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# **Ontario Works Service Plan Addendum Wellington CMSM**

## **2023**

**For Non-Employment Services Transformation (EST)  
Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs)/District  
Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs)**

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**ONTARIO WORKS  
SERVICE PLAN ADDENDUM**

**Delivery Partner: Wellington County Ontario Works**

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**For year three: 2023**

**Section 1: Ontario Works Priorities**

**Ministry Priorities**

Ontario Works delivery partners play a key role in delivering on many of the government’s priorities and have the ability to leverage provincial investments in infrastructure, employment, education and social services to create new opportunities for clients. The Service Plan provides an opportunity for delivery partners to demonstrate linkages between local service delivery and Ministry priorities.

**1. Social Assistance (SA) Service Delivery**

The County has been an early adopter of digital delivery solutions, including the full implementation of Electronic Document Management (EDM) and the MyBenefits client app in this planning cycle. We will continue to work with the province and support clients and staff in adopting digital service delivery solutions, including the roll-out of digital eligibility verification for dental providers and a paperless dental card in the spring of 2023, as well as moving away from printing and mailing monthly benefit statements.

Wellington County OW is committed to continued participation in the delivery of centralized and automated service delivery. In 2021 the County began participating in the centralized intake process that includes the introduction of e-signatures and automated client ID confirmation, as well as auto-granting eligible electronic applications. We continue to be active in implementing service delivery changes and working together with the province and the IBAU for simpler and more efficient benefit delivery to Ontario Works applicants and recipients.

The Ontario Works office will continue to support provincial efforts and make changes to local processes in line with provincial risk-based approaches to monitoring and maintaining programme integrity. We expect to complete ongoing updates to eligibility verification and review processes based on provincial data-matching information that is further developed over this planning cycle.

The roll-out of the next stages of Employment Services Transformation (EST) is an important priority in 2023-2024 and marks a transitional year for Wellington County, Ontario Works. Actions are anticipated to support staff in beginning to administer common assessment tools, and preparing ourselves to work with the new Employment Service System Manager, Serco Canada, as well as existing Employment Ontario partners. Working closely to support our staff, clients and community partners will be critical as we plan for significant reform to the Social Assistance System over the next year. Ongoing communication and engagement at all levels will be a top priority over this planning period.

## **2. Improving Employment Outcomes**

Since 2022, our achievement of our service contract outcomes was adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic but has been steadily improving over the last two years of this planning cycle. In the category of average amount of employment earnings reported by clients on a monthly basis, we saw an increase of 3% over 2021 actuals, from \$757 to \$780 in 2022. The percent of caseload with employment income increased by 18% from 2021 to 2022, with 10% of our caseload reporting earnings from employment. Our percent of terminations exiting to employment remained steady at just under 21% in 2021 and 2022, and the share of the caseload exiting to employment remained at 1.2% for both years.

County of Wellington Ontario works will continue coordination efforts with local EO providers, including improving referral processes for OW clients into EO services, and coordinating service delivery to minimize duplication, including employer services and supports. OW and EO staff work closely together to support clients, and these collaborative relationships will be of benefit to the new employment services manager in our area as we transition to EST. In Q4 of 2023 we will be working closely with MCCSS and the new Employment SSM to develop a client transition plan that will support the implementation of the Integrated Employment System in January of 2024.

We continue to prioritize delivery of pre-employment, stability supports programming to assist clients in becoming employment-ready, and continuing to provide tailored one to one support for clients as they prepare to enter the job market and look for work. The use of our local case management software, CAAPS, enables staff to actively monitor client outcomes and

action plans. Our caseworkers continue to focus on outcome planning with clients and regularly build upon our local case management practices.

Our office has been actively involved in increasing client access to both employment placement opportunities as well as unpaid activities that support their well-being and enhance social inclusion as the local economy reopens and recovers.

Our Employment and Caseworker teams will continue to identify clients that are able to pursue employment and will take a number of actions that will help us achieve our goal of improving employment outcomes by 3% in 2023. These actions include:

- Completing and tracking referrals to EO service providers and working collaboratively with EO providers to ensure clients are supported in accessing EO programmes and services.
- Issuing employment benefits and supports to clients to assist them in finding and maintaining a job.
- Connecting with employers and offering incentives, recruitment and employment maintenance supports to encourage them to hire OW clients.
- Following a structured case closure process to ensure that client employment outcomes are properly captured in SAMS.

