

2019 - 2023

Ontario Works Caseload Profile

June 2023

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Introduction

The Ontario Works Caseload Profile provides an analysis of how local Ontario Works caseloads have changed over time, by focusing on caseload demographics over the last five years.

This report offers a point-in-time look at the demographic characteristics of the Ontario Works caseload for Wellington County and Guelph, capturing the caseload both prior to the pandemic, during the peak of the public health emergency, and in the current time period following the emergency.

The Caseload Profile provides local data for use in service planning and to support community initiatives focused on poverty reduction and low income households in the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph.

Summary of Key Trends

- The caseload continues to increase but remains below pre-pandemic levels.
- The trend of long-term reliance on Ontario Works continues, with a year-over-year increase seen in the number of households on assistance for longer than five years.
- Fewer younger people are coming onto assistance- the total number of cases with applicants under the age of 25 has shown a steady decline year-over-year.
- Exits to employment remain lower post-pandemic, but a higher percentage of Ontario Works recipients in Wellington and Guelph report income from employment compared to the province as a whole.
- With low vacancy rates and rising rents and utility costs, use of Emergency Assistance remains high to meet eviction prevention needs, in line with province-wide trends.

Data and Methodology

The data presented in this report represents a point in time, capturing all cases on the caseload as of March 31st of each year between 2019 and 2023. The data is sourced from internal reports generated by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS).

All data represents the primary applicant and their associated dependents, where applicable. The analysis in this Caseload Profile focuses on relative shares of the caseload for each demographic variable to provide an overview of caseload trends and characteristics over time.

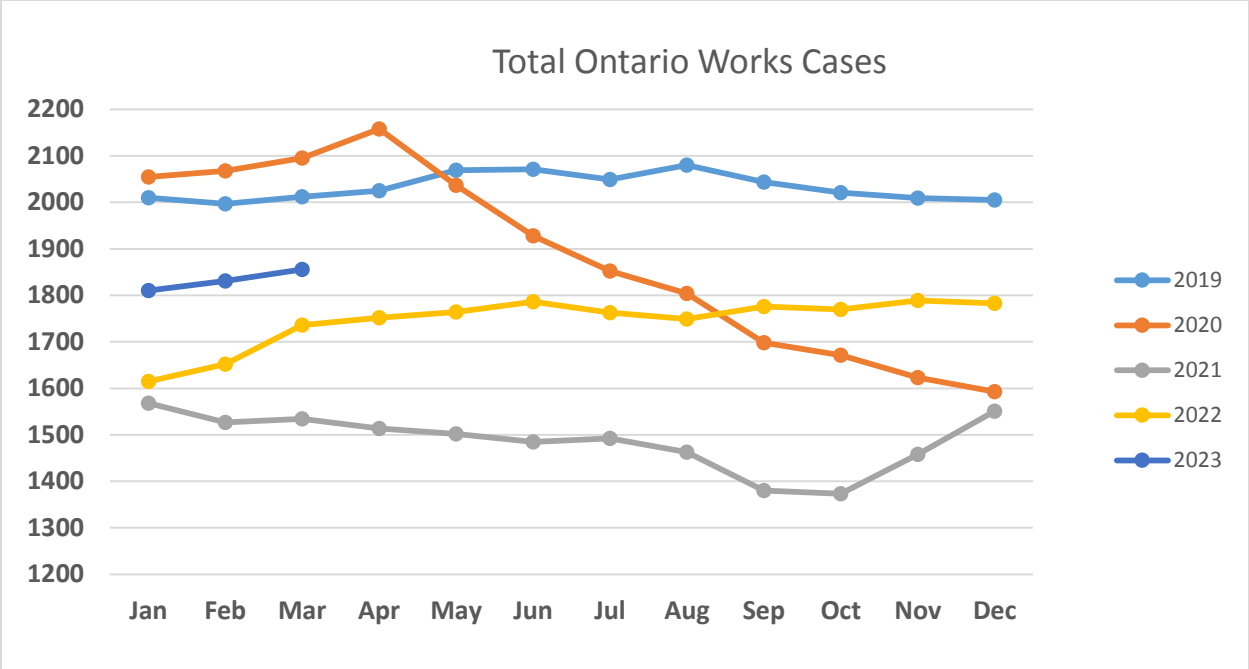
Different source reports were used in order to access all available demographic data. Due to the different methodologies used by MCCSS to compile data in each of the source reports, as well as entries with incomplete information, total caseload figures differ slightly in each source report. Details on the source reports are provided in the table below.

Source Report (Provincial Reports)	Data Used
March 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 CRS 100M Integrated Case Summary Report (Guelph and Fergus offices)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Age • Family Composition • Months on Assistance • Age of Dependent Children • Caseload Distribution
Social Assistance Performance Operations Report v5.1 March 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total Caseload • Total Beneficiaries • Percent of Caseload with Employment Earnings • Average Monthly Employment Earnings • Percent of Terminations Exiting to Employment • Total Applications for Emergency Assistance
Ontario Works Caseload at a Glance Report March 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average Time on Assistance • Total Cases with No Fixed Address

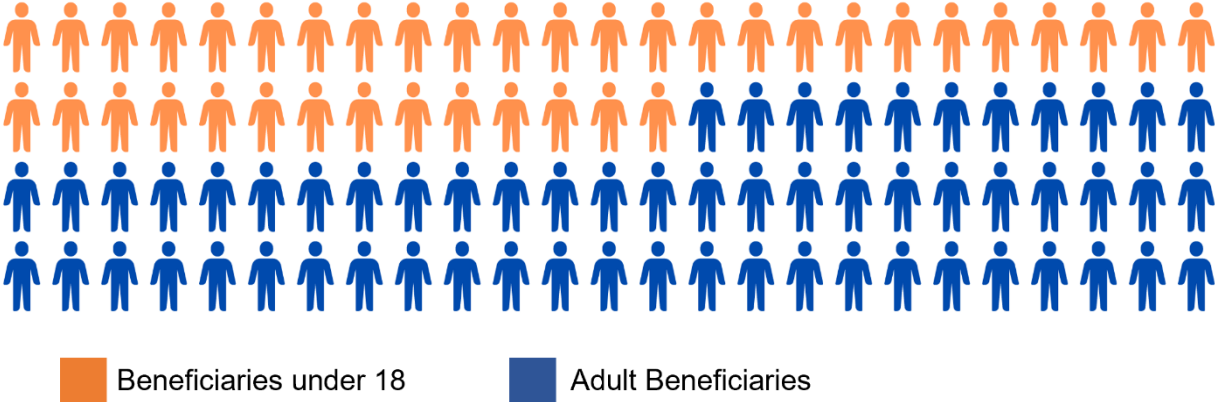
There are some discrepancies and limitations in the data sources used, particularly due to reliance on a centralized provincial system for access to local caseload data.

