

Nipissing's Summary Report

Responses from Clients/Staff and Community Partners
on the Commission's Review of Social Assistance in
Ontario



District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board

August 19, 2011

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Brian Kreps
Ontario Municipal Social Services Association
1 Dundas Street West, Suite 2500
Toronto, ON M5G 1Z3

Dear Mr.Kreps:

The District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. We greatly appreciate OMSSA taking a leadership role in gathering feedback on this topic prior to submitting their final position paper to the Commission.

We have read your draft response and did participate in the Webinars today. Further to these discussions, there are a few points where we feel more detail in OMSSA'S final position paper may be beneficial, specifically in the areas of prevention and communication. In order to combat the stigma attached to social assistance programs a re-branding will be required which will involve increased communication with our communities. The need to educate our citizens on the linkages between healthy communities and social assistance programs is another area where there is a great deal of room for growth in our planning. A pro-active rather than reactive approach with a focus on prevention through service system integration is also a key component to avoiding future dependency on social assistance.

Over the past month various efforts have been underway in our office to gather feedback on the Commission's Discussion Paper. Attached are the comments and recommendations received from our Clients, Staff and Community Partners. Please note that these comments do not reflect our Organization's position. The District of Nipissing will be submitting a position paper on the Commission's discussion paper after we have had the opportunity to meet with our Board to review the document along with the feedback received in the attached summary report. This data will be instrumental in our future planning. A copy of our position paper will be forwarded to OMSSA.

The methodology used to collect the data documented in this Summary Report involved surveys and facilitated Staff/Client and Community Partner forums using the Commission's recommended framework to guide our discussions. A total of 65 pages of raw data were documented from the 39 clients, 25 Staff and 7 Community Partners who participated in these activities.

Due to the volume of feedback received and timelines we have chosen to present this information to you using a point form format. We would also like to note that we have chosen this method so that we could share the voices of our clientele using their un-edited words about their lived experiences.

While all of the comments and recommendations received through our discussions were enlightening, several common themes did emerge a few of which we would like to highlight:

- The impacts of stigma and stereotyping;
- The need to lessen legislative restrictions for clients wanting to pursue post secondary education;
- The importance of increased collaboration between agencies responsible for delivering human services;
- The need to increase communication with the labour community/private sector and local employment agencies;
- The need for an increase in service integration to streamline services;
- The impact of low social assistance rates and the need to raise these rates to a level that recognizes the social determinants of health and meets an adequate standard of living;
- The need for a more flexible system that is responsive to local conditions;
- The need to simplify the Ontario Works program

Once again, we thank you for the opportunity to participate and hope that this information will be helpful.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding the feedback received. I can be reached at 705-474-2151 at ext. 3332.

Sincerely,

Michelle Glabb
Program Supervisor/Ontario Works

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

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

Staff Responses

- Community Placements-Government incentives for employers;
- Better government supports for apprenticeship programs and access to grants;
- Increased collaboration between EI and OW and access to other services/training through EI;
- Increased funding from the government to support the creation of industry in communities where industry has been lost;
- Increased support for small business;
- Increased employment funding to OW to support employer incentives through EP;
- Marketing strategy to educate public and employers on Ontario Works supports/services and labour pool;
- Participate in initiatives that will result in the reduction/elimination of Stigma/Stereotyping of Ontario Works recipients;
- Increase communication and employers and provide job coaching to assist employers with training;
- New software (CURAM) should have matching capabilities that will link participant skills with employment opportunities;
- Employer portals in CURAM to advertise job opportunities;

Community Partner Responses

- Further communication and collaboration with the local Chamber of Commerce;
- There should be forums at the local level where job seekers and employers looking for employees meet to connect, exchange ideas and identify mutually beneficial opportunities;

Client Responses

- Increase social marketing/awareness that could include commercials and/or ongoing campaigns that would remind and inform potential employers of the OW labour pool. There are a lot of large scale employers who are aware of programs and benefits, but these tend to be unskilled positions with little advancement or job security, while many small businesses are not aware of programs they could take advantage of to train one or two long-term skilled employees;
- Create phone service so clients who don't have phones can use a centralized voicemail system: Have own VM box; Use so employers can leave messages for clients; Service can be accessed from any phone; Toll free # to access VM from any payphone;
- Network with the Chamber of Commerce;
- Increase Employer incentives to support OW clients. Consider wage subsidies for the three month probationary period;
- More access to transportation;
- Need to change stereotypes and remove discrimination/stigma. Educate employers;
- Use cheque inserts to inform clients of job opportunities that are available;
- More Job fairs to link clients to opportunities that will lead to sustainable employment. Set up "Meet and Greet.";
- Mentorship Program that would re-introduce people to workforce;
- Send newsletter to employers to announce successes to further market OW as an employment agency;
- Increase Apprenticeship Programs and have a worker on site that specializes in apprenticeship options;