A priority for our office this year will be increasing the percentage of clients with earnings as well as the average amount of reported earnings. These are two areas where we feel, relative to other service managers in our region, improvement can be made.

### **3. Leverage Local Economic Development**

Ongoing collaborative work between local Economic Development offices and our Employment Team and Settlement Services Team to deliver and promote job posting and placement, newcomer employment supports and transportation solutions. We also work in partnership with economic development colleagues on the Our Food Future, Smart Cities project that includes developing solutions to address local food insecurity.

Continued partnership with the local Workforce Planning Board (WFPBD), including contributing to and accessing labour market information and collaborating on workforce development solutions.

The OW Employment team continues to nurture employer relationships across the region through the annual Employer Recognition Awards, and our SPACES employment incentive programme for public and not for profit employers.

#### **4. Develop and Maintain Local Community Service Partnerships**

The OW office is a leader in supporting community collaborations that support the needs of Ontario Works clients and other vulnerable groups. The local Poverty Elimination Task Force, Built for Zero homelessness campaign and the Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy are examples of initiatives that the County supports and is involved with that address issues of income security, homelessness, health equity, and substance use that impact many OW clients.

Internally, OW staff work closely with both Housing Services and Children's Early Years staff to connect clients to appropriate supports. This includes direct referrals to Child Care Fee Subsidy and ensuring homeless clients are placed on the By-Name List and have applied to the Centralized Waiting List for social housing.

Relationships with Employment Ontario providers as well as basic skills and training providers like Action Read and the Wellington County Learning Centre will continue to be a priority for year three of this planning cycle as we transition to becoming an EST site.

#### **5. Strengthen Program Accountability**

The OW office actively monitors the Eligibility Verification Process (EVP) and promptly investigates allegations of fraud and misrepresentation to ensure ongoing compliance with provincial expectations. The County has consistently met provincial expectations related to the timely completion of EVPs.

Increased provincial expectations concerning programme outcome targets will require management and caseworkers to increase efforts related to the management of outcome plans and support to clients related to employment. The County is a historically strong performer related to exits to employment and has shared case management and case closure practices with a number of other OW offices across the Province.

Expenditures will continue to be managed closely to ensure the OW programme is delivered efficiently and within cost-shared funding available through the existing provincial funding model and respecting the approved 2023 County Budget.

Clear documentation requirements are followed for the very few Ontario Works benefits that are managed outside of SAMS and this information is submitted promptly as part of the monthly subsidy claim process to MCCSS.

## Section 2: Environmental Scan

### External Influences

- Updates to external influences such as political climate, social and economic environment, demographic trends, geographic and climate-induced influences.

County of Wellington Ontario Works saw a surge in demand for assistance in the period immediately at the outset of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Demand for financial assistance dropped significantly in the months following, due in large part to the introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Although provincial directives allowed most ongoing clients to remain on the caseload while in receipt of CERB for the purposes of retaining access to employment supports and extended health benefits, new applications for assistance dropped significantly below normal levels. Although the caseload has grown since Federal recovery benefits and programmes wrapped up in 2021, the number of cases has not yet reached pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2023.

Economic recovery, a tight job market, inflation, and the high cost of housing in Guelph and Wellington may pose challenges to the financial wellbeing of individuals in our communities over the course of this year. Ontario Works clients locally often struggle to stabilize their situation and be able to meaningfully seek and maintain employment due to some of these factors, such as their inability to secure appropriate housing.

### Caseload Description

- Have there been any changes to current composition of caseload and provide anticipated changes over the course of 2023 (i.e., projected growth/ decline)?

Despite a rapid caseload decrease in 2020 followed by a gradual increase, the caseload composition remained largely unchanged over this planning cycle. Our caseload continues to age, with clients aged 55 and older representing an increasing share of the caseload year over year. The trend of long-term reliance on OW continues, with a year over year increase seen in the proportion of the caseload on assistance for longer than two years despite pandemic disruptions.

The OW caseload for the City of Guelph and the County of Wellington, while continuing to increase since the end of 2021, remains lower than pre-pandemic at 1,831 cases as of February 2023. Provincial forecasts predict a return to 2019 caseload levels over the course of the 2023-2024 planning year.

Each year the OW office completes a more in-depth analysis of the caseload and caseload trends. This is once again planned for Q2 of this year and will assist both in current year services delivery as well as in EST planning and implementation with our employment services SSM and EO partners.

