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**Ministry of Community and Social Services
Report of Client Discussions
On Social Assistance Reform**

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March 2014





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“Social Assistance is supposed to be a temporary solution to a problem. It shouldn’t turn someone’s life upside down or result in the loss of their independence and self-respect.”

- An Ontario Works client

1. Introduction

1.1 The Client Discussions

The 2013 Ontario Budget contained some initial steps for reforming social assistance. The focus of these reforms is on improving outcomes, promoting better employment outcomes and increasing fairness.

The Budget acknowledged that successful transformation will take time. The document further notes that the government is committed to starting “discussions with recipients, municipalities, delivery partners and others to set priorities and work through the choices required for transformation”.

As part of this exercise, between January and May 2013 the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) established a multi-sector working group of some 30 service providers, employers and clients of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The participants attended six roundtable sessions in Toronto, where they discussed ways to reform the social assistance system, especially around employment services and supports.

In the course of these sessions it was suggested that the Ministry should hear directly from clients, particularly regarding employment. Clients have a unique and highly valuable perspective on what is and is not working in the system.

Over the summer and fall months of 2013, the Ministry conducted a series of half-day client discussion sessions in 10 cities across the province,¹ where clients were encouraged to draw on their personal experiences to identify and propose ways to reform the system. This paper summarizes the results of these client discussions.

¹ The 10 cities were: Hamilton, London, Kingston, Newmarket, Mississauga, North Bay, Ottawa, Scarborough, Toronto and Thunder Bay. Two sessions were held in Ottawa: one in English and one in French.

1.2 The Topics

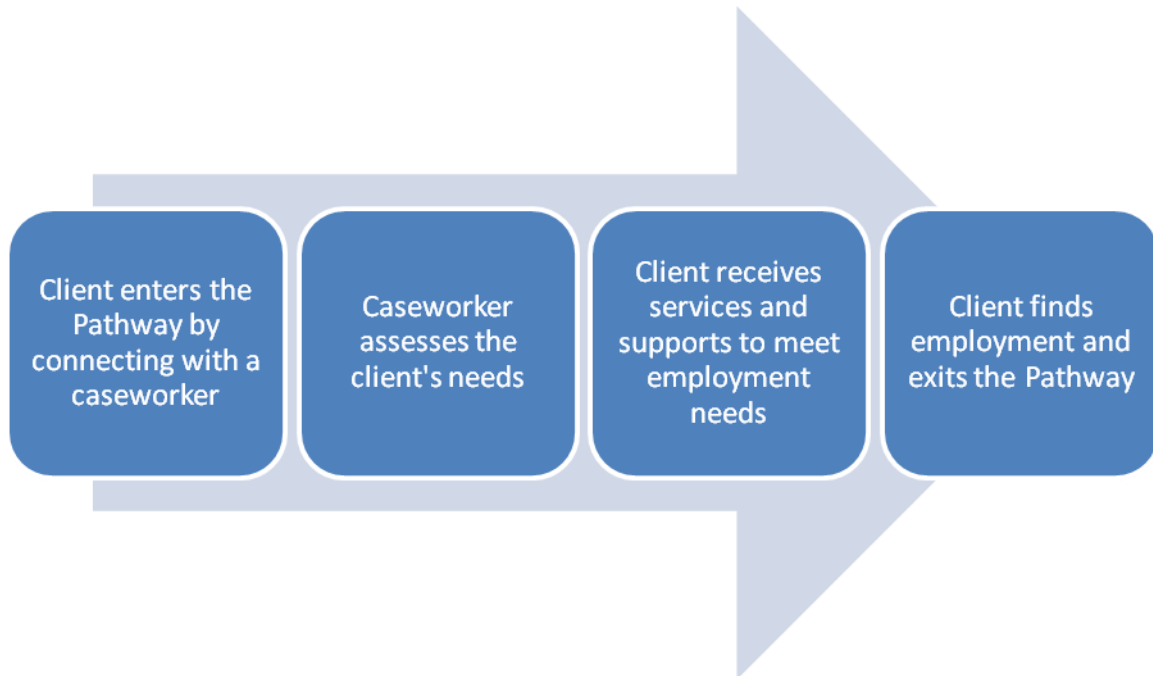
The agenda for the client discussions centred on the following four themes:

- **Improving Incomes:** Social assistance rates have been widely criticized as inadequate. What do clients think constitutes fair and adequate benefits and why?
- **Client Service:** How do clients feel about the quality of the service they receive from provincial and municipal caseworkers and other local office staff? How might staff provide better support to help clients achieve employment goals?
- **Integrity and Accountability:** These programs are often criticized as being too complicated and difficult to understand. Is that your experience? Are current ways of reporting income accurate and fair? Do you feel the program rules are too complicated or difficult to understand? Can they be simplified, while still ensuring the government receives the information it needs to verify a client's circumstances?
- **Improving Employment Outcomes:** How effective is the employment system at helping clients prepare to enter or re-enter the workforce and find suitable employment?

Each session included a mix of Ontario Works and ODSP clients, and ranged in size from six to 17 participants. The sessions were led by the same facilitator, who is also the author of this report.

At the beginning of each session, we asked clients to look at the system as a “pathway” that takes them on a journey into the workforce. This pathway begins when clients first connect with someone in the system - usually a caseworker in either a municipal or provincial office. Following initial contact, clients proceed through several stages that assess their needs and provide them with services and supports. Ideally, the journey ends with the client finding employment that fits his/her skills and needs.

As depicted by the diagram below, the pathