

Ontario's Social Assistance and Employment Service System Transformation Plans

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Economic and Community Development Committee

EC21.2

Presented by

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Purpose

- Provide an overview of Report EC21.2, *Ontario's Social Assistance and Employment Service System Transformation Plans*
- Highlight key elements and changes, including early assessment of potential implications for the City of Toronto and low income residents
- Set the foundation for future reports back to Committee and Council which will provide further information, analysis and recommendations as these changes unfold

Background

- In Ontario, Social Assistance is comprised of Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)
- OW is delivered by 47 separate municipal and regional service delivery agents, as designated by the Province; Toronto, through Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS), is one such municipal delivery agent
- OW delivery agents are responsible for providing “end-to-end” program delivery and management, including all functions related to:
 - a) Initial intake and eligibility determination
 - b) Financial benefit administration and ongoing eligibility
 - c) Program compliance and integrity
 - d) Case management and service planning
 - e) Employment services
 - f) Post-exit supports
- ODSP is delivered by the Province through local and regional offices

What's Changing?

- On February 11, 2021 Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) released "**Recovery and Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation**"
- The focus is on a shift from end-to-end program delivery and management to a **functional approach** to program and service delivery
- This shift includes three phases of change over the next four years:
 - **Realigning functions** to provide more efficient, person-centered supports for low-income residents (Late 2020-2022)
 - **Realigning service delivery**, including a **transformed Employment Service System** to improve system coordination and employment outcomes (2022-2024)
 - **Provincial Human Services Integration** to enable more broad and timely access to critical services and supports for clients and low income residents (2024+)

What's Changing?

Social Assistance program changes (Late 2020-2022)

- Initial intake and eligibility determination (completion of applications) will be centralized and move to the Province
- New online Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA) and risk-based eligibility determination framework for initial and ongoing eligibility is expected to support faster decision making and improve program integrity
- Automating and moving administrative activities to the Province will enable greater focus on service navigation and life stabilization locally
- Centralization of intake functions expected for Toronto in fall 2021

What's Changing?

Realigning Service Delivery (2022-2024)

- Further administrative centralization, including mandatory financial benefits administration, ongoing eligibility assessment and program compliance and integrity management
- Greater focus by municipal Caseworkers on life stabilization supports, including connecting clients to a broader range of services, such as mental health and addictions, child welfare, youth programs, healthcare and housing
- Municipalities will deliver these “person-focused” services to Ontario Works clients as well as some clients of the Ontario Disability Support Program

What's Changing?

Employment Service Transformation (EST)

- Ontario Works Employment Assistance and ODSP Employment Supports integrated into Employment Ontario (EO), the provincial employment services program
- 15 new EO service areas established, Toronto is a stand alone area
 - Service system manager for each area to be selected through a competitive process
- Implementation began in January 2021, in 3 prototype service areas (Hamilton-Niagara; Peel Region and Muskoka-Kawartha)
- The province has not communicated the implementation timeline for the remaining municipalities, including Toronto
- TESS staff are engaging with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development on implementation details and timelines

What's Changing?

Provincial Human Services Integration Model (2024+)

- Residents in need will be able to access one-on-one support from a Caseworker (and get connected to a range of local human services) without having to meet the eligibility criteria for social assistance financial benefits
- Similarly, people who exit social assistance can continue to receive support, as needed
- Local partnerships enabled by Provincial Human Services Integration will support better service connections and warm referrals
- No fixed completion date at this time

Co-Design Process

- The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) has committed to working with municipalities to co-design elements of the changes and the respective local implementation plans
- Toronto, through TESS, Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFA), and others, have been engaging on and working closely with Ministry staff on the first phase of co-design related to the centralization of intake functions
- Centralization of intake expected to be implanted in Toronto in fall 2021
- Implementation will be iterative, with elements added and improved on over time
- A new funding formula is being developed to support this vision and the Province is engaging with municipalities in the design of this new formula

Gaps, Risks and Opportunities

Gaps

- The Provincial vision for social assistance transformation does not address the adequacy of rates, an issue Council has raised in the past, leaving most clients living in deep poverty in the city

Risks

- Any reductions in funding to TESS for intake related activities will have impacts on the resources available not only to TESS but to the City's Human Services Integration (HSI) Application and Support Centre (ASC)
- Functionalization of service delivery may lead to “hand-off” issues for clients across the various services being delivered separately
- Potential for reduced capacity in workforce development within the City as a result of Employment Service Transformation

Opportunities

- Greater local focus on and coordination of critical life stabilization supports for low income residents
- More people accessing one-on-one support from Caseworkers
- Alignment of human services integration municipally and provincially can strengthen service coordination and may lead to increased accessibility and impact

Next Steps

- Continue co-design work with Ministry, including on centralized intake and work towards the provincial human services integration model
- Ongoing collaboration across divisions within Community and Social Services (CSS) and others to continue to identify and assess anticipated service, financial or organizational impacts
- Engage with other divisions and Toronto Public Library, as well as community and workforce development stakeholders as appropriate, to assess how the City can best advance its workforce development priorities and support residents in a transformed employment services system

Appendix

Summary of Recommendations

1. City Council approve the five principles of engagement with the Province, as outlined in the staff report Attachment 1:
 - a. Prioritize client well-being and progression;
 - b. Commitment to engagement and collaboration;
 - c. Recognition of Toronto's unique size, diversity, and complexity;
 - d. Adequate and sustainable funding to drive best outcomes; and
 - e. Promoting local economic and social inclusion.
2. City Council direct the General Manager, Toronto Employment and Social Services, to report in the second quarter of 2022 on the co-design and implementation of Phase 1 of Ontario's Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal plan, including a further assessment of implications and impacts on City functions, roles and budget.
3. City Council request the Province of Ontario to address the adequacy and structure of social assistance by implementing a new and modernized rate structure that uses an evidence-based approach to annual social assistance rate increases.
4. City Council direct the General Manager, Toronto Employment and Social Services to engage with other divisions and Toronto Public Library, as well as community and workforce development stakeholders, as appropriate, to assess how the City can best advance its workforce development priorities and support residents in a transformed employment services system, including whether the City should pursue the new employment service system manager role and, if so, in what configuration and report on findings and recommendations in the second quarter of 2022.