### **Local Labour Market and Economic Development**

- Provide any updates to the local labour market that may have occurred during year 2, including changes to:
  - Typical job patterns: part-time, seasonal, self-employment, etc.
  - Common industries: manufacturing, hospitality, etc.
  - Anticipated industry growth or decline; etc.
  - Employment opportunities in First Nations communities

The unemployment rate for the Guelph CMA was 3.5% in February 2023, a considerable improvement over the February 2021 rate at 7.7%, but higher than the very low pre-pandemic unemployment rate of 1.6% in February of 2019. Despite pandemic-related labour market fluctuations, the Guelph CMA continues to experience lower unemployment rates and higher participation rates than the provincial average. Guelph CMA's labour force participation rate remains among the highest in Canada, at 69.7% for February 2023.

According to the February 2023 Labour Market Plan Update released by the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin, the top 5 occupations in highest demand in 2022, by number of jobs posted online in Waterloo, Wellington, and Dufferin are as follows: retail salespersons (7671), material handlers (5886), other customer service and information services representatives (3937), food counter attendants, kitchen helpers and related support occupations (3226), and retail and wholesale trade managers (3037). Some key industry insights from the report include the following:

- There is high demand in manufacturing and construction in our economic region. Issues related to lower pay and access to a licence, vehicle or adequate transit present challenges.
- Health care, social service and education-related positions remain in demand and difficult to fill as there is very low unemployment of qualified individuals in these sectors.
- Professional and Technical Services remain in high demand and these occupations tend to be an area where remote or hybrid work options are more possible.
- Transportation and warehousing continue to experience significant employment growth and this is an area where more trained workers are required.

The County of Wellington is a part of a group of 20 partners across Ontario who have contributed to the SWIFT project (Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology Inc.), with the goal of providing 3.5 million people across 350 Ontario communities with high-speed internet service. In addition to the County's commitment of \$880,000 to this work over a five-year period, the SWIFT project announced \$12.1 million in targeted project funding for underserved homes and businesses in Wellington County. Four projects were completed between 2021 and 2022, enabling more residents in rural Wellington County, including OW recipients, to access reliable and affordable high-speed internet, critical for connecting to employment opportunities and stability supports. In 2023 we are anticipating significant announcements related to the wide-spread expansion of broadband fibre across the rural areas of Wellington, this will have a significant impact on businesses and residents in these currently under-serviced areas.

## Community Engagement

- A description of any changes to how community partners have been engaged in improving employment outcomes for clients. Community partners may include:
  - Community agencies
  - Local employers
  - Employer associations
  - Educators
  - Training organizations
  - Local economic development department
  - Health and wellness centres
  - Elders in First Nations communities
  - Organizers of cultural events and programs

The OW office works closely with many community partners to help improve employment outcomes for clients. Listed below are some updates and changes to this work.

We continue to work closely with the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin, as well as local committees that bring together Employment Ontario service providers and other educational partners. Key tools such as the local labour market plan and the [FindYourJob.ca](https://www.findyourjob.ca) website assist us in our planning as well as work with clients and employers. These partnerships also support strong referral processes to supportive employment services that OW clients often require, such as Youth Job Connect or newcomer employment readiness programmes. These collaborative tables and relationships are also proving very useful as we begin to work with our partners on the implementation of EST over the course of 2023.

Our Employment Specialist and the rest of our employment team continue to work directly with employers to support client placements into available jobs. In some cases employers are provided with incentives as well as supports to hire OW clients and a good example of this is our SPACES programme. The OW office SPACES initiative is in its fifth year, with employer applications currently open for interested organizations across Guelph and Wellington County. The Supporting People and Communities Employment Support (SPACES) initiative provides not for profit and public sector employers with a wage subsidy incentive to hire an OW client to undertake work that will serve to benefit the community. The programme focuses on recruiting clients with barriers to employment and offering them the opportunity to increase their employability and give them current employment experience to profile on their resume.

In 2021, Ontario Works partnered with the Guelph Community Health Centre, Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis, Sanguen, and Compass Family Services through a United Way grant to distribute phones and low-cost plans to clients of these agencies who needed them. The Ontario Works division supported OW clients specifically through dedicated funding for phones and low-cost talk and text plans for up to two years to help them meet their employment and life stabilization goals. An initial 118 OW clients were provided a Wi-Fi-enabled smartphone based on a referral from their caseworker and subject to manager approval. We have since connected over 300 clients with a phone to support them in achieving greater stability in their lives, including activities such as job search and employment services participation. The OW office is also a partner in the newly emerging Digital Equity Coalition that is looking to address issues related to the availability, cost and use of digital technology and tools. This work has further highlighted the importance of some of our existing connections with agencies such as Hope House and Action Read that are supporting OW clients in gaining computer and digital literacy skills.