- Increase available employment services/training that are connected to the demand and supply of jobs in the areas where jobs are available and offer Employment services that cater to specific ages and skill sets;
- Create a database through OW Agency websites that only OW clients can access through a login that lists all available jobs in community. Employment staff could then match clients to opportunities;
- Reward participants for connecting with employers (maybe a \$10.00 grocery card for every five resumes they hand out);

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

Staff Responses

- Eliminate restrictions to post secondary learning. Current OW Legislation requires applicants/participants to pursue OSAP for both tuition/books and the living allowance. OW Directive should be aligned with ODSP legislation in this regard;
- Offer health benefits while clients are attending post secondary;
- Employment Services that is responsive to changes in our local economy. Targeted training that meets the needs of employers;
- Better assessment tools that can be used to determine what skills specific training a client requires based on market demand;
- Increased collaboration with educational institutions to develop skills training that fits the labour market needs.
- Increase EP and CP opportunities to help participants gain work experiences/references etc.;
- Province led and funded employment training for OW staff to deliver employment services;
- Centralized/collaborative tools and funding using a “no wrong door” philosophy for employment services
- Simplify OW, focus more on employment, less on eligibility;
- Education and focus on employment-offer courses/training that are career focused;

Community Partners

- Promote a mentorship program with employers for social assistance participants;
- Assessment tools to identify development needs;
- An effective social assistance system will support people to obtain education, training and certifications that improve their chances of obtaining sustainable employment;
- The Ontario Student Assistance Program and social assistance should be harmonized, allowing social assistance recipients to retain their health benefits while going to school;
- OSAP should be given as a grant rather than a loan to people who are unemployed or on social assistance;

Client Responses

- A trial work basis to gain the skills required to give them a chance to gain experience;
- Aptitude testing;
- Assess candidates and screen properly for employment opportunities;
- Increased communication with Employers within District and beyond District Boundaries;
- Bring employers to the group of clients so that they can speak directly to potential employers. Employers could then suggest what upgrading would be required to move towards interviews and job success;
- Increased training opportunities through OW;
- Collaboration with community agencies that offer employment services ;
- Find out what skills level or what qualities the participant has education wise etc.;
- Funds to enable participants better meet the monthly needs and expenses so they can concentrate on studies;
- Have work shops for all the different skills and needs of the employers;

- Job coach/Job Fairs/Job Placements/Job Shadowing with incentives;
- Mandatory workshops/courses through local employment agencies;
- Approve Ontario Works participants to participate in post secondary education without applying for OSAP;
- Create ongoing Overpayments for Tuition only;
- OW could mandate participants to have at least High School equivalency;
- Increased volunteer work to give participants work experience, references, chance to network;
- Purchase vacant buildings and hire Ontario Works participants to complete renovations to offer housing to participants; ensure Codes are met by following correct processes;
- Put people in co-op opportunities - this way the participant can get a feel of what it is like to work and, of course, what it is like to do that particular job, and who knows, if he or she likes it, they might decide to stay with it;

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

Staff Responses

- Increased mentorship/job shadowing opportunities;
- Collaborative employment planning;
- Reduce silo's/competitions for statistics to guarantee program funding;
- Provincially mandated caseload maximums that allow staff to spend more time with participants on their employment goals;
- "One Stop Shop" employment services. No wrong door model with seamless service delivery;
- OW participants should have the same access to the employment services through EI that are available to other unemployed people who are not in receipt of social assistance;
- Notice demographic differences, all communities require different supports;
- Marketing strategy that is focused on reducing stigma;

Community Partners

- Have employment drop-in centers in appropriate neighborhoods, lots of peer support;
- Ensure that on site child care is available while clients are assisted with resumes and job applications;
- The meaning of "Employment" implicit in the Report is too narrow. An alternative term, "Work," refers to whatever purposeful things people do to make their lives meaningful and worthwhile, and would be a better concept upon which to create program outcomes;

Client Responses

- Informative newsletter/calendar of events of employment opportunities/OW booklet of services and ensure that people without internet access have access to the information;
- A mall kiosk possibly;
- DNSSAB website could have a link that outlines community services that are available and what workshops are available through DNSSAB and other agencies;
- Better access to affordable housing;
- Market/campaign to diminish stigma of OW;
- Increase access to transportation;
- More communication with Service Canada to ensure that all unemployed people have access to the same employment supports;
- More time for caseworkers to sit with their client/specialized employment staff;
- Smaller case loads - need quality, not quantity. Teachers only have so many kids. OW should be the same;
- Establish an after-hour access to help people who are not available from 8:30am-4:30pm;