Total Cases and Beneficiaries

The Ontario Works division saw a surge in demand for assistance at the outset of the COVID-19 public health emergency in spring of 2020. Demand for financial assistance dropped significantly with the introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and continued to decline until October 2021, when federal benefit programmes ended. The Ontario Works caseload for the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph, while continuing to increase since late 2021, remains lower than pre-pandemic levels.

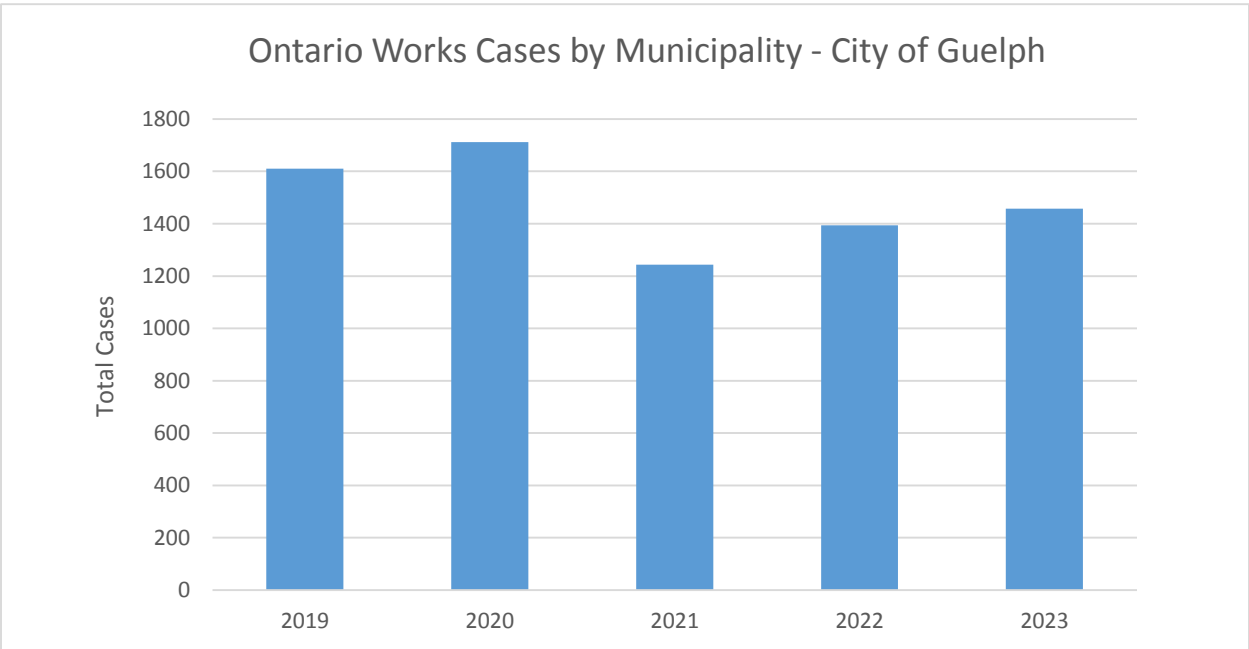
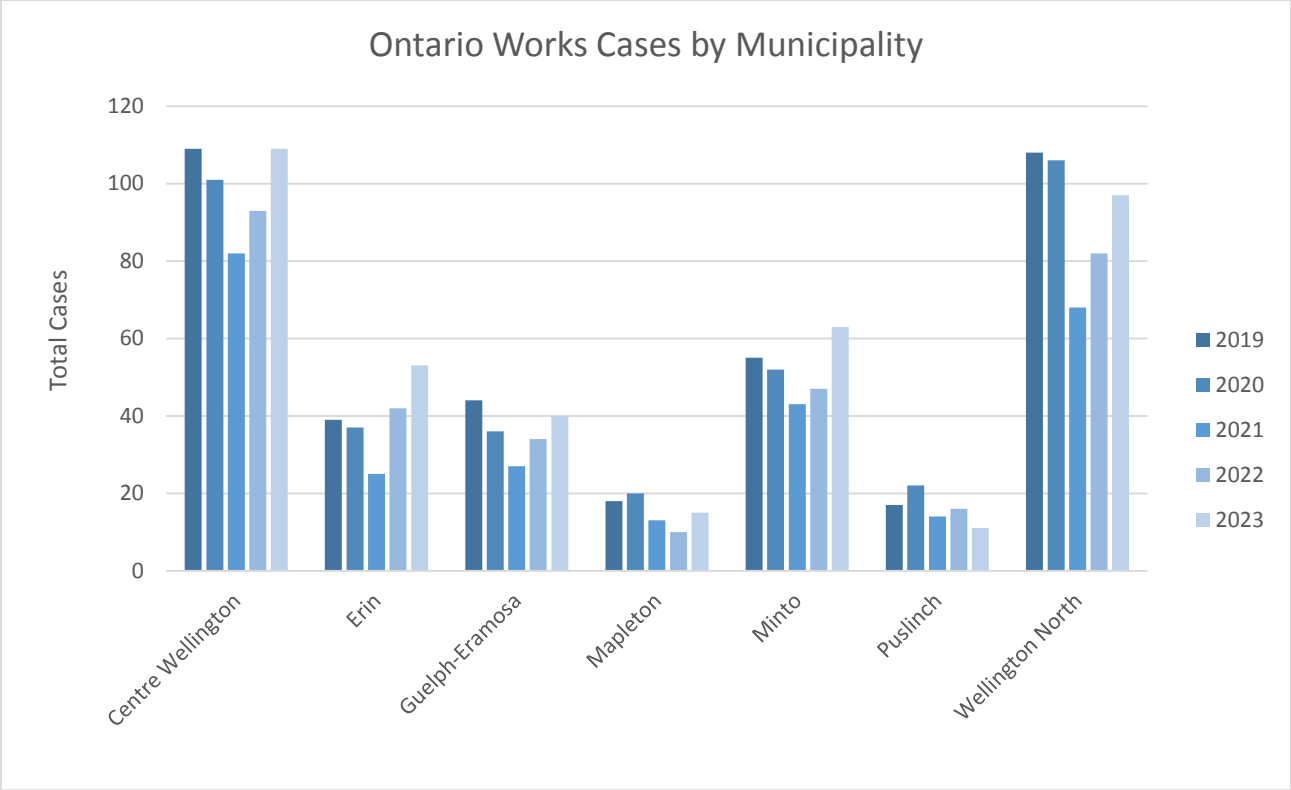


The total number of beneficiaries supported by Ontario Works remains proportional to the number of cases. Children under the age of 18 represent more than one third of all beneficiaries reliant on Ontario Works assistance (applicants, spouses and their dependents), at 39% in 2023. This percentage has remained constant with a minor +/-2% variance year-over-year.