The OW office continues to work with Compass Community services to support the cost of clients accessing low-cost therapeutic counselling. This is a low barrier service that clients can often access more quickly than more formal options offered through the centralized mental health system (Here 24/7 offered through CMHA of Waterloo Wellington).

In 2023 we are working with some key internal partners to develop a number of projects that will benefit our clients and the community. These include support to the County's Indigenous Advisory Council and Economic Development Division to develop an Indigenous Gathering Circle and garden at the Wellington Place campus. Through discussion with Indigenous allies, community partners and County staff, the Gathering Circle will be a place for healing, education and gathering on the land. This space will provide an alternative for community partners to meet with their Indigenous clients and opportunity for precontact flora to re-establish back into this natural setting. Another project involving the Settlement Services Team and Economic Development is support to Welcoming Week multi-cultural programming that will be occurring in September. This furthers our work to support newcomer clients on OW and to foster employer and community support for hiring and welcoming newcomers to our communities.

A developing partnership is with The Grove, a local initiative that has opened a series of youth hubs across our service area. Four, full-service youth hubs are open and another 3 locations are in the works. There is significant potential for us to work together with The Grove to offer more supports to youth that we are working with between the ages of 12 and 26.

### Section 3: Program Management

#### Service Delivery

- Outline business practices in place to ensure modernizing and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of program delivery

In order to best support the needs of our clients, particularly those with complex barriers to employment, we will continue to provide wrap-around supports to assist clients with stability supports and pre-employment preparation through an engaged Employment Team and a single caseworker model working in tandem. This streamlined model allows our ongoing clients to have one point of contact to support them with their financial assistance and developing their participation agreement and outcome plans in an efficient and effective manner. Caseworkers are able to utilize the full range of benefits and supports to support their clients in achieving their life stabilization or employment goals. In addition, the caseworker serves as the central referral point for the client, directing them toward internal and external supports as appropriate, including employment supports and in-house stability support programs. This service delivery model provides a solid foundation for our Employment Services Transformation process this year.

The OW management team regularly reviews local labour market information to understand our local environment, outcome performance, and required action. This information includes local unemployment rates, Workforce Planning Board reports, reports and information from our Economic Development colleagues, and local business news. Regular review of our local economic conditions positions Wellington CMSM to take on the challenges of a new employment services delivery model and work together with our new service system manager.

In addition to SAMS, we continue to utilize our locally developed Comprehensive Assessment and Action Plan System (CAAPS) to assist in case management. The CAAPS system continues to be extremely helpful to caseworkers as it provides them with a user-friendly, single-view picture of their caseload. It is also effective at tracking when outcome plan and file reviews are required and is a major asset to staff in completing file closure processes. The CAAPS system allows our staff to more easily stay up to date and ensure appropriate and efficient follow-ups are happening with the clients they are serving.

## Oversight Strategy

- Any changes in the oversight strategy in place to ensure that:
  - Delivery of Ontario Works is in accordance with legislative requirements, program directives and standards.
  - Subsidy claims submissions are accurate, reflect actual expenditures provided to eligible persons and meet ministry expectations (as per the Subsidy Claims Guidelines); and
  - Risks and areas for improvement are identified.

Managers and staff continue to respond effectively to provincial policy changes through ongoing work to update and modify business processes and service delivery approaches. Currently, our Trainer and other expert staff continue to deliver SAMS training to both new and returning staff. Refresher sessions are also offered, with the goal of ensuring all staff are well equipped and comfortable working in SAMS while we continue to meet the established service standards. Regular provincial communications and updates are shared with staff and training is offered when policies and directives are reviewed and revised.

The Provincial update of target achievements is reviewed with all OW managers as part of bi-weekly Leadership Team meetings. Outcome results and related issues are discussed with the MCCSS Programme Supervisor as part of quarterly review meetings. Staff are provided with a number of ongoing engagement opportunities, which include regular all-staff meetings, working groups, and feedback surveys related to various elements of the County's OW service model. The County of Wellington is planning on implementing a corporate survey tool in 2023 that will enable us to conduct more robust engagement and evaluation activities throughout this planning cycle.

