options Paper.
  - Note: Today's webinar is based on what's actually in the Options Paper.
- Provide a number of tools you can use to
  - assess the options in the Options Paper
  - organize with people in your community
  - respond to the Options Paper
  - prepare for and conduct meetings with MPPs.

# Agenda

- Update on Social Assistance Review process
  - Options Paper has been released
- Overview of merging OW and ODSP
  - Questions / Discussion
- Overview of 'Assessing and Organizing Toolkit'
  - 7 key tools
  - Questions / Discussion
- Wrap-up

# ISAC's Partners on the Social Assistance Review

- Campaign 2000
- Colour of Poverty - Colour of Change
- The Ontario Council for Agencies Serving Immigrants
- The ODSP Action Coalition
- Metro Toronto Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic
- The community legal clinic system's Steering Committee on Social Assistance
- YWCA Toronto

# Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

- Social Assistance Review promised in 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- Commission appointed by Minister of Community and Social Services in January 2011.
- Discussion Paper released June 9, 2011.
  - Reflected government's focus on "removing barriers and increasing opportunity with a particular focus on people trying to move into employment from social assistance" (from poverty reduction strategy)
  - Consultation period June through end August
  - 700+ submissions from across Ontario
- Options Paper 'Approaches for Reform' released Fri Feb 3.
  - Identifies various options for reform that could be part of final recommendations
  - Consultation process limited – by March 16 – only 6 weeks to respond
  - Also released 'What We Heard' – report on summary of feedback
- Final Report and Recommendations due June 2012.

# Option 3: Merging OW and ODSP

- OW and ODSP are two separate programs operating under different legislation. They have different purposes.
- OW legislation's purpose: "To establish a program that,
  - a) recognizes **individual responsibility** and promotes **self reliance through employment**;
  - b) provides **temporary** financial assistance to those most in need **while they satisfy obligations** to become and stay employed;
  - c) effectively serves people needing assistance; and
  - d) is accountable to the taxpayers of Ontario."
- ODSP legislation's purpose: "To establish a program that,
  - a) provides **income and employment supports** to eligible persons with disabilities;
  - b) recognizes that government, communities, families and individuals **share responsibility for providing such supports**;
  - c) effectively serves persons with disabilities who need assistance; and
  - d) is accountable to the taxpayers of Ontario."

# Political Context

- Commission's first discussion paper reflected MCSS concerns about ODSP
  - Increasing caseloads – 15% increase in 2.5 years = \$550 million more per year
  - “Few” ODSP recipients in the paid workforce (11%)
- Commission spoke of people with disabilities as those who “can” and “cannot” work – i.e., defining by employability
- Commission spoke of mandatory participation in employment and in treatment and rehabilitation
- Ministry increasingly fighting definition of disability in the courts

## ... more context

- Government has \$16 billion deficit they've promised to eliminate by 2017-18
- Drummond Report looking at how to find administrative efficiencies and savings in programs
- In feedback to the Commission's Discussion paper, some groups suggested merging OW and ODSP into one program.
- We were expecting Options Paper to discuss this.
- Commission's Options Paper suggests merging, but is not explicit – need to interpret pieces in various chapters.

# Options Paper – aspects of merger

- Chapter 1 – re: integrating employment services
  - Paper says one of four features of “effective services and supports” is “access to the same level and range of employment services and supports for people with disabilities as available to people without disabilities”
  - Says people have said ODSP Employment Supports are mostly for “job ready”
  - Says people with disabilities need “the same range of services and supports as people without disabilities (skills upgrading, training, housing, childcare, etc.) as well as specific supports related to disability, such as accessible transportation and greater availability of attendant services”.
  - Says people have said various programs should be “better integrated” – would allow agencies to “provide the full spectrum of services that clients need”



# ... aspects of merger

- Chapter 2 – re: integrating benefit structure
  - Complex discussion on how to set rates. Goals:
    - Adequacy – linked to poverty measures (LICO, LIM, MBM)
      - paper notes these don't include additional costs of disability
    - Fairness between people on assistance and low-wage workers – linked to wages in the labour market, esp. the minimum wage
    - Creating work incentives – linked to a “reference wage”
    - Paper notes balancing these three goals must be done in the context of poverty reduction
  - Ways to address “trade-offs” between these three goals.
    - Extended health benefits for all low-income Ontarians?
    - Varying the rate structure over time?
    - Earned income supplement?
    - Housing benefit?

