

Clause No. 15 in Report No. 5 of Committee of the Whole was adopted, without amendment, by the Council of The Regional Municipality of York at its meeting held on November 21, 2013.

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SOCIAL ASSISTANCE TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT PLACEMENT
2013-2014 INITIATIVES

Committee of the Whole recommends adoption of the following recommendation contained in the report dated October 25, 2013 from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. The Regional Clerk forward a copy of this report to the Human Services Planning Board and Community Partnership Council to inform their work on “Making Ends Meet” and Immigration Settlement initiatives.

2. PURPOSE

This report is a status update on the initiatives reported to Council on November 15, 2012 in Clause No.2 of Report No. 9 of the Community and Health Services Committee. It highlights the range of innovative workforce development approaches developed within the Social Services Branch to help Ontario Works participants become and stay employed. The report also outlines plans for 2014 and lays the groundwork for the future direction of employment programs.

3. BACKGROUND

Ontario Works is a provincially mandated program that provides basic financial assistance and employment supports to help people become and stay employed

The Community and Health Services Department provides mandated financial and employment assistance to eligible York Region residents under the provincial Ontario Works (OW) program.

Basic financial assistance helps with the cost of food and shelter, drugs, and other exceptional needs. In addition, as a condition of eligibility for Ontario Works, most recipients are required to participate in employment assistance activities. These activities help participants obtain skills that allow them to get and stay employed. Employment assistance activities may include assisted job search, volunteering, job-specific skills training, self-employment activity, and employment placement.

For some individuals, the requirement to participate in employment assistance activities may be deferred due to ill health, caregiving responsibilities or other exceptional circumstances that may make participation impractical.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Social Assistance Reform discussions are focused on supporting residents to become and stay employed

In its spring 2013 budget, the government announced initial steps to reform social assistance with a focus on promoting improved employment outcomes for clients. In addition to a one percent rate increase for families, changes allowing recipients to earn more (better incentives), save more (for unplanned expenses) and keep their primary vehicle (for job search and work) will help people move to work and keep working.

The Province has committed to discussions guiding social assistance reform in Ontario. Municipalities, including York Region, are engaged through the Provincial-Municipal Social Assistance and Employment Committee. The Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the City of Toronto chair a committee of key municipal and provincial partners to discuss reform, policy and program design and key implementation considerations.

The Province also set up consumer focus groups to listen to client experiences and hear about employment success factors, barriers, and potential improvements for services in Ontario Works. York Region Social Services was one of 10 sites asked to participate in these discussions and coordinated the participation of Ontario Works clients.

The direction of Social Assistance reform is focused on services and programs that get and keep residents attached to the workforce. York Region's employment service initiatives support this direction.

The OW caseload is in a constant state of change. Each month about 500 new cases come onto assistance and roughly an equal number exit the program. In 2012, OW provided assistance to a monthly average caseload of 6,100 cases.

The Region's Ontario Works workforce development program offers a full range of services to meet the diverse needs of participants

The OW caseload is increasingly comprised of individuals with multiple, complex barriers to employment. York Region has created a workforce development program that addresses the full continuum of participant needs, from persons requiring only limited assistance in becoming job-ready to those needing intensive, ongoing supports. To do this the Region's Social Services workforce development program uses a combination of in-house staff (case managers), local workshops (job searching and resume writing), community referral (literacy and language training), and job development (finding jobs for clients). Purchased programming, through the Region's Community Investment Strategy, helps to complement these services and get people employed.

Results in 2012 show social assistance workforce development is helping people move to jobs, avoid Ontario Works altogether, and reduce reliance on public assistance.

In 2012, York Region's workforce development program assisted over 1,370 residents and their families to become employed and leave assistance. The Region's employment program directly contributed to almost 25 percent of 2012 program exits. In addition, through Community Investment Strategy funded employment programs, Ontario Works assisted more than 112 low income residents to find employment and avoid social assistance altogether. In 2012, York Region's OW program moved people to jobs on average 1.5 months sooner than its GTA counterparts, showing the value of the Region's investment in workforce development.

In 2013, Ontario Works enhanced its collaborative workforce development program with additional partnerships

This year, Ontario Works launched a number of new internal and external partnerships to respond to the emerging needs of participants, employers and the economy.

New partnerships and targeted supports for foreign-trained professionals are engaging the talent and experience of skilled immigrants

Ontario Works provides assistance to many highly skilled and educated newcomers who, having come to Canada in search of work, have found themselves unemployed or working in survival jobs. Among the over 350 skilled newcomers on the program, including doctors, nurses, IT professionals, accountants and engineers, many continue to struggle to gain important work experience in Canada and to improve their understanding of Canadian workplace culture and norms, important pre-requisites to becoming and staying employed.

Training and job placement

In May 2012, the Community and Health Services Department entered into an 18-month purchase of service agreement with Rehabilitation Network Canada to provide pre-employment training, job placement, and retention supports for internationally educated professionals (IEPs) on Ontario Works. Since its inception, 28 individuals have participated in the program, twelve of whom have moved to employment, four having exited assistance altogether. In one instance, an internationally trained accountant was able to secure a full-time accounting position in the health services sector earning \$32.00 per hour. In another, a 59-year old foreign trained civil engineer, with over 25 years of project engineering experience, found employment as a project engineer inspector with a company specializing in structural, mechanical, engineering and maintenance services. The Rehabilitation Network Canada partnership concludes March 2014.