- Establish electronic file login - secure web site;
- Gas allowance should be increased to meet the demands of OW requirements;
- OW could "pay" or "reward" people who take any upgrading - it would make taking these more attractive;
- OW could have staff whose only job is to partner participants with employers;
- Reacclimatize clients to work force: • shadowing; • volunteer work; • support mentor program;
- Something connected to IVR to answer simple questions, like a hotline where clients can ask basic questions about employment options;

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

Staff Responses

- Increase in provincial funding to support employment services that help participants overcome barriers to employment (life skills training, budgeting, parenting etc.);
- Increased focus on EP'S with job coaches;
- Increased access to healthcare/addiction services/mental health services/counseling;
- Seamless delivery of services that assist participants with barriers-"no wrong door" approach;
- Collaborative approaches with community partners/service providers with respect to planning and interventions that seek to address participant barriers;
- Increased access to transportation for all participants District wide including rural/remote areas;
- More training for staff on the local labour market;
- Pardons should be easier to obtain;

Community Partners

- Coordinated attention from a round table of associated disciplines, reviewing efforts on a case by case basis.
- Create links to agencies that support those with special needs or need additional support. Ensure supports are in place as client adapts to an employment position;
- The summary report is silent on vulnerable and marginalized youth, and needs to address this in order to look ahead with an eye to preventing future generations from getting trapped in the system;
- The report is also silent on issues around addiction/substance abuse as a serious barrier to productive community engagement, and the need for social assistance to be aligned with treatment and rehabilitation programs;
- There needs to be recognition in whatever model is developed that face-to-face support is required to effectively serve the large portion of the social assistance case load that has complex needs and significant barriers to overcome;

Client Responses

- Access to a doctor/medical care and counseling. Ministry of Health to advise Ontario Works when there are new physicians accepting patients, list of clinics including hours of operation. Have Ontario Works doctor (or dentist) in-house;
- Access to Pardon Services: Statute of Limitations on certain offences;
- Better networking with Chamber of Commerce;
- Better transportation options/Earnings should be 100% exempt for first six months as incentive to work;
- Consolidate services;
- Educate employers on "how to train" candidate's "Learning Styles" (communication encouraged by employee);
- Find out which employers would be willing to help a participant facing multiple barriers. Finding out what the barriers are and showing them where to go or what to do;
- Flexible hours to accommodate child care, etc.;

- Increase training opportunities/available grants or loans to re-educate or re-enter the work force;
- Knowledge of what aids are available: Update information; Newsletters "advertise.";
- Location: integrating services/one stop shopping;
- Mandatory Drug/Alcohol testing and programs;
- Permit Ontario Works staff to write a Letter of Reference on behalf of participants;
- Specialized services;
- Support for employers to insure employees;

E) *How can Ontario's Social Assistance System better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they may need?*

Staff Responses

- Increase access to healthcare/Doctors/ treatment centers;
- Add services to OHIP ~ chiropractor, physiotherapy, counseling, etc.;
- Increase in funding/incentives to support employment services that focus on connecting participants with disabilities with employers;
- Recognition awards and/or a local campaign that encourages employers who hire participants with disabilities;
- Offer incentives to Physicians to accept OW/ODSP clients;
- Software for clients/computer-self employment/virtual employment;
- Faster turn around time for ODSP eligibility decisions/simplify process to apply for ODSP benefits;
- Integrate service delivery between OW and ODSP to streamline service delivery (ex. Discretionary requests for ODSP processed by OW, Funeral benefits for ODSP clients processed by OW, Participation Agreements/Employment Related Expenses for non-disabled spouses and dependent adults processed by OW);
- Further explain recently released accessibility legislation (AODA) to reduce the fear of financial hardship for employers who will have to come into compliance by 2012;

Community Partners

- OW should have persons on staff who are comfortable working with clients with special needs and who know the community resources and has set up direct links with the community partners;

Client Responses

- Ask participants more specific questions to enable individuals to self-identify to assist with accommodation issues;
- Assessment tool for Case Managers that assists with finding the client's strengths and weaknesses; determine what their capabilities are;
- Database of clients who have disabilities resumes so employers can access when they are seeking someone for employment/ Database of employers who would be willing to hire persons with disabilities, those clients can contact when seeking employment;
- Give them better training programs/computer training that will help;
- Grants for employers to alter workplace accommodations at no cost to themselves;
- Have a physician that would work with Ontario Works to assist participants;
- Incentives for volunteer work;
- Liaison worker to connect those with disabilities to employers that would be willing to hire;
- More flexibility and collaboration for service to accommodate: Para bus must be booked 48 hours in advance; Difficult for those who need this service to get to a last minute job interview or shift at work;
- Not enough doctors to complete medical forms;
- Reduce application time for ODSP and improve to provide ease of application;

- Show employers what limitations the disabled have and see if they can fit them in somewhere. Let's see what special quality they still have left as a human being;
- Work from home opportunities: Self-employment; Virtual assistant; would open more doors;