# ... more from chapter 2

- Paper says trade offs more pronounced for people with disabilities
- Proposes “new supplementary disability benefit”
  - “The benefit structure needs to better address incentives to work and fairness for low-income people with disabilities who are currently working and not receiving ODSP”
  - But, people with disabilities have extra costs and lower earning potential
  - Could end the rate differential with Ontario Works – instead, institute “a new supplementary disability benefit, outside the social assistance system, could be provided to all low-income people with disabilities”
  - Benefit could be phased out as employment income increases
- Also proposes new program “to provide a secure and adequate basic income for people with severe disabilities who are unlikely to generate significant earnings over their lifetimes”
  - Could be similar to OAS / GIS / OGAIS (GAINS), or Alberta’s AISH, or Caledon’s proposal
- Means everyone would get same rate, with a “disability top up”
- Or a “severe disability pension”

# ... aspects of merger

- Chapter 3 – re: aligning asset limits
  - “There is no policy basis to explain why asset limits should be higher for ODSP than for Ontario Works”
  - We disagree – see purposes in legislation
  - Various approaches to increasing asset levels
    - Set OW limits equal to those of ODSP
    - Increase asset limits for a period when person is first on
    - Increase limits on specific assets that help improve longer-term financial security (e.g., RRSPs, IDAs, etc.)
    - Regardless, could make a combined blanket exemption
      - E.g., Quebec has total \$60,000 limit for all assets, except principal residence (note: paper acknowledges problems re: trusts)
  - Implication is that asset levels would be the same for everyone

# ... aspects of merger

- Chapter 4 – re: integrating delivery
  - “As these various approaches to reform are considered, the question arises as to whether two separate programs in social assistance are in fact necessary”
  - Three approaches to “improving integration and delivery to help achieve long-term viability”
    1. Separate delivery of OW and ODSP income, but integrated employment services and supports for everyone
    2. Income and employment services integrated and delivered locally – i.e., municipalities and first nations
    3. Municipalities deliver case management and employment services, while province issues cheques (and other admin work)

# Issues with merger

1. Benefit to people on ODSP will depend on whether negative aspects of OW are sufficiently resolved
  - No discussion of addressing negative aspects of participation agreements in OW
    - I.e., from “workfare” and “work first” models:
    - How participation agreements are decided on
    - What the available resources / programs / services are
    - What the penalties are for non-compliance
  - Eligibility presumably remains tied to:
    - agreeing to employment-related activities that (depending on investment) may continue to be limited by what’s available (see issue 2) and often determined by a caseworker.
    - agreeing to take any job rather than one that fits individual needs and situations, and is a pathway out of poverty.
  - Paper understands “workfare” as a problem of inadequacy and poor quality employment supports and services

# ...issues

## 2. Asks if participation requirements should be imposed on people on ODSP.

- As one aspect of “same level of service for people with disabilities”
- “Our goal is to make recommendations that will respond to the work aspirations of people with disabilities and encourage and support their participation in employment to the maximum of their abilities”.
- Programs in other countries assess work capacity of people with disabilities – e.g., different benefits and participation requirements depending on if you’re deemed able to work at least part-time.
- If the OW participation requirement system is not addressed, this would move the worst parts of OW into ODSP.
- The programs can provide the same level of employment services for people with disabilities – and services that meet their needs – without having to make participation mandatory.

## ... BUT they ask:

- Should these changes be made now? Or later?
  - Should Ontario “adopt a means to better assess work capacity and set participation requirements for people with some capacity for employment” **OR**
  - Should Ontario “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 AODA.”
- Will be a very important point to highlight in responses - about all the changes that are being proposed. Will discuss more later.

