



Office of the Commissioner
Community and Health Services Department

MEMORANDUM

To: Regional Council

From: Katherine Chislett
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

Date: November 1, 2018

Re: York Region Staff Input – Proposed Social Assistance Reform

Due to the Municipal election there was insufficient time to allow for Regional Council review of input prior to submission

In July 2018, the Province of Ontario announced a 100 day review of Ontario's social assistance system. This included the provincially-mandated and municipally delivered Ontario Works program. The Province did not initiate public consultations, however, the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services invited input from municipalities late in summer 2018.

Due to municipal election timing, a staff level response was provided as it was not possible to bring forward York Region's input for Regional Council endorsement prior to submission. The submission is attached. Any comments provided by Regional Council will be forwarded to the Province to assist in driving effective reform of a complex system.

York Region input aligns with previous Regional submissions

York Region has provided input to previous efforts to reform social assistance including, most recently the [Income Security: Roadmap for Change](#) consultations. In addition, staff participated in provincial-municipal committees related to modernizing Ontario Works program delivery. The York Region Ontario Works program is implementing service delivery changes to reduce administration and improve the customer experience. York Region drew upon these experiences in developing its input.

Municipal associations agree on the need for reform

In its announcement of the 100 day review, the Province cited concerns about a disjointed social assistance system with patchwork policies and excessive front line worker time spent on administration. The Minister stated the need for a sustainable program that is compassionate, helps people to re-enter the workforce and breaks the cycle of poverty.

In principle, municipal associations share these concerns and goals for reform. Provincial associations consulted with York Region and other municipalities on their submissions to the provincial government. Given municipal expertise and co-funding of Ontario Works program delivery, municipal associations highlight the need for a collaborative approach to reforming social assistance that does not add pressure to the municipal property tax.

Staff will review Provincial reform and continue to work with municipal associations to respond

The results of the Province's review are expected in early November 2018. Staff will review and assess the impact on York Region and remain committed to working with the Province to create beneficial outcomes for York Region and its residents.

Katherine Chislett
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

Attachment (1)
YORK-#8925825



ATTACHMENT 1

KATHERINE CHISLETT, Commissioner
Community and Health Services Department

October 18, 2018

Via email: Janet.Menard@ontario.ca

Janet Menard
Deputy Minister, Children, Community and Social Services
Hepburn Block 6th Floor
80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto ON M7A 1E9

Dear Ms Menard:

Re: York Region's Input on Proposed Social Assistance Reform

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into development of the Provincial Social Assistance Reform Plan, particularly as it will apply to Ontario Works. Due to the election, we are not able to put our recommended input before Council for endorsement. We will, however, bring this submission forward to Council for its endorsement at the earliest opportunity, and will forward their decision at that time.

We agree that Ontario Works must do a better job at helping people find and keep jobs and reduce their reliance on the program.

We support the positions of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association. Municipalities are on the front-line of administering Ontario Works on behalf of the Province. We need change that is well planned, fiscally responsible and does not add pressure to the municipal property tax base. As Consolidated Municipal Service Managers of early years and child care programs, affordable housing and homelessness prevention services, municipalities have been through major reforms before. We know how to reduce red tape and re-focus complex programs into measurable results for clients and the Province.

Social assistance reform is important to our residents who need help. While some Ontario Works clients are able to find jobs quickly, many face significant challenges due to mental health and addictions, social isolation, low education or lack of work experience. Many struggle with several of these challenges at the same time. This is the case for close to 70 per cent of York Region Ontario Works clients.

These challenges make it hard for people to get back to work or keep jobs. For some, because of their multiple challenges, seeking and securing employment may become a perpetual cycle. This is a key reason why we have seen longer stays and repeat use of Ontario Works. About 43 per cent of York Region Ontario Works clients who exit the program return to assistance. This is a similar issue across the Province.

Reversing these trends must be a critical part of reform. Like other Ontario Works Administrators in the Province, York Region is improving program delivery to better support clients who face challenges. A key problem in the current program is too much time is spent on administration and not enough time on helping people move ahead with their lives and re-enter the workforce.

York Region is implementing a new service model that includes:

- Implementing administrative efficiencies and reinvesting savings so front-line staff have the time and tools to help clients overcome challenges and find and keep jobs
- Simplifying access to community programs and benefits so clients are able to get the support they need quickly
- Providing more support to clients after they exit the program so they can remain independent or reduce the need to or frequency of returning to Ontario Works
- Improving use of data and performance measures to evaluate client progress and results

These changes align with the Province's goal of creating a better system that is compassionate and uses resources wisely to break the cycle of poverty.

To move forward, I have attached six priorities that we urge the Province to consider as part of the reform plan.

We share your concerns that the current system is complicated and does not achieve results for people who need help. Reform is the opportunity to work together to identify what is working and what is not; assess options and how to best implement solutions.