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

A) *How should social assistance rates be determined?*

Staff Responses

- Discrepancy between ODSP and OW social assistance rates not equitable;
- Shelter benefit rates need to be calculated regionally by geographic area and not provincially;
- Responsive system that can address changes in local housing market;
- Social assistance rates should be based on low income cut off levels established in the various regions to reflect differences in the cost of living;
- Looking at realistic poverty lines;
- The Northern allowance should be moved more South; ex. NB get northern travel grants but not northern allowance;
- Regulate the amount of rent a landlord can charge;
- Can utility costs be increased for northern communities as they clearly spend more in this area (ex. Between NB and Windsor);
- Earnings exemptions should be in the first 6 months (give a boost) and no asset limits;
- If we issue enough to cover rent we avoid crisis and paying arrears-they avoid eviction;
- Add home insurance benefit (mandatory);
- Per diems are different and should be standardized-increased, ex PNA, Emergency and Hostels. How are they calculated?;

Community Partners

- Adjusted to local cost of living factors such as housing, food basket, etc.;
- Benefits in both OW and ODSP are too low to achieve the outcomes the Social Assistance Review Commission seeks to achieve;
- Benefits need to reflect the actual cost of basic living expenses in each locale, and need to be at a level that keeps people out of poverty;
- The division of low income individuals and families into those on social assistance and those not causes problems that are difficult to resolve. Ideally, every Ontarian would be considered equally;
- Strong consideration should be given to a guaranteed annual income model that is administered through the income tax system. The potential for vulnerable people to be put into hardship if there are changes in their financial situations between tax filing times should be mitigated by incorporating in-term eligibility adjustments similar to ones available in Ontario's income-based child care fee subsidy system;

Client Responses

- 50 percent earnings exemption could start right away, rather than after 3 consecutive months: Build clients up right at first rather than break them down and then re-build;
- A basic set amount with rates increased for those participating in upgrading, training, etc.;
- Base living costs (rent/utilities) plus basic amounts for each adult, plus basic amounts for each child, plus food allowance per person, plus special needs, plus educational/employment needs (as required), plus start-up/emergency amounts (as deemed required), plus medical needs (as required) currently as an applicant with three dependents. After I pay rent, electricity, gas, and basic telephone/internet (no cable/satellite television, cell phone or other monthly "luxury costs). I am left with about \$250 to feed, cloth (school uniforms), and transport a family of four over a 30 day period;

- Based on costs more than caps: Increase Basic Needs (cost of food on rise); Phone is a necessity (i.e. jobs, emergencies, with kids, etc.);
- Based on Minimum Wage (and go up, as it does);
- Based on Municipality rent, cost of food, cost of utilities, special requirements, basic needs funding to go up;
- For married couples, with no children at home, they should have something else in the middle of the month (no child tax benefit to supplement shortages) coming in to supplement the small amount that is given to them at the beginning of the month;
- By inflation rates;
- Consider individual circumstances at the moment: Flexibility with emergency funds; give a whole month worth of benefits not just 16 days;
- DEFINITELY -on the cost of living. Each area of the province HAS to be examined to determine cost of living in a specific area. I receive \$562.40/month. I consider myself to be extremely lucky to have rent (all inclusive including cable, telephone, and internet service) at just \$500.00/month. This only leaves me with \$62.40/month for food, toilet paper, tooth paste, etc. This just doesn't work even with the food banks and the soup kitchen. Keep in mind, I live in an unfinished basement (no walls or ceiling; no private bathroom) - just one big unfinished room. I have even seen some places offered by Ontario Housing and the ones I saw should be ordered demolished by the Board of Health;
- Fire Insurance and phone covered under Basic Benefits;
- Not enough doctors to complete medical forms;
- Increase shelter rates, so that you do not dig into your food allowance;
- Max on special diet allowance should be removed: if medical documents stating special diet is provided and client is entitled to \$300.00 more a month, why is it maxed at \$250.00 month?;
- Northern and rural considerations;
- ODSP and OW should have same rates;
- Provide discretion to local service delivery agent/Worker to determine who knows the needs of the local area.
- Rates non comparable to 1998 after Mike Harris cut 25 percent, however, cost of living has increased;
- Take into consideration age and gender of dependents on BU: Costs increase as get older; Females require additional supplies (female hygiene products and undergarments);

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

Staff Responses

- Tax based Provincial drug benefits;
- Change earnings exemption model to include gradual reductions. After 6 months they lose 25%, 50%, etc.;
- Earnings exemptions should be in the first 6 months (give a boost) and no asset limits;
- Increase benefits available through EEHB/EHB. This may help participants who are afraid to exit social assistance because of high prescription drug costs etc.;
- Guaranteed minimum income approach that is administered through CRA. There is no need to identify people who are in need of a subsidy to remain out of poverty and stigmatize them by pushing them below that line;
- Increase minimum wage;
- More affordable housing supplements;
- Eliminate EI AOBs/all assignments, taking their money and putting them back in hardship;
- Can small businesses have the options to give employees benefits at a low cost or give them tax breaks for same?;