# ... issues

## 3. Depends on level of investment into quality employment services

- “What is currently available is failing to identify and meet the range of needs of people who are not able to enter the workforce easily.”
- Employment services “must recognize the range of barriers to employment facing people with disabilities”
- Calls for (for everyone):
  - Consistent assessment and case-management
  - Integrated pre- and post-employment services and supports
  - Strong connections with employers



# ... issues

## 4. Disability income supplement

- Huge change in income architecture
- First time we've heard of this – unsure where it comes from
- Many unanswered questions:
  - Is this a central mechanism to make merger possible? Or is there a rational policy explanation for instituting it?
  - Who gets it? What is the definition of disability for eligibility?
  - How much money is it going to be?
  - They describe “additional living costs” and “lower earning potential” for people with disabilities. How are these determined?
  - Will amount be enough so people on ODSP won't lose money?
  - Or will it mean more money? Isn't the review about reducing poverty?
  - How does it relate to options about employability, if at all?
    - E.g., to idea about higher or lower rate depending on ability to work at least part-time.
  - How does it respond to needs of people with episodic disabilities?

## ... issues

5. What about people getting the “severe disability pension”
  - Are they entitled to employment-related supports?
  - Or is this just “permanently unemployable” category again?
  - And how is “severity” of disability determined? Using what criteria?
  - Sets back society’s understanding of disability and the rights framework that underlies it.

# ... issues

## 6. Disconnect between ideas and questions.

- Paper's narrative is nuanced and raises important issues – but questions often ignore these issues.
- Narrative presents options as though they are up for debate, but questions move to asking about how the options can be implemented.
- E.g., narrative seems to say, 'Should we merge OW and ODSP?' But questions seem to ask, 'How should we merge OW and ODSP?'
- The questions seem to assume that many options have already been decided on.

# ... issues

## 7. Much depends on investment

- To achieve the kind of employment services system envisioned in the paper would require a significant investment by government.
- Recommendations may also mean a big investment in benefits.
- But, the economic situation right now is a big problem.
- Government may choose to make the “cost neutral” or “cost savings” changes first.
  - E.g., making OW and ODSP one program re: delivery, etc.
- These are the changes that will have the most negative impact on people.
- People with disabilities would lose the most.

# Preliminary Analysis re: merger

- Fix the “basic” program first, before even considering bringing people with disabilities in
  - Quality and effectiveness of employment services must be improved
  - Focus on making the “basic” program responsive to other barriers to employment already identified
    - E.g., gender, “race”, education, training, etc.
  - Get rid of the stigma
  - Develop programs that specifically respond to the needs of people with disabilities
- Otherwise, merger means putting people with disabilities back on welfare

# Possible Discussion Questions

1. What are other benefits / drawbacks to the Commission's proposal?
2. How would merging the two programs impact (either positively or negatively) on particular groups of people in your community?
  - e.g., women, lone mothers, people in racialized communities, people with disabilities, newcomers, First Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Metis).

# Other Discussion Questions

3. For you to support merging the two programs, how would it need to be implemented? For example:
  - What would have to be done first?
  - What barriers to employment would need to be recognized, and how?
  - How should employment supports be improved in a merged system?
  - What is the minimum income that people should receive?
  - How should people with disabilities be treated differently, if at all?
  - What is the most effective in helping people overcome barriers to employment?
  
4. Can you think of other ways that the current political or economic situation might impact on the government's implementation of merging OW and ODSP?

# Why Organize?

- Options could have far-reaching implications for people on social assistance and low-wage workers
- Commission's final recommendations will guide government restructuring
- Commission acknowledged the Review is happening in the context of poverty reduction but government's focus appears to be on cost-cutting and administrative efficiencies



# Organizing Toolkit

- Assess the Options
- Consult with your community
- Write a submission
- Meet with the Commissioners
- Lobby MPPs

# 8 Useful Tools

- 1) Vision/Framework
- 2) Options Backgrounders
- 3) Using an Equity Lens
- 4) ODSP Action Coalition Position Statements
- 5) Government's Poverty Reduction Commitments
- 6) Political and Economic Overview
- 7) MPP Lobby Kit
- 8) A Conversation on Options

# 1. Vision / Framework

- Assess each option against your vision for OW/ODSP
  - Does it reflect your principles and values?
  - How would it need to be implemented to accomplish what you want to change about OW / ODSP?