Caseload Distribution

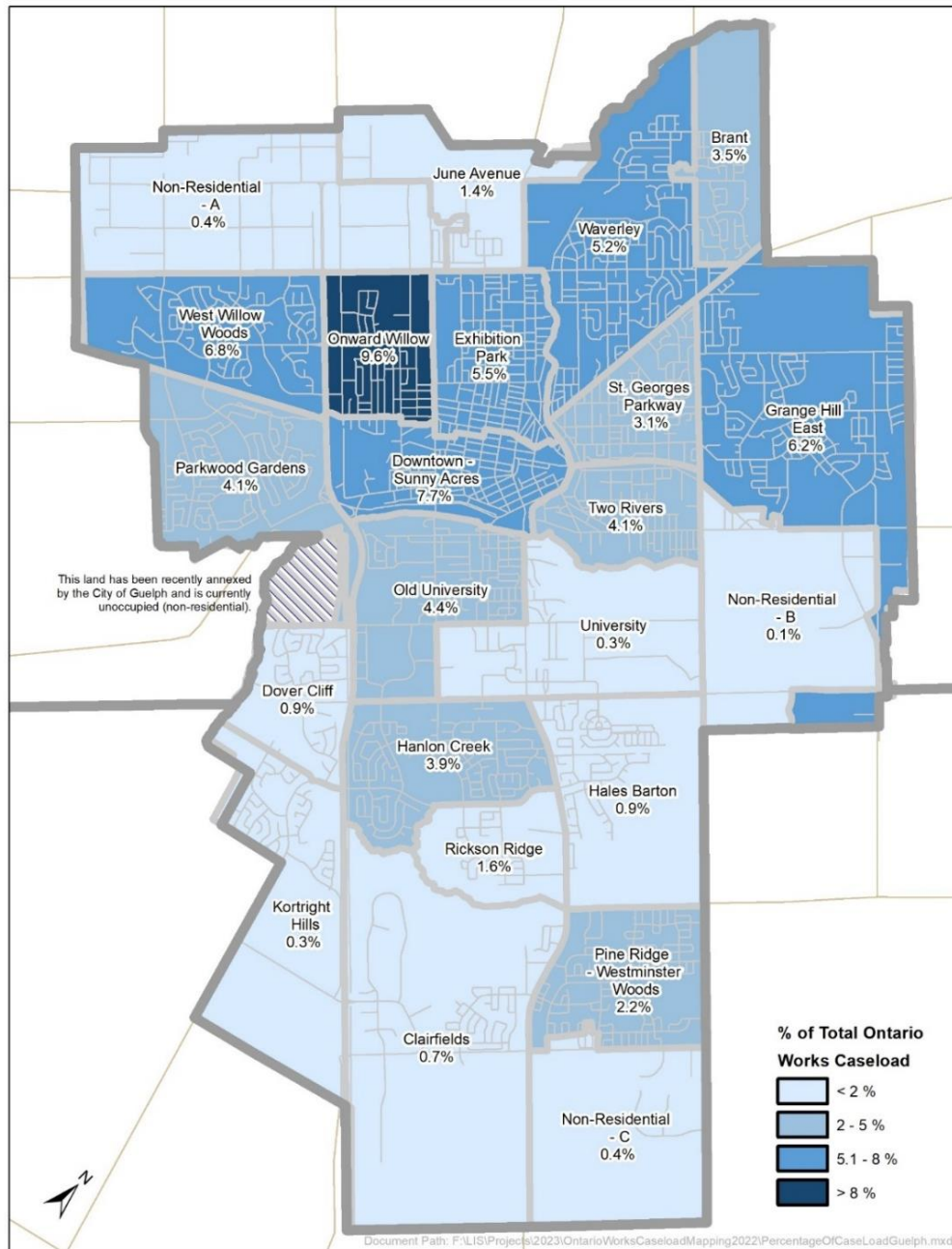
Ontario Works recipients residing in the City of Guelph account for 79% of the total caseload, with 21% distributed across the seven County of Wellington municipalities. This ratio has remained relatively consistent, with a small variance (+/- 2%) year over year.



The following maps show the caseload distribution across the 23 neighbourhoods of the City of Guelph, as defined by Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health boundaries, and the County’s seven municipalities.