Community Partners

- Annual Guaranteed Income;

- Clients should be better off if they are working including access to benefits comparable to those on OW;
- The new social assistance system should be positive, empowering, enabling, and use benefits in a way that gives people an incentive to engage and participate actively with the program;

Client Responses

- In my experience, most workers seem to truly want to help their clients. In most cases, extending benefits and supplements to their full extent where possible to give that extra boost that would often be the factor in succeeding to place a client in a position to leave OW assistance permanently. I think that theirs is a difficult thankless job, and they deserve some recognition and reward for their efforts. It would also be beneficial to them to allow a small annual fund per social worker to be available for exceptional circumstances, which they could apply to their clients at their discretion to facilitate such efforts;

C) 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?

Staff Responses

- Increase special diet funding;
- Base benefits on the needs surrounding the disability (ex. Depends, ensure) for those on assistance and off (tax based);
- Continue with rent and energy supplements as well as property tax credits for homeowners;
- Drug/dental/vision benefits for low income families;
- Private childcare costs when unable to access licensed care due to hours of work;

Community Partners

- Universal Food in the Budget amount to every recipient;
- Benefits available to low income families that match those of current social assistance recipients;

Client Responses

- 24 hour child care;
- A benefit would be to give a grant of some sort to take a course for a truck license & then pay it off when employed by garnishing part of their wages!;
- All drugs that certified medical doctors write prescriptions for should be covered. Again, if you don't need this drug, why would a doctor write the prescription?;
- Better access to YMCA. People on OW should be given membership cards. Would be healthy and social and would help with networking;
- Increase coverage for chiropractic care and physiotherapy;
- Dental/vision benefits: Better coverage for adults;
- Dentures should be covered under Dental (without healthy teeth, you cannot work);
- The cost of drug and alcohol programs for non recipients;
- Drug coverage for some over the counter drugs: Reactive for allergies (very expensive); Lactaid capsules; and Antacids;
- EHB for those receiving OSAP;
- Food allowance in the middle of the month it just would have to be about \$200.00 it would give them some extra cash and it would take the pressure off the food bank and give them some more self-respect because they could provide for their family;

- Funds for pets: Gifts cards to pet store for food and grooming; Medical insurance to cover vet bills; and Pets should be considered as like family;
- Giving incentives after graduating from a program (e.g. gas cards, food, WalMart);
- I think there are too many benefits for families and not enough for individuals. Individuals are always left behind;
- Dental benefits and a dentist willing to accept OW clients;
- Provincial Drug and dental benefits based on taxes;
- Sick time wage subsidy for crisis or medical issues – preventative;

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

Staff Responses

- Review asset exemptions as some assets are an investment for the future and should not affect initial eligibility;
- Can have some assets on ODSP and not on OW (more equal asset limits between ODSP and OW);
- 77.8% of staff responses say yes changes in asset limits/exemptions should be changed, 22.2% said no;

Community Partners

- Yes

Client Responses

- All RRSPs should be exempt: Create future crisis; Inability to save for retirement, all should have opportunity to save for retirement;
- Be able to have Life Insurance;
- Be able to save money;
- Establish "wiggle room" for bank account Exempt life insurance: Cash surrender value (whole policy);
- People should be allowed to save for a rainy day;
- Make the limit more than your cheque to be saved in the bank;
- Match asset limits at ODSP;
- Not have to dispose of assets to qualify;
- OW should give at least a one month grace period when looking at assets when they start a job;
- Personal asset limits should be higher, and asset exemptions should be less if persons are willing and able to work to get off OW;
- Saving accounts should be exempt: Retroactive CTC in lump sum put in bank account creates person to be ineligible for assistance but if received monthly its exempt; Sign declaration/ affidavit that funds in savings account are being saved for better housing, education, or put towards debt should be exempt;
- Should be able to have money in the bank for emergencies;
- The cost of automobiles has drastically increased in the past few years, and the allowable exemption should be reviewed and adjusted;

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

Staff Responses

- Combining OW and ODSP-specialized benefits, case by case, disability by disability;
- ODSP short term disabilities-different regulations and fewer hoops. (ex: cancer);
- Must meet the requirements under the Ontarians with Disabilities Accessibility Act;
- All ODSP Benefits including discretionary benefits should be delivered by one office;

- Should be based on established guaranteed minimum incomes for each region and delivered through CRA;

Community Partners

- Each client should have a Transition to Work Plan, based on their strengths and needs;

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

A) *Are the rules meeting their objectives? Are there rules that are not working? What changes do you suggest?*