# ISAC's vision

- OW
  - from punitive and counterproductive
  - to supportive and accessible
- ODSP
  - from punitive and inaccessible
  - to supportive and inclusive
- ISAC's vision / framework available online
  - <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/submission-to-the-commission-for-the-review-of-social-assistance-in-ontario/>

# ODSP Action Coalition's Vision

- Based on a human-rights approach
- Outlines 4 key principles
  - Adequate standard of living
  - Dignity
  - Poverty reduction
  - Accessibility
- ODSP Action Coalition vision available online
  - <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/dignity-adequacy-inclusion-rethinking-the-ontario-disability-support-program/>

# 2. Options Backgrounders

- Use ISAC's backgrounders to help people understand the options
  - Tax Delivered Income
  - Moving Benefits out of OW & ODSP
  - Merging OW and ODSP
- Organize a community consultation
  - Discuss the advantages / disadvantages
  - Support? Or Not support?
  - How would each option need to be implemented to address poverty and other barriers in your community?

# 3. Using an Equity Lens

- Rather than commenting on each option broadly, focus on the impact of various options for particular groups
  - People with disabilities
  - Women
  - Lone mothers
  - Peoples of colour
  - Newcomers
  - First Peoples (First Nations, Inuit and Metis)
- Refer to the Toolkit for examples of submissions that do this

# 4. Disability Position Statements

- Use the ODSP Action Coalition's position statements on 5 key issues to understand what is at stake for people with disabilities:
  - Defining people with disabilities based on who "can" and "cannot" work
  - Accommodation and AODA
  - Mandatory participation in work-related activities
  - Mandatory treatment and rehabilitation
  - Special Diet Allowance
- Available online
  - <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/mpp-lobby-kit/>



# 5. Government Poverty Reduction Commitments

- The Poverty Reduction Act was passed unanimously in 2009 by all provincial parties
- The Social Assistance Review is part of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy
- ISAC's handout on '*Government Poverty Reduction Principles*' lays out the political commitments
- Refer to these commitments in submissions and meetings with the Commissioners and MPPs
- Restructuring should be about reducing poverty, not government cost-cutting and administrative efficiencies

# 6. Political and Economic Overview

- Use ISAC's Political and Economic Overview to assess:
  - Which options will the government likely act on?
  - How quickly are they likely to move forward?
  - How are they likely to implement this option?
  - Who is likely to benefit and who isn't?
  - How much money is likely to be invested?
  - How narrow will the eligibility requirements be?
- Focus feedback on particular options or how each option needs to be implemented to address poverty and other barriers

# The Doom and Gloom on Ontario's Economy

- Job losses / tax cuts / slow economic growth = diminishing government revenues and a growing deficit
- Premier promises to eliminate the deficit by 2017/18
- Appoints Don Drummond to lead a Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services
  - Report expected late January – early February
  - Media reports indicate government spending must be limited to 1% for next 6 years to eliminate deficit.
  - Some ministries could face 30% cuts.
  - Radical overhaul of how public services are delivered, including OW and ODSP

# What will Government do?

- Fears
  - Poverty reduction will be lost amidst focus on spending cuts, administrative savings and reducing OW/ODSP caseloads
- Possibilities for Optimism?
  - Possible improvements to employment supports and access to training and education
  - Possible improvements to asset rules and to social assistance rates
  - Possible reduction in intrusive monitoring and oversight
  - Possibility that any administrative savings found would be reinvested in social assistance

# Lobby your MPP!

- It doesn't end with the Commission's final report and recommendations. Don't give up!
- It's the government who has the power to restructure OW and ODSP, not the Commission. Lobby Liberal MPPs and ministers.
- Lobby NDP and Tory MPPs - in a minority government, opposition parties have more clout!

# 7. MPP Lobby Kit

- Use the ODSP Action Coalition's MPP Lobby Kit or adapt it to create your own
  - <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/mpp-lobby-kit/>
- The kit contains:
  - Key messages
  - Backgrounders and Positions on Key Issues
  - MPP letter templates and tip sheets

## 8. Influencing the Commission and MPPs

- Think of the Options Paper as a conversation between the Commissioners, Don Drummond, MCSS Minister John Milloy, and the Premier.
- Identify your key messages
- Look for opportunities (or create your own) to get out your message

# Other Resources from ISAC

## ...on the way

- Taped Webinar with an Overview and analysis of Options Paper
- Gender, Disability and Racial Equity Focus
- Key Messages that respond to key issues in the paper (and include economic arguments)



**Any Questions?**



## Thanks! and finally...

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