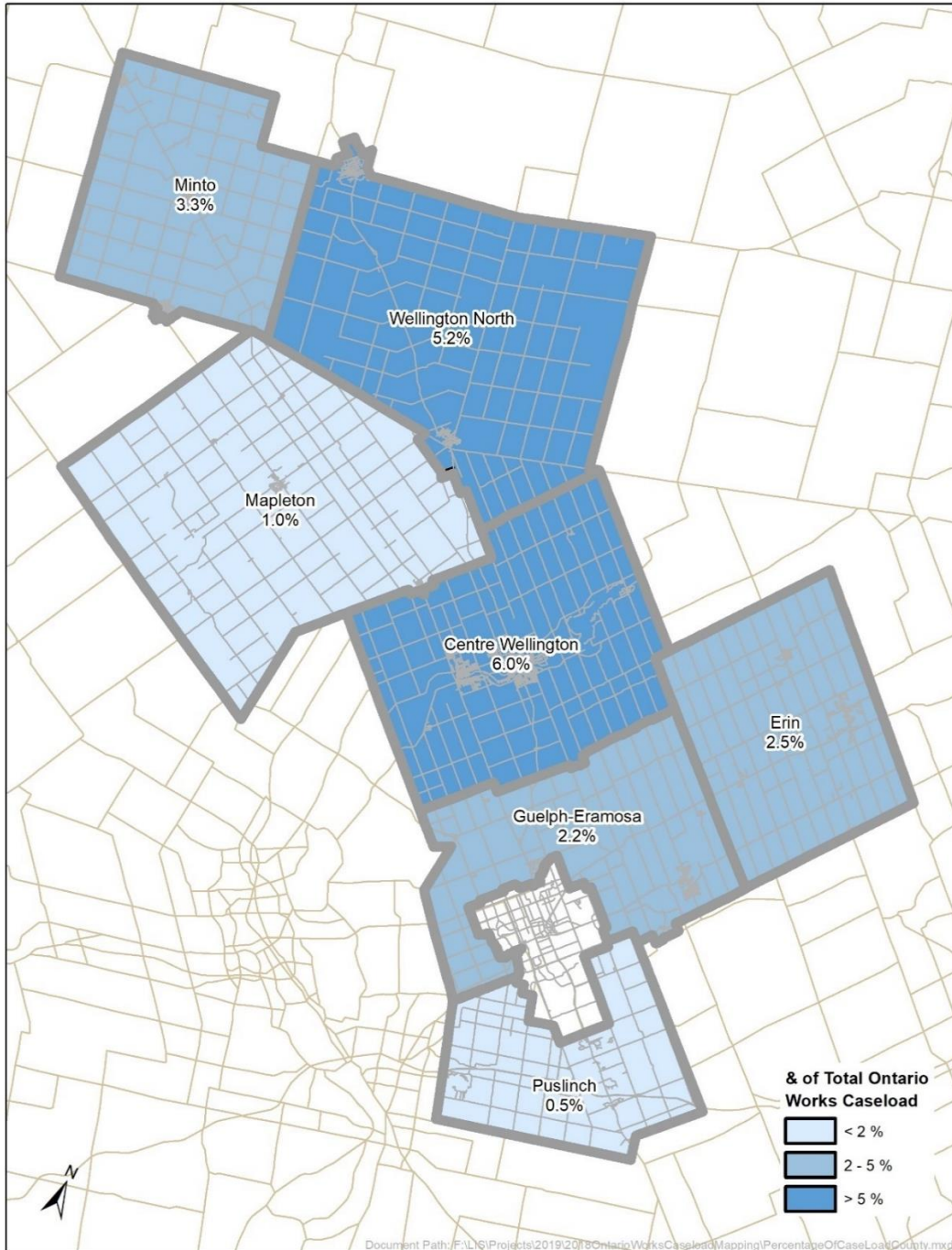
City of Guelph

The neighbourhoods with the highest proportion of the Ontario Works caseload are Onward Willow (9.7%), Downtown-Sunny Acres (7.7%) and West Willow Woods (6.8%). These three neighbourhoods have consistently had the highest number of Ontario Works beneficiaries year-over-year, with minor variance in their respective shares of the total caseload since 2018. Higher proportion of housing designated as social or affordable housing in these neighbourhoods, as well as a greater concentration of rental housing options may account in part for the higher density of Ontario Works cases in these areas.



County of Wellington

Although the total number of cases has fluctuated over time, Centre Wellington and Wellington North have consistently retained the largest shares of the Ontario Works caseload in the County. Population levels and availability of more affordable rental housing may account for these patterns.



Housing and Homelessness

The number of cases with no fixed address in March of 2023 was 108, accounting for just under 6% of the total Ontario Works caseload. Ontario Works rates have remained unchanged since 2018, when the basic rates were increased by 1.5%, representing a negligible change in income for Ontario Works recipients.

Although ODSP rates increased by 5% in the fall of 2022, the gap between social assistance rates and the poverty line is significant. A family of four receiving Ontario Works in the City of Guelph lives on an income that is equal to 30% of the income at the poverty line as defined by Statistics Canada¹. This gap, coupled with rapidly increasing average market rents in our service area is making it increasingly more difficult for individuals and families receiving Ontario Works to find and maintain affordable housing.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) estimates that the average market rent (AMR) in the Guelph service area has increased by 16.7% since 2019, with average rent (across all unit sizes) amounting to \$1,434. Local news reports suggest that local rents are much higher, with average rent for a one-bedroom unit estimated to be \$2,085.

The high cost of housing has been a subject of local and national interest, with Guelph garnering attention as the eighth most expensive place to rent in a list of 35 cities across Canada². In the current housing climate, the need for social and affordable housing stock is growing as affordable rental options become increasingly difficult to find. Locally, the number of households waiting for social housing in Wellington and Guelph rose from 1,986 in 2019 to 3,377 in 2022³.

Caseload Demographics

The following section looks at caseload demographics in five areas: gender and age of primary applicant, family composition, dependents, and length of time on assistance. These five variables are chosen based on the reliability and availability of provincially generated caseload data. The analysis in this report focuses on relative shares of the caseload for each demographic variable to provide an overview of caseload trends and characteristics over time.

¹ Statistics Canada. (2023, May 2) *Table 11-10-0066-01 Market Basket Measure (MBM) thresholds for the reference family by Market Basket Measure region, component and base year.*

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601>

² (2022, November 22). Average rental price for a one bedroom in Guelph is \$2,085. *Guelph Today.*