Staff Responses

- 33.3% of staff surveyed state that the rules are meeting their objectives 66.7% said NO;
- 71.4% of staff surveyed state that there are rules that are not working 28.6%- NO ;
- There should not be a 3 month waiting period to qualify for benefits such as the Full Time Employment Benefit;
- Access to Emergency assistance should not be limited to once every 6 months/should be able to issue more than 16 days of emergency assistance, recommend full month;
- Applicants applying for emergency assistance should not have access available credit to get help;
- Why is there a 3 month waiting period to qualify for earnings exemptions? This rule not only serves to disqualify many applicants but also serves as a disincentive to gaining employment in the first 3 months while in receipt of social assistance;
- Current legislation does not meet the needs of the working poor who don't quite meet the eligibility criteria for Ontario Works. This target group often does not have access to any benefit plans etc...and therefore have to go without proper nutrition, medication etc.;
- No prevention for dental for adults, we action after damage already created, usually more expensive to treat;
- Circumstances are not met when each community requires different things;
- We need prevention- preventative measure rather than be reactive (ex: evictions and disconnection notices);
- Should not look at ongoing earnings for the reporting period at the time of application to determine initial eligibility;
- Eliminate the existing system and replace it with a guaranteed minimum income administered through CRA;
- Changes needed with respect to sole support parents qualifying to be deferred until their children are school age. This is a deterrent to their future success and a disservice;
- Have to wait to end of month to remove a member of BU and add to other BU. Can not remove mid month=hardship and/or O/P;
- Reporting periods different for OW and ODSP-confusing;
- Temp Care legislation/restrictions and rates do not work;
- Eligibility determination too complicated. Need to simplify process;
- Administratively difficult to do AOB'S and ineffective for clients= hardship;
- Asset exemption for ODSP applications, if not eligible for ODSP O/P is created = not productive;
- Non compliance ineffective;
- Fewer rules/questions will leave more time for human relationships;
- Not enough positive incentives to encourage participation;
- Discretionary benefits vary by area, ex: dental and vision=inequality;
- ODSP and OW are different but should be the same. There should not be deserving and undeserving poor;
- Under 18 criteria, special circumstances are seen different in different districts and by different workers;
- Too much information for client, especially at application time;
- File retention period does not work, what if O/P is now being recovered in other municipality;
- Lack of Kinship services through CAS impact OW program through Temp Care;
- Immigration should provide benefits to immigrants;

Community Partners

- The participants agreed that Ontario's social assistance system needs an overhaul. If the necessary transformations are to be successful the entire framework of legislation, services, programs and people that impact on social assistance recipients needs review and re-design as well;

- By focusing only on social assistance legislation and policy, the existing silos remain intact, and people in receipt of social assistance remain marginalized in a class apart from the rest of the population;
- Most of the current focus is on providing financial benefits, when most social assistance clients need support in other forms as well;
- There should be recognition of the value of people in need helping each other, and resources provided to support initiatives to establish effective networks; e.g., peer support networks have proven effective in other jurisdictions (California, for example);
- Both OW and ODSP have too many rules to be administered easily, and inconsistencies in service delivery are common. Service delivery agents constantly need to train case work staff, and are challenged to maintain service standards when there is a lot of staff turnover;
- Ontario's child care fee subsidy system became much easier to administer when eligibility moved to income-based criteria; participants felt that a similar approach should be applied to determining social assistance eligibility;

Client Responses

- Increase the allowances available to individuals who want to start a small business. When a Business Centre says it is a viable plan, more than \$250.00 should be available as start up costs;
- Offer workshops for dependent children on Ontario Works (Grades 7 and up) to start educating at a young age so they don't become dependent on OW when they are adults;
- Why deduct dollar for dollar? This is like EI rules, but OW is not under same umbrella as EI;
- Call in or do income reporting on-line/ Electronic OW stubs;
- Change the Form Letters to be "reader friendly" and not worded as to suggest possible fraud!;
- More time for Case Managers to have for clients, smaller case loads - need quality, not quantity. Teachers only have so many kids. Case Managers need more supports a better team;
- We live below the poverty line and suffer a lot from it every time you add more money to our checks – it is pennies. I heard that in the 1990's, welfare checks were much higher by \$200.00?;

B) How can special purpose benefits be delivered more efficiently and equitably? Should some be delivered outside the social assistance system?

