



COMMITTEE REPORT

OW-23-02

To: Chair and Members of the Social Services Committee
From: Stuart Beumer, Director of Ontario Works
Date: Wednesday, June 14, 2023
Subject: **Overview of the Ontario Works Division**

Background:

In Ontario, social assistance is provided through two programmes, the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works. Ontario Works provides temporary financial assistance to residents in need while they are actively assisted in becoming employed and achieving self-reliance. As a Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM) the County of Wellington has been designated by the province of Ontario to deliver income support through the Ontario Works programme for the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph.

All Ontario Works delivery sites enter a contractual relationship with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) to provide services under the Ontario Works Act, 1997. While ODSP is delivered directly by the province.

The Ontario Works Division strives to effectively serve people needing assistance by delivering high quality programmes and services in collaboration with our community partners and in accordance with provincial legislation and directives governing the Ontario Works programme. Services are delivered through two office locations in Guelph and a Social Services office in Fergus, as well as itinerant services provided on a regular basis in Mount Forest.

Ontario Works Eligibility, Rates and Benefits:

To qualify for Ontario Works assistance, applicants must be residents of Ontario over the age of 16, have assets no greater than the limits set out in the programme, and be in financial need. Certain assets are exempt for the purpose of calculating eligibility for assistance. These assets include the applicant's principal residence, one vehicle, business assets necessary to the operation of the applicant's business, compensation from settlement agreements, and locked-in savings such as RESPs.

Asset Limits, O. Reg.38(1)

Number of Dependants Other than Spouse	Single (\$)	Couple (\$)
0	10,000	15,000
For each additional dependent add	500	500
Child under Temporary Care or Dependent of Dependent	500	500

A household's basic financial assistance is provided monthly and consists of a basic needs and shelter portion. The basic needs portion of the payment is fixed, while the shelter portion is based on actual shelter costs up to established maximums depending on family size. Shelter benefits for Ontario Works recipients are very low and fall significantly short of covering market rate shelter costs in our service area.

Benefit amounts vary based on family size and individual circumstances. A single person on Ontario Works is entitled to \$343 in basic needs (to cover food, clothing, household goods, phone, etc.) and a maximum of \$390 in shelter (rent and utility costs) for a total of \$733. A single parent with two children under 18 years of age would receive \$360 in basic needs and a maximum of \$697 in shelter for a total of \$1057. To note; ODSP rates are slightly higher to account for the longer-term nature of meeting the unique needs of people with disabilities.

Basic Needs (Renters and Owners), O. Reg. 41(1)1

Number of Dependants Other than Spouse	Dependants 18+	Dependants 0-17 years old	Single Recipient (\$)	Couple (\$)
0	0	0	343	494
1	0	1	360	494
	1	0	623	652
2	0	2	360	494
	1	1	623	652
	2	0	781	826
3	0	3	360	494
	1	2	623	652
	2	1	781	826
	3	0	956	1001

For each additional dependant add \$175 if dependant is 18 years or older and \$0 if the dependant is 0-17 years of age.

Shelter Maximum, O. Reg. 42(2)2

Benefit Unit Size	Max. Monthly Shelter Allowance (\$)
1	390
2	642
3	697
4	756
5	815
6+	844

In addition to receiving basic assistance, social assistance clients are eligible to receive other mandatory and discretionary benefits to assist with costs related to medical needs and employment:

- **Ontario Drug Benefit Card** –A monthly Ontario Drug Benefit Card is provided so that recipients can access prescriptions at no charge.
- **Dental Care** – Adult clients are only eligible for urgent/emergency dental services up to a normal max of \$1000/year. Dentures are also provided locally to all Social Assistance clients as a discretionary benefit.
- **Vision Care** – Recipients are eligible for basic vision care (exams and eyewear).
- **Other Health Related Costs** – Recipients can receive funding for medical supplies and related costs not covered by the healthcare system. Examples of these costs are diabetic supplies, transportation for medical purposes and prescribed assistive aids/ devices (hearing aids, prosthetics).
- **Extended Health Benefits** – Recipients exiting Social Assistance may be eligible for health benefits for an additional period of 6 months if coverage is not available through another program or their employer.
- **Special Diet Allowance** – Provides additional funds to assist with the cost of a special diet that is due to an approved medical condition of a family member. Benefits can range between \$30 and \$250 per month, per family member, depending on the medical condition.
- **Employment Benefits** – Recipients may receive funds to cover expenses to participate in job search, basic education, job specific skills training, or costs related to starting a new job.
- **Housing Stability Programme** – This is a local financial benefit that is available to assist social assistance recipients to assist with retaining or obtaining housing. Support is provided to cover rental and utility deposits and arrears as well as moving costs.