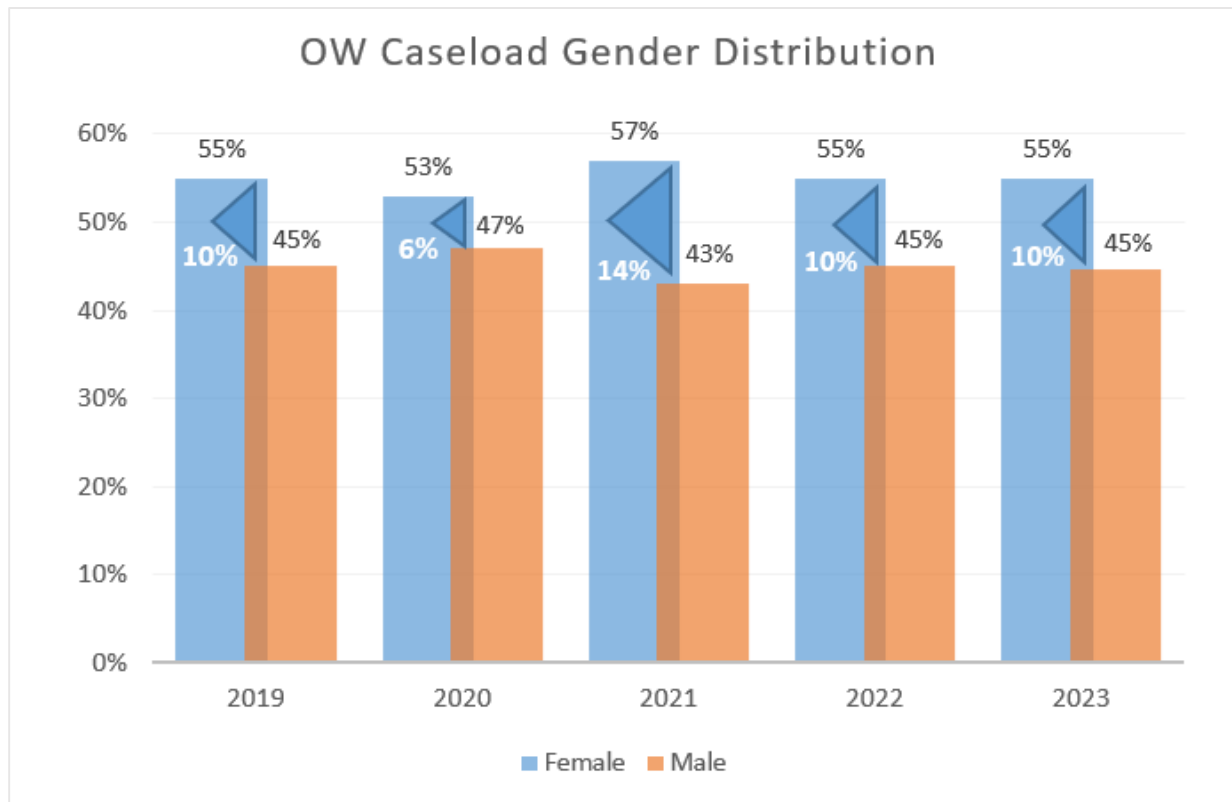
<https://www.guelphtoday.com/local-news/average-rental-price-for-a-one-bedroom-in-guelph-is-2085-6138575>

³ County of Wellington. (2023, May 10). *Committee Report HS-23-05: Overview of the Housing Services Division.*

<https://pub-wellington.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=7393>

Gender

Although there is a long-standing gender gap on the Ontario Works caseload, the gap between the number of men and women receiving Ontario Works assistance returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, remaining at 55% female and 45% male in 2023.

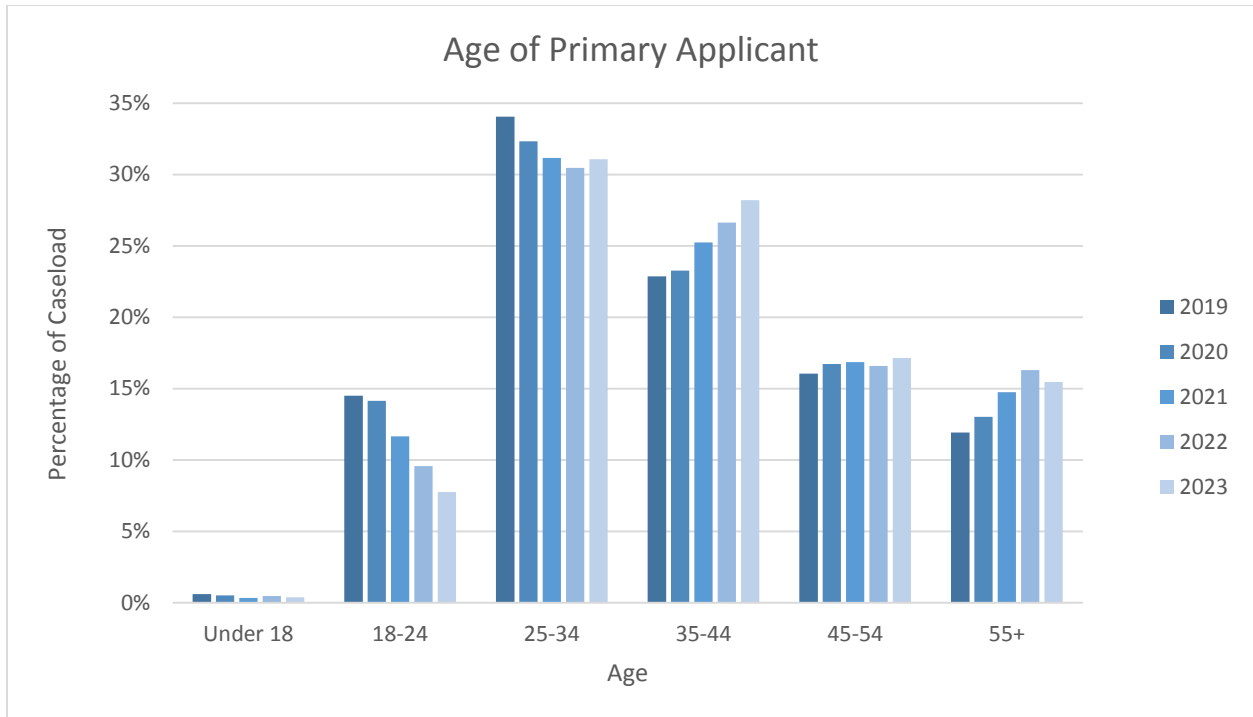


Age

Those aged 25-34 make up the largest age cohort on the Ontario Works caseload, representing just under one third of all Ontario Works cases, in line with caseload age distribution in previous years.

The total number of Ontario Works cases for applicants aged 34 years and under has generally decreased year over year, particularly for individuals under 25 years of age, while those aged 35 and older continue to account for an increasing share of the caseload in 2023.

Overall, age distribution continues to align with caseload demographic patterns seen in previous years.