Staff Responses

- One stop shop-more productive. No need for multiple hand offs (ex: ACSD given by ODSP or temp care by OW);
- Funeral and dental as a Ministry of Health benefit;
- Discretionary benefits should be administered by ODSP office for ODSP clients;
- Why not have EHB and EEHB issued outside of OW via tax base?;
- Can OSAP not be continued over the summer? Perhaps they can do Co-op over the summer;
- Guaranteed minimum incomes administered by CRA would alleviate pressures on social assistance offices to deliver emergency assistance to citizens who fall through the gaps;
- One consistent method to determine eligibility for special purpose benefits across the province. There should not be inequities from region to region. Clients should have access to the same benefits regardless of where they reside in the province of Ontario;
- 37.5% of staff surveyed believe that some special purpose benefits should be delivered outside of the social assistance system 62.5% said NO;

Community Partners

- ODSP clients are eligible for \$100 additional each month if they land a job, but OW clients are not;
- Social assistance provides minimal levels of benefits and compared to ODSP, Ontario Works is the most limited; Consideration should be given to increasing what is available to help people achieve self-sufficiency and creating a more level playing field;
- Correctional Services pays released individuals a living allowance if they go into an accredited school program, and their OSAP loan has only to cover tuition and books;
- ODSP clients are not provided the same incentives or encouragement to access employment supports as are OW clients, thus people who could earn all or part of their living remain more dependent on social assistance than they need to be;

Issue 4: Viable over the long term

A) *What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?*

Staff Responses

- Immediate short term financial relief;
- Opportunity for continuing education and job readiness training;
- Self Sufficiency and Employment;
- Stable Health;
- Increase in social inclusion;
- Adequately meet the needs of basic needs and shelter;

Community Partners

- People with sustainable incomes, and sufficient benefits for health, eye glasses, teeth, etc.;
- Successful transition to employment whether part time or full time;

B) *What additional data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of social assistance benefits and services? For example, should ethno cultural and racial data be collected in order to evaluate and improve supports for people from racialized and ethno cultural communities?*

Staff responses

- Understand generational connection –recidivism;
- Data on the overall health of social assistance recipients;
- Understanding what issues they may face and what resources they may have for them;
- Differences in rural versus urban experiences and impacts while in receipt of social assistance;
- Data on how the levels of usage of charitable organizations, grassroots agencies, shelters etc.... for those in receipt of social assistance;
- Data on the relationship between social assistance and poverty reduction;
- Data on how the social assistance system does not meet the needs of the working poor who do not meet the eligibility criteria for social assistance;
- Additional data on demographic information;

Community Partners

- Yes, ethno cultural and racial data be collected in order to evaluate and improve supports for people from racialized and ethno cultural communities;
- TV Ontario used the figure of \$2,900 in extra costs per household in Ontario because of the social assistance responsibility. This might be measured regularly to assess the effect of future improvements. At same time, the "social determinants of health," the Quality of Life matrix, etc, - all measured for the social assistance population might offer measurable outcomes;

C) *What can the provincial government and municipalities do to better integrate services?*

Staff Responses

- Amalgamate OW and ODSP-too many cross program issues, via SDMT and otherwise;
- Education-overlapping programs;

- More information sharing;
- Duplication of services should be reviewed and service providers need to be better connected so that everyone knows “who does what”;
- Integration of social assistance with the Homelessness and Best Start implementation plans;
- Work towards a “one stop shopping” service delivery model;
- Consolidate all income support services into the income tax system. Consolidate all training/education and employment readiness programs under a single ministry. Develop a no wrong door approach at the local level with the municipalities responsible to ensure inter-sectorial collaboration so that services behave like a single “virtual agency”;
- Increased collaboration and joint planning between OW and ODSP and other Ministries such as the Ministry of Education/Health;
- Shift the focus to prevention through system integration so that fewer numbers in the future will require social assistance programs

Community Partners

- The feds have to be involved in this, especially as transfer payments relate to housing, health, and education. A shared focus on a "poverty free" population, the attributes that make up "healthy communities," intentional, coordinated partnerships. I.e. if there was a Youth Commissioner for the province, or the city, it would bring about a larger awareness of what's effective, what's needed, what is counter-productive;
- Social Assistance/OW should be more involved in the Homelessness and Best Start implementation plans. They should also take positions on boards such as Chamber of Commerce, NBIFC etc.;
- Social assistance is designed and delivered as a separate system, which creates a systemic barrier that makes transition “off the system” more difficult the longer one is reliant upon it;
- Ideally, all forms of assistance would be delivered through one mechanism so that everyone’s needs are assessed on the same basis and met through one set of policies;
- In our communities an effective network of partnerships has been formed to respond to the needs of social assistance recipients beyond what is available through OW and ODSP. Agencies strive to deliver these services seamlessly in order to stabilize households so that people can work on improving their situation in life; however, coordinating multi-agency service plans is extremely challenging and prone to breakdowns;
- Some municipalities in Ontario, such as Sault Ste, Marie, and whole regions in the Province of Québec have established central service coordination functions so that social assistance and ancillary supports can work together more effectively;
- Delivering well-coordinated services demands a high level of communication among agencies and a free flow of client service-related information, What is needed are structures and systems that align more closely with a collaborative community “No Wrong Door” service delivery model;
- The Children’s Health Information Network is an example of an information sharing resource that promotes both client engagement and service integration. A similar resource would be a great asset for services for people on social assistance;
- It is difficult to maintain a system of silos that is fractured. Income supports and employment services from all levels of government should be Integrated;
- The transfer payment system currently in place has a “back and forth” pattern that gives the province some flexibility, but the funding is always gone at the end of the year;
- There should be an overarching, comprehensive and holistic structural plan that allows social development strategies to unfold across fiscal year and ministerial “boundaries”;

Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

A) What should Ontario do to address the short-term income support and training needs of people who are not eligible for EI?