Corporate volunteer placement pilot

In May 2013, Community and Health Services launched a corporate Ontario Works volunteer placement initiative to assist IEPs on OW to obtain meaningful Canadian work experience and exposure to Canadian workplace culture and norms. In accordance with provincial directives, OW volunteer placements are unpaid and operate to a maximum 70 hours per month for a 6-12 month period. By placing newcomers in a range of meaningful volunteer opportunities throughout the organization, the initiative is leveraging the talent and experience of staff in helping skilled newcomers to prepare for work in Canada. Since its introduction, two foreign trained engineers have been placed with Transportation and Community Planning, and a number of departments have expressed interest in hosting placements this fall.

Networking event to support internationally educated professionals

On November 18, Community and Health Services will host a networking event to support IEPs on Ontario Works to make new professional connections, learn about their industry in Canada and benefit from referral opportunities that may lead to a job. This event builds on the success of last year's first ever York Region IEP Conference and a similar workshop put on by Ontario Works staff. The event brings together 35-40 IEPs on Ontario Works and a range of employers including York Region staff, local municipalities, associations, agencies and the private sector from the engineering, health care, accounting and information technology sectors.

A multi-agency self-employment partnership is responding to the entrepreneurial abilities of many participants

In an economy increasingly demanding non-standard forms of work, self-employment can provide improved access to the labour market and a potential route to self-sufficiency for social assistance recipients. In May 2012, Ontario Works launched a two-year self-employment program targeting goal oriented, self-directed participants with a capacity for entrepreneurial work.

Since its inception, 14 participants have begun actively working with a self-employment provider toward starting their own business. One participant recently opened a successful home-based, and corporate, cleaning business. The self-employment initiative will remain an important component of the Region's workforce development program in 2014.

A new opportunity with the Strategies and Partnerships branch will serve to educate job seekers and provide a valuable community service

It is a commonly held belief in the employment industry that over 80 percent of all jobs are never advertised, and being equipped with an effective job search strategy can make the difference between gaining access to these opportunities and not. In fall 2013, Ontario Works will partner with the Department's Strategies and Partnerships branch in launching videos providing tips and guidance on "networking", a cornerstone of an effective job search. The video segments will be placed on YouTube to assist OW participants and anyone in the general public (e.g. graduates, workers entering new fields, etc.) needing advice on how to use networking to enhance their job search.

In 2014 Social Services will expand its understanding of employer and resident needs

A new Community Employment Roundtable will uncover obstacles facing small business in attracting and retaining labour

Ontario Works has collaborated with the Workforce Planning Board of York Region (the flow-through agency) in leading concept development, the funding application and engagement of two consultants to coordinate community employment roundtable activities.

In September 2013, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities approved time-limited, 100% provincial funding (one year) to launch an employer roundtable. The roundtable, comprised of a cross-section of community leaders and small and medium employers, will address issues facing small and medium size employers in attracting and retaining qualified labour and link jobseekers to this key employer sector.

An expanded partnership with Economic Strategy will improve understanding of employer needs and create new opportunities for job seekers

Ontario Works, through its partnership with Economic Strategy, has been introduced to a new job search technology called Wanted Analytics. It provides improved access to labour market information and a robust job search feature supporting better matches between participant skills and local job opportunities. Over the coming year, the relationship will be expanded to include opportunities for joint employer visits and OW

participation at forums involving local municipal economic development staff. York Region is one of several municipalities forming strong partnerships with economic development to better connect people to jobs.

A review of individuals participating in English language training will help uncover barriers to employment and the supports needed for many newcomers on Ontario Works

Formal English language instruction plays a key role in helping many newcomers develop the language skills needed to compete for jobs and integrate effectively into the Canadian workplace.

In 2014, staff will review OW clients participating in English language training to determine overall job readiness and the supports needed to enhance access to the labour market. In addition to one-on-one employment assessments, the initiative will include an environmental scan of municipal best practices and a review of the services available in transitioning from language training to jobs or other suitable activities.

Improved understanding of why people are returning to social assistance will result in better service planning

An improved understanding of recidivism, including the rate of return and why people return to social assistance, can offer vital information about the types of programs, partnerships and integrated supports needed. In 2014, staff will undertake a comprehensive review of social assistance recidivism including the local characteristics and circumstances of individuals returning to social assistance. This, complemented by a similar review in the homelessness program area, will serve as part of a broader review of Social Services programs and services in 2014 and beyond.

Link to key Council-approved plans

The current as well as planned programs and initiatives that make up OW workforce development contribute to key economic and healthy community goals outlined in Visions 2026 and 2051, the Region's 2011 to 2015 Strategic Plan objective to *increase the economic vitality of the Region*, as well as the Community and Health Services Department's Multi-Year Plan. These initiatives and programs also contribute to fulfilling economic goals of the Human Services Planning Board and the Community Partnership Council.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Ontario Works Employment Assistance programs and innovations are managed within the current budget. In 2013, the budget is \$4.4 M gross. Funding for basic financial and employment assistance is cost shared with the Province at a cap of \$700 per case. The 2013 cost-share ratio is 85.8% provincial, 14.2% Regional tax levy. This cost-share ratio will be fully uploaded by 2018, with the Province funding 100% of the \$700 cost per case.

Ontario Works workforce development and innovation assists people to move to jobs and reduce reliance on regionally cost-shared social assistance programs.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

An innovative Ontario Works workforce development program benefits all municipalities by helping vulnerable, low income residents to gain the skills needed to get work, keep work and actively participate in their communities.

6. CONCLUSION

There is provincial interest in transitioning Ontario Works from a program of income maintenance to one rooted in workforce development and employment. York Region is positioning itself for this and advocating for a reformed social assistance program which includes a broader and more integrated range of supports and stronger connections with employers.

Through a focus on innovation and partnerships, the Region is continuing to align its OW workforce development program to meet the future anticipated direction of social assistance in Ontario and to better equip OW clients to get and retain employment.

For more information on this report, please contact Cordelia Abankwa, General Manager, Social Services, Extension 2150.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.