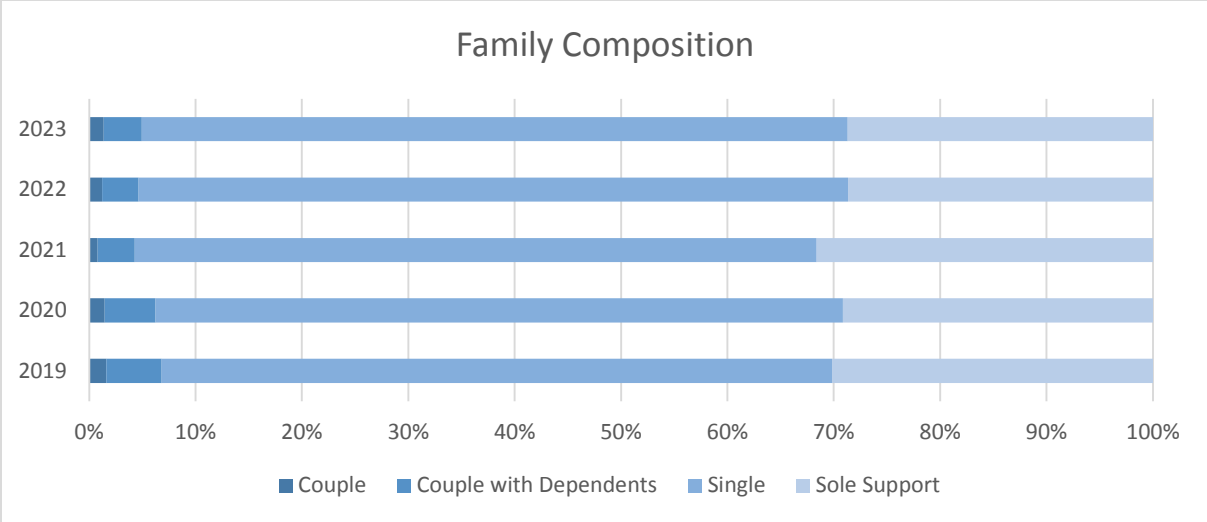
Although the percentage of primary applicants aged 55 and older dropped slightly in 2023, the proportion of the caseload in this age group has continued to steadily increase, rising to 15.5% of the caseload in 2023 from 12% in 2019. Lack of a current skill set after employment loss, and lack of re-skilling and training programmes for older workers may be barriers to exiting assistance for those aged 55 and older.

Family Composition

Single individuals continue to represent the greatest share of the Ontario Works caseload, followed by sole support parents. In 2023, these shares were as follows:

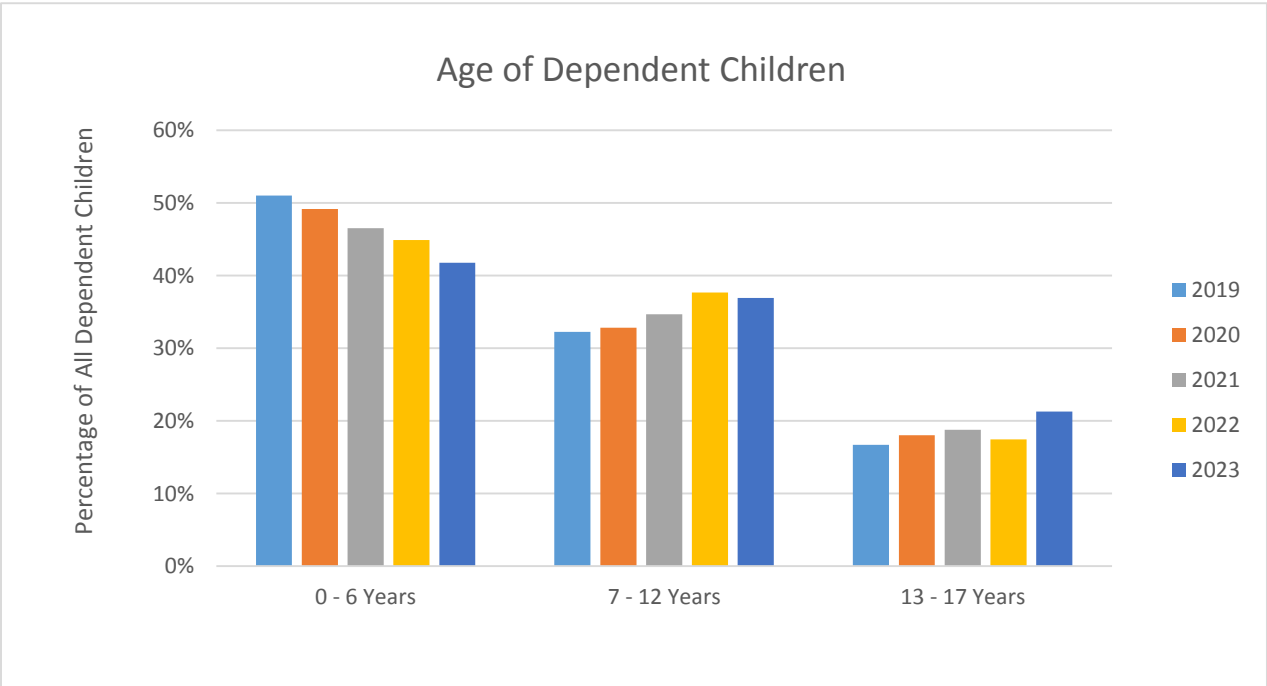
- Single- 66.4%
- Sole support parents- 28.7%
- Couples with dependents- 3.6%
- Couples- 1.4%

While there are minor variances from year to year, the relative share of the caseload for each family type has remained steady over the last five years.



Dependents

42% of dependent children on the Ontario Works caseload are between birth and six years of age. This age breakdown has remained consistent over time, although the relative share has decreased year over year, from 51% in 2019 down to 42% of all dependent children in 2022. Age distribution of dependent children on the Ontario Works caseload reflects the demands and challenges associated with caregiving in the early years, as well as Ontario Works participation requirements that enable single parents of young children to temporarily defer employment activities until children are of school age.



While the share of children under the age of 6 has gradually decreased year over year, the share of school-aged children (7-17 years old) on the Ontario Works caseload increased slightly, with the percentage of dependent children aged 7-12 rising by 5% and the percentage of dependent children 13-17 rising by 4% from 2019 to 2023.