Staff Responses

- Change the rules of EI-# of hours required to get training- perhaps less hours could qualify you for training or reduced benefits;
- Change rules of OSAP so that it is more accessible and has fewer restrictions on eligibility such as ownership of a vehicle and negotiate more flexible repayment plans that in accordance to the former students salary/wage after graduation/longer deferral periods/increase amounts of loan forgiveness etc.;
- Increase funding to First Nations to allow more Aboriginal students to participate in training/post secondary programs without needing to rely on social assistance;
- OSAP for tuition, basic living by OW;
- Support so clients can go to school (post-secondary) so they can exit OW in the future;
- ODSP/OW legislation changes on the treatment of OSAP;
- Inequity in Funding across bands and provinces;

Client Responses

- Provide "Back to Work" basic courses such as computer training /career counseling/job coaching;
- Reduce limitations on "Second Career" opportunities;
- Any program that EI is offering should be offered to people on social assistance;
- Have Apprenticeship Programs more available for other people (rather than just for EI clients);
- Inform public what is available;
- More education regarding programs available;
- Open doors for those who have never qualified for EIB: Due to lack of hours; or self employed persons;
- Remove age restrictions for programs;

Community Partners

- Aggressive advocacy for fair and equitable EI benefits relative to national amounts;
- The transfer payment system currently in place has a "back and forth" pattern that gives the province some flexibility, but the funding is always gone at the end of the year;
- There should be an overarching, comprehensive and holistic structural plan that allows social development strategies to unfold across fiscal year and ministerial "boundaries";
- Regulatory frameworks and service delivery models for social assistance should be harmonized across federal and provincial ministries, programs and jurisdictions;
- There are things that the current system does that service consumers talk positively about. These include the quick turnaround time for requests for assistance and benefits, and the transformation of child care fee subsidy from an asset-based to an income-based eligibility test;
- The Community Conversation focused less on the employment side of social assistance programming than on the income side. Participants attributed this to several factors including:
 - the financial benefit structure and rates create issues that consume the majority of client and service provider attention; and
 - relatively few people are connected to employment through social assistance programs;

B) What should the interaction be between income-tested benefits, such as WITB and child benefits, and the social assistance system?

Staff Responses

- Income tax tested programs, can drug/dental benefits etc....be attached? Ex. Citizens receiving CPP Benefits only have no access to drug/dental benefits however ODSP recipients do;
- Interaction with EI should be faster, perhaps if could fast track clients so their reliance on assistance is a shorter duration. Lump sum reimbursements to OW via AOB'S may result in hardship for the clients due to the different payment period;
- Delays in processing CCTB applications result in lump sum CCTB reimbursements which can create hardship for clients in the month that the lump sum interfaces;
- Joint protocols with Federal agencies should be established and guidelines should be consistent;
- FRO office is slow processing and is confusing. Delays in processing terminations of assignments create hardship for clients;

Community Partners

- Clear and easy to understand and navigate;

C) Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance?

Staff Responses

- More collaboration with Immigration Canada;
- Sponsor's debt should be forgiven as not to hold debt against client;
- Better interaction with CPP (Death Benefits);
- Joint protocols with federal agencies across the province;
- Improve the CRA Refund Set Off interfaces ;
- The federal government needs to re-affirm its role in the delivery of social housing by committing to a National Housing Strategy in partnership with the Provinces;
- EI, CPP, WSIB should be tape matched in the same way as the Child Tax Benefit;
- Past federal governments have toyed with the notion of a guaranteed minimum income. This is a good time for provincial governments to revisit this concept with a willingness to change provincial legislation and structures to support a transition in partnership with Ottawa;
- Increased core funding to programs that address poverty and social assistance programs. Funding should not be based on employment targets with possible claw backs when targets are not achieved;
- Recognition of remote/rural/northern issues in service delivery and the increased costs associated with delivering services in these areas;

Community Partners

- When it comes to urban native residents, I believe there is a huge gap between the Federal-Provincial authorities and the municipalities - it is in terms of both governance and political will. I feel better coordination in terms of "soft services," preventative care; healthy neighborhoods would have a positive effect on all who are on social assistance or the working poor.