York Region's Input on Proposed Social Assistance Reform
October 18, 2018

If you have any questions please contact Cordelia Abankwa, General Manager of Social Services. She can be reached at 1-877-464-9675 Extension 72150 or by email at cordelia.abankwa@york.ca.

Yours truly,

Katherine Chislett
Commissioner, Community and Health Services

Copy to: Wayne Emmerson, Chair, Regional Municipality of York
Lina Bigioni, Chief of Staff
Bruce Macgregor, Chief Administrative Officer, Regional Municipality of York

Attachment – Six Priorities for Social Assistance Reform

YORK-#8823330

Six Priorities for Social Assistance Reform

1. Help People Move Forward by Reducing Complex Rules

A review is needed to identify and eliminate rules that do not help people find and keep jobs or become independent. While some of the rules are important to ensure people who need support are eligible, others are intrusive. Clients spend too much time trying to comply with these rules rather than overcoming challenges and taking concrete steps to re-enter the workforce and improve their quality of life. For front-line staff, the workload is too often tilted to monitoring these rules rather than providing direct support to clients. Simplifying earnings exemptions and combining the basic needs and shelter allowance into one benefit are examples of rule changes that will reduce complexity and help both front-line staff and clients.

2. Reduce Paperwork so Front-Line Staff Can Help People Get Off and Stay Off Ontario Works

York Region's new model is focused on freeing-up front-line staff to spend more time with clients. As recently identified by the Province's line-by-line review of Ontario Government expenditures, government-wide service delivery modernization can help by reducing the amount of unproductive time spent on internal administration and routine reporting requirements. We encourage the Ministry to continue service modernization. Important initiatives include digitizing documents, continuing to improve SAMS and improving data to help both the Province and municipalities track program performance and enhance client results.

3. Develop Employment Services that Work for People Who Face Challenges

Like other Ontario Works Administrators, York Region relies on referrals to Employment Ontario to help clients who are ready to move quickly back into jobs. However, clients with multiple challenges require more help than current Employment Ontario services provide. Evidence shows that people succeed better when help with mental health or addictions, individual coaching on life skills and the costs related to working (e.g. transportation) are combined with job-specific skills, placements and employer partnerships. These approaches are more intensive than short-term employment services, but can improve long-term prospects. In addition, tools that can help clients identify their strengths and challenges are useful so front-line staff can target the level and type of support needed.

Going forward, we welcome the opportunity to work with the Province on how to expand Employment Ontario services to better meet the needs of Ontario Works clients who face more challenges. This can include exploring options for more integration at the municipal level. Municipalities will need the ability to determine how services can be tailored to community needs and who is best able to provide the right type of service to achieve results.

4. *Maintain Local Flexibility and Support More Inter-Ministry Coordination*

"One size fits all" models do not work for Ontario Works clients. Residents have unique situations when applying to Ontario Works. Each community also has different conditions that impact on client success. Municipalities require flexibility in how they design, manage and adjust to meet different and changing client needs. As well, better partnerships with other Ministries are critical to streamline access and referrals to services that help clients move ahead, like mental health and addictions and supportive and affordable housing. The Province's plan to improve mental health services is welcome and is an opportunity to improve access to Ontario Works clients who require treatment services.

5. *Help Clients Connect to the Right Services and Provide Follow-up Support to Transition and Stay Off Assistance*

Ontario Works clients often need help connecting to the services they need and dealing with issues as they arise, both while they are on assistance and when transitioning off. Based on the success of York Region's Housing Stability Program, we know this type of support is a cost-effective. By combining targeted financial assistance with reduced administration front-line staff work closely with clients, understand their unique needs and help with finding housing, life skills, access to mental health or addictions services and transportation. The result has been greater housing stability and independence, for example 93% of people who access the Housing Stability Program remain housed and fewer are returning for financial help.

A similar approach is needed as part of Ontario Works program delivery. Preventing clients from having to return to Ontario Works through less administration, more client support and appropriate follow-up, can achieve short, medium and long-term savings. Under the current Ontario Works program, this type of intensive support is hard to provide to the clients who need it. Reform is an opportunity to implement this approach more broadly.

6. *Helping People Stay Independent and Off Assistance*

Reforming Ontario Works cannot happen in isolation. People who are living with low income need help to reduce their cost of living so they do not have to resort to Ontario Works in the first place or return for income or other benefits. This is a job for all levels of government. In York Region, regionally funded discretionary benefits are available to eligible residents who are low income and not receiving Ontario Works. They include assistance to prevent housing loss, cover health-related items and help with the costs of public transit. This is in addition to provincially-mandated programs York Region manages.

We welcome the Province's initiative to reduce the cost of living for people, including those with lower income. As an important complement to changes to social assistance, the Province is encouraged to consider providing health benefits to people living on low income who do not have access to them through their work. This is a key gap in broader income security that would make a difference in helping people manage their daily lives and maintain employment.