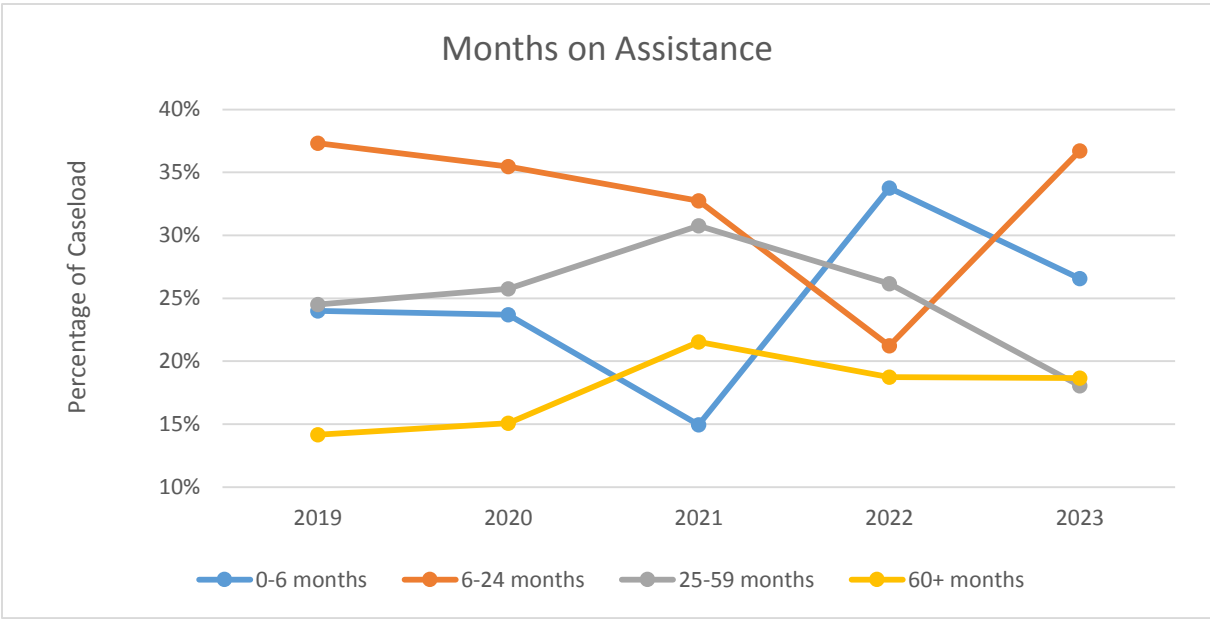
Pandemic-related school closures in Ontario from 2020 to early 2022 placed tremendous pressure on families, particularly those with school-aged children, to cope with increased caregiving responsibilities. However, age distribution of dependent children on the caseload remains largely aligned with trends seen in previous years, with children under 6 making up the largest share of dependents.

Length of Time on Assistance

Year over year changes in length of time on assistance, show the trajectory of the pandemic response and its' impacts on the Ontario Works caseload, namely the availability of emergency benefits in 2020 and 2021 for those with recent attachment to the labour market.

The large decline in cases on Ontario Works for less than six months, and a large increase in cases on assistance for longer than two years between 2020 and 2021 suggested that those with no recent employment history, and therefore no eligibility for federal recovery benefits, remained on assistance. However, the availability of these emergency federal benefits kept the inflow of new cases much lower over that time period.

The sharp increase in the share of new cases (>6 months on assistance) from 2021 to 2022 coincides with the rise in cases in fall of 2021 after federal pandemic benefit programmes ended.



Those who have come onto Ontario Works in the last 2 years now represent the highest percentage of the total caseload at 37%. Although the share of the caseload for those on assistance for longer than five

years has remained flat into 2023, the total number of cases has risen from 323 in 2022 to 344 in 2023, indicating that long-term reliance on Ontario Works continues to increase.

The total number of households reliant on Ontario Works for longer than five years has risen by nearly 21% over 2019 numbers. The average length of time households remain on assistance has risen from 29 months in 2019 to more than 32 months in 2023, but below the provincial average of 39 months. On average, sole support parents remain on assistance for the longest period of time, while couples without dependent children typically exit assistance faster than other household types.

Employment and Earnings

The Ontario Works office currently provides targeted supports to assist clients with their employment-related goals and to encourage financial independence. Social assistance recipients can access focused individual supports from their caseworker as well as a dedicated employment team to assist them with preparing for employment, access relevant training opportunities, and find work. The provision of employment services is expected to change significantly as our region transitions to a Service System Manager (SSM) model for the delivery of employment services in early 2024. As part of the Employment Services Transformation, a new service delivery model will integrate social assistance employment services and other government-funded employment services into Employment Ontario, managed by a regional SSM.

Once employment services transition to the SSM, caseworkers will no longer be able to provide existing mandatory employment related benefits to clients, but will retain some ability to issue other participation supports. The transition places an emphasis on the role of municipalities in delivering stability supports to social assistance clients to support them in stabilizing their lives, including needs assessment, warm referrals to community agencies and issuing discretionary benefits for medical needs.

While the Employment Services Transformation may impact the ability of Ontario Works staff to support clients directly with employment needs, the County of Wellington case management approach currently includes a focus on life stabilization and staff are well positioned to undertake this transition.

Percentage of Caseload with Employment Earnings

Individuals in receipt of Ontario Works assistance can earn up to \$200 a month without a reduction in their financial support. For every dollar earned above \$200, Ontario Works deducts 50 cents from every dollar of financial benefits, until the amount of deductions as a result of earnings exceeds their monthly Ontario Works entitlement.

The percentage of clients receiving Ontario Works in Wellington and Guelph who report having some employment earnings fell significantly with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic but began to recover in summer of 2020. The percentage of clients with employment earnings appears to be rising incrementally, with levels remaining considerably lower than pre-pandemic but higher than 2022 levels.

It should be noted that the local yearly average for the percentage of caseload with employment earnings continues to exceed the provincial average.

Average Monthly Percentage of Ontario Works Caseload with Employment Earnings					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (YTD)
Wellington CMSM	13.8%	9.3%	8.5%	10.0%	10.4%
Province	13.2%	8.9%	8.6%	9.3%	8.8%

Employment Earnings

Average monthly employment earnings for Ontario Works recipients with employment income have shown a steady increase since falling to a low of \$757 in 2021. While the average monthly employment earnings for OW recipients in Wellington and Guelph are below the provincial average, this is consistent with earnings patterns in previous years, including pre-pandemic.

Average Monthly Employment Earnings for Ontario Works Recipients with Employment Income					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (YTD)
Wellington CMSM	\$822	\$839	\$757	\$780	\$788
Province	\$893	\$928	\$930	\$887	\$881

Exits to Employment

Prior to the pandemic, on average, nearly a third of all local Ontario Works recipients exiting assistance did so because they secured employment or because their earnings were high enough to render them ineligible for financial assistance. This trend has been disrupted by the onset of the pandemic, with year to date exits to employment standing at just under 19% in 2023, down from a high of 30% in 2019.