Service Delivery:

Help Centre

Ontario Works clients are assisted through our Help Centre at 129 Wyndham St in Guelph, upon initial contact over the phone or in person. The Help Centre provides integrated supports to Social Services applicants, clients, and members of the public through the provision of information, referrals and assistance with applications. Staff also provides individuals with information and warm transfers to other health and community services.

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 (EA) 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 EA. The amount of EA provided aligns with Ontario Works rates.

Application

Clients applying for Ontario Works complete the application online or over the phone through the provincial centralized Ontario Works intake line. Clients who are unable to complete the application online or on the phone, or who require additional supports such as language interpretation can complete the application in person at our office.

Intake and Verification

As soon as an Ontario Works application is received, the Intake team assesses initial eligibility and schedules a Verification Interview with a caseworker to verify documents and confirm eligibility. Caseworkers review documents related to identity and eligibility for all members of a household, and will complete all required forms and agreements.

Case Management and Stability Supports

The Ontario Works division currently supports 1,861 households consisting of more than 3,200 individuals who rely on Ontario Works for income.

Ontario Works caseworkers provide one-to-one wrap-around supports to assist clients, particularly those with complex barriers to employment, with stability supports and pre-employment preparation in collaboration with our Employment Services team. Ongoing Ontario Works clients have one point of contact to support them with their financial assistance and developing their participation agreement and outcome plans. Participation agreements and outcome plans are required under programme legislation, and are developed by the caseworker and the client, detailing the actions they will take to achieve their goals and maintain eligibility for assistance.

Caseworkers utilize the full range of benefits and supports available in our service area to support their clients in achieving their life stability or employment goals. In addition, caseworkers make referrals to internal and external supports as appropriate. Our office also administers and manages several specialized caseloads, including:

- Learning, Earning and Parenting programme (LEAP) for youth under 18 and parents aged 16 to 25 who have not completed high school.
- Temporary Care Assistance to provide income assistance and benefits to an adult on behalf of a child where the child is in the temporary care of the adult and is in financial need.
- Life Skills, an intensive case management programme for clients with significant mental health, behavioural or substance use issues that prevent them from gaining financial independence. Clients on the Life Skills caseload receive assistance with appropriate referrals to community resources or for medical and psychiatric assessments that may assist them with stabilizing their situation.

Employment Supports

Our Employment Services team currently works in tandem with Ontario Works caseworkers to support clients in preparing for employment, looking for a job, and maintaining employment. These supports include referring clients to Employment Ontario service providers and collaborating closely with these agencies to ensure clients are supported in accessing the employment programmes and services available to them. Clients are also able to access digital devices such as computers and mobile internet

hotspots on loan through the Employment team, and receive digital literacy support from staff. Our Employment Services team also connects with employers and offers incentives, recruitment and employment maintenance supports to encourage employers to hire Ontario Works clients.

Eligibility Review

Ensuring programme integrity is a critical function in the delivery of Ontario Works supports. A key oversight mechanism used by the province is the Eligibility Verification Process (EVP), which ensures that the right benefits are being delivered to eligible recipients by performing risk-based case audits bi-monthly. The Ontario Works division also has two Eligibility Review Officers (ERO) who manage complaints, referrals, and fraud allegations from various sources inside and outside of Ontario Works. When a client's assistance is reduced, suspended, or terminated as a result of a decision made by our office, clients have the right to request an internal review of the decision. If a decision is upheld after an internal review, clients can appeal the decision to the Social Benefits Tribunal.