Through close collaboration with our Treasury Departments, County of Wellington Ontario Works ensures that clear documentation requirements are followed and submitted promptly as part of the monthly subsidy claim process to MCCSS.

## Analysis of Resources

- Any change in the resources (e.g. financial, staffing, community, etc.) required for program management.

The total number of full-time employees dedicated to Ontario Works functions is 64.2 FTEs, with a staff to manager ratio of approximately 8.5 including all levels of management. As of February 2023, our case to caseworker ratio was approximately 96. This calculation does not include cases or staff members assigned to specialized or intensive case management programmes and also does not include ODSP clients accessing OW employment supports. 2023-24 is a transitional year for our office as we transition to becoming an EST site. This transition will require continued work with County management, staff and our Human Resources department to manage changes to staffing and functional roles.

The Social Services Department, comprised of Children’s Early Years, Housing Services, and Ontario Works divisions continues the process of integrating client reception, help and application services at our 129 Wyndham Street office. The development of tools and training related to integrated client service, as well as the service integration that is underway, are significant undertakings that will take a phased approach. Integration efforts continue in 2023, with a focus on the delivery of a new integrated Help Centre. The County continues to implement changes to the configuration of our office spaces to bring social services staff more closely together and to prioritize staff safety. This will help ensure that we are better equipped to assist clients in navigating services across a number of areas while also making changes to our office spaces to enhance workplace safety.

### **Overview of Learning Supports**

- Outline the strategic learning plan to train staff in the delivery of stability supports, employment and financial assistance, to achieve program objectives.

Our organization remains committed to facilitating professional development and lifelong learning experiences for all of its employees. The provincial training curriculum, Supportive Approaches through Innovative Learning (SAIL), continues to form the foundation upon which other experiences are built. The OW Division will be working with OMSSA this coming year to provide newer staff members with the Client Centric Strategies training that builds upon many of the principles and strategies of SAIL and we will be interested in assessing if this training curriculum can form a foundational piece of our client service staff training moving into the future.

In addition to offering SAIL modules, we take concrete action to ensure that the principles of the SAIL training are lived out by our staff throughout the organization. SAIL principles are applied through various initiatives and means including lunch and learn sessions, job shadowing, a resource library, an intranet, and staff learning events. A further support for staff is the Trainer, who is a resource regularly used by staff in an advice and guidance capacity to assist them with policy interpretation and decision-making.

Staff are provided with a variety of other training opportunities appropriate to their roles during the course of the year. The County's Performance Appraisal process allows staff, with the support of their manager, to identify their own learning and personal development goals. Throughout the year, the trainer provides 'refresher' sessions based on feedback received from staff and management as well as information received from the Province related to programme updates and changes. In addition, staff are supported in attending local workshops related to issues such as addictions, mental health, youth services, employment, and other inter-agency learning events.

Ontario Works managers continue to be offered a variety of learning opportunities, including a Certificate in Leadership offered through the University of Waterloo. This programme aims to build the capacity of managers by offering training in leadership skills such as coaching for success, how to lead people, team building, and managing opportunities for conflict. We are also supporting staff in the employment services transition through regular communication and project updates and change management supports as we undertake this work. The County has been an early adopter of many provincial modernization projects and will continue to look for opportunities to support the development and best possible implementation of programme changes.

## **Business Practices**

- Have any changes to business practices been made in order to meet standards for performance to comply with program policy (e.g. developing local policies to support program delivery).

County of Wellington Ontario works is continuously engaged in local policy development and in reviewing service delivery processes and procedures. Recent updates to our local policies reflect changes to discretionary benefit management, including the use of electronic tools and trackers and changes to coverage based on an analysis of market costs and coverage in other jurisdictions; case management practices for victims of domestic violence living in emergency shelters, and changes to processes for assignments. We are also updating and developing referral pathways and anticipate this work to continue as we transition to EST. The Social Services management team is exploring further integration of application and navigation services, including services for Ontario Works clients, in order to reduce duplication of effort and streamline our social services intake pathway.

Through regular team meetings and case conferences, managers and staff collaborate on business process improvements to more efficiently manage auto granted cases and communicate with the IBAU on an ongoing basis.

**Are there any additional changes that do not fall into the above categories?**

**N/A**