Average Monthly Terminations Exiting to Employment (% of all terminations)					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (YTD)
Wellington CMSM	29.8%	23.4%	20.9%	20.3%	18.9%
Province	23.3%	22.2%	20.8%	23.1%	19.9%

Our service area consistently exceeded the provincial average in this performance indicator prior to the pandemic. Labour market conditions in Wellington-Guelph continue to show signs of a strong recovery post-pandemic, with an exceptionally low unemployment rate of 3.8% and a high labour market participation rate of 70.4% in March⁴. Local data shows that there were over 3,400 active job postings for the Guelph area in March, suggesting favourable conditions for job seekers⁵. As the caseload

⁴ Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin. (n.d.). *Local Labour Market Snapshot*. <https://www.workforceplanningboard.com/resources/resources-businesses/local-labour-market-snapshot/>

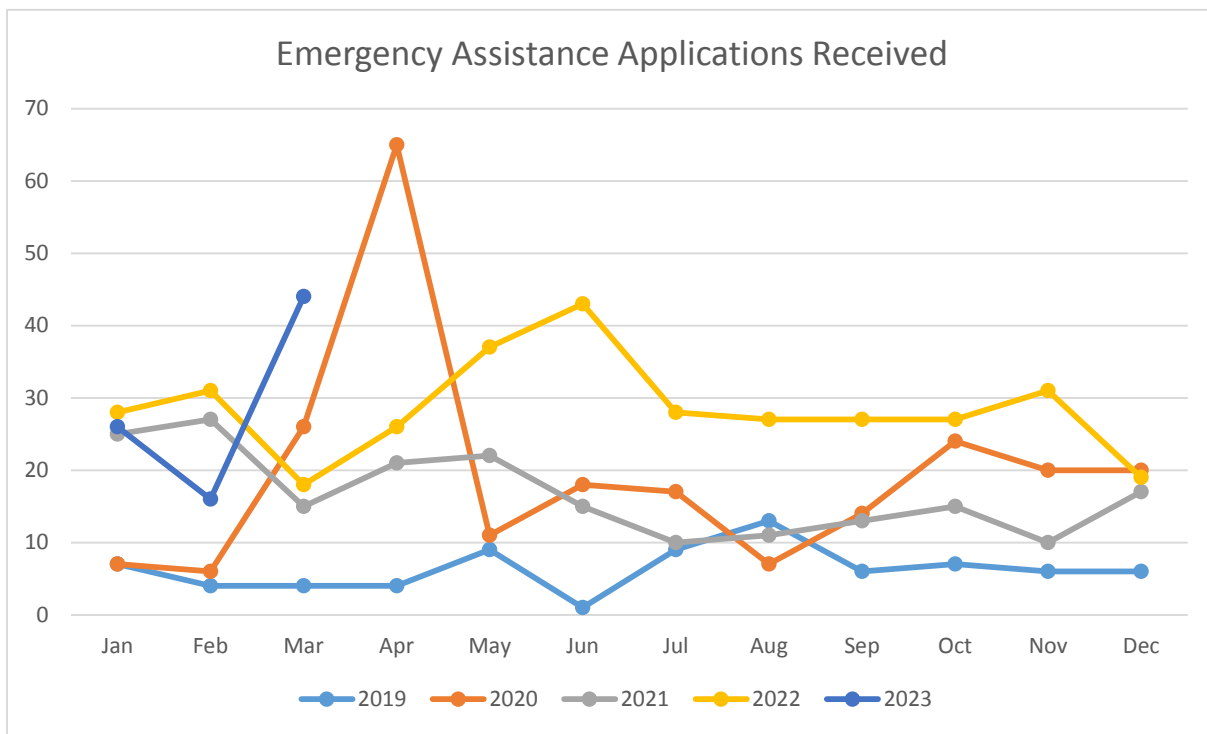
⁵ Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin. (n.d.). *Labour Market Insights Report*. FindYourJob.ca. https://www.findyourjob.ca/labour-market-insights-report/?e8_page=trends&date=2023-03&geofence-key=ontario-census-metropolitan-areas%2F35550&geofence-key-labels=Guelph®ion-type=ontario-census-metropolitan-areas

continues to increase post-pandemic, many clients remaining on assistance require additional life stability supports and assistance to become employment-ready and may not be exiting to employment at rates seen in previous years.

Emergency Assistance

Emergency financial assistance is administered by local Ontario Works offices, and is available to residents of Ontario who are in a crisis or emergency situation, and are unable to meet their immediate basic needs. Emergency assistance is distinct from ongoing Ontario Works assistance, and can be provided for up to 48 days to cover the cost of needs such as food, housing and medication. Individuals in receipt of ongoing Ontario Works or ODSP assistance are not eligible for Emergency Assistance.

The amount of Emergency Assistance provided is in line with Ontario Works rates and varies according to individual circumstances. Individuals may qualify if they are facing an emergency such as eviction, leaving an abusive relationship, or are facing financial hardship while waiting for other benefits such as Employment Insurance.



Requests for Emergency Assistance spiked in spring of 2020 and generally continue to remain higher than levels in previous years. This is largely due to the use of Emergency Assistance in conjunction with Housing Stability Programme supports to prevent eviction and keep individuals in our community from more permanent reliance on social assistance.

The Housing Stability Programme is a discretionary benefit used to prevent homelessness and keep individuals at risk of homeless to remain housed. Housing Stability Programme supports can be issued to

cover expenses such as rent deposits, rent and utility arrears and moving expenses, and to support individuals in crisis situations.

Ontario Works caseworkers work together with the Housing Stability team in Housing Services to utilize all available resources to assist individuals in the community who may need temporary support to remain housed. Use of Emergency Assistance in homelessness prevention is an example of social services integration and the efficient use of supports across programmes to meet the needs of the most vulnerable individuals in our community. With low vacancy rates, long subsidized housing waiting lists, and market rent rates that far exceed social assistance shelter coverage, use of Emergency Assistance is expected to remain higher than pre-pandemic to meet these needs, a trend reflected province-wide.

Looking Ahead

Ontario Works caseload numbers indicate slower growth than anticipated in the post-pandemic recovery period, with caseloads remaining 13% lower than pre-pandemic. Provincial forecasts suggest that the local caseload could increase by 8.3% over current levels over the course of 2023-2024 fiscal year. This projected caseload growth suggests a monthly average of 2,064 cases in the current fiscal year, which would return the local caseload to pre-pandemic levels.

As previously discussed, the Ontario Works division is preparing for significant changes to the delivery of employment supports as the division undertakes the provincial Employment Services Transformation over the course of the year. The Ontario Works division is working closely with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Employment Services System Manager (Serco Canada) to implement changes, understand their impact on service delivery and outcomes, and develop a client transition plan. Our continued commitment and focus on wrap-around stability supports for clients ensures we are well-positioned to support clients through this change.

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