Discretionary Benefits

The Ontario Works division delivers discretionary benefits for social assistance recipients (Ontario Works and ODSP clients) as well as other low-income individuals in the community. Ontario Works clients access provincially cost-shared discretionary benefits through their caseworker, while ODSP clients and those not in receipt of social assistance receive this assistance through a Special Benefits Caseworker and our Programme Integrity and Support Workers.

Settlement Services:

The Ontario Works division also delivers Settlement Services to newcomer immigrants to Wellington County. The Settlement Services team delivers services primarily from the Fergus social services office and itinerant locations around Wellington County. Funded through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the mandate of this programme includes assisting newcomers to Canada to access community services and adjust to life in their new communities. Settlement Services supports are available at no cost to those with Permanent Resident, Convention Refugee, or Live-In Caregiver status in the County of Wellington and City of Guelph.

Experienced Settlement Workers help newcomers in the following areas:

- Accessing interpreters/translators
- Finding housing and affordable childcare
- Registering children in school
- Enrolling in language training
- Finding a family physician
- Seeking employment
- Navigating government and community services

Information sessions are provided to educate newcomers about labour laws in Canada, their rights, responsibilities, and safety in the Canadian workplace, and how to navigate the numerous options with Canadian banking institutions. Collaboration with Economic Development has also ensured the movement towards growing local rural communities by successfully integrating newcomers. Our Settlement Services team assisted 227 new clients with a settlement and referral plan in 2022 and hosted 69 settlement services group sessions for newcomers.

Community Grants and Partnerships:

Ontario Works staff and management are involved in the community through collaborative work, meaningful partnerships with other service providers, and the administration of 100% municipally funded community grants. Many grants supporting low income and other vulnerable residents across Guelph and Wellington are managed through the Ontario Works division on behalf of the Social Services Department, including:

- Rural Women's Support Programme
- Rural Transportation Programme
- Children First Fund
- Guelph and Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination
- Wellington Dufferin Guelph Drug Strategy
- CMHA Vulnerable Seniors Initiative

Investing in these activities strengthens our connection to the local community and region, enabling us to stay informed on issues that affect the delivery of our services across all three social services divisions. It also allows us to work collaboratively as a community to develop programmes and improve service systems to better meet the needs of vulnerable residents across our service area.

Future Directions:

Employment Services Transformation

The Ontario Works division is preparing for significant changes in the employment supports area of our programme as we go through the provincial Employment Services Transformation (EST) this year. A Service System Manager has been identified for our area who will take over the administration of employment supports for Ontario Works clients by January 2024. We are working closely with MCCSS and the new Employment Service System Manager (Serco Canada) to implement these changes, understand their impact on our service delivery, and develop a client transition plan.

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 EST change may impact the ability of Ontario Works staff to support clients directly with employment needs, the County of Wellington case management approach is centered on life stabilization and staff are well positioned to undertake this transition.

Social Assistance Modernization

The province completed the implementation of centralized intake in December of 2022, with all CMSMs now processing applications through a centralized intake process. Centralized Intake provides a new online application for Ontario Works, electronic ID verification and signatures, and a risk-based eligibility determination framework to enable automatic granting of low-risk Ontario Works applications. Other modernization activities include the advancement of paperless processes and enhancements to the functionality of the MyBenefits app.

Anticipated Caseload Growth

Current 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.

Financial Pressures

Ontario Works rates have remained static 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 and are now annually adjusted to inflation, the gap between social assistance rates and the poverty line is significant.

A family of four receiving Ontario Works lives on an income that is equal to 30% of the income at the poverty line as defined by Statistics Canada. This gap, coupled with rapidly increasing average market rent in our service area is making it increasingly more difficult for individuals and families receiving Ontario Works to find and maintain affordable housing and meet their basic needs.

Recommendation:

That the Overview of the Ontario Works Department report be received for information.

Respectfully submitted,



Stuart Beumer
Director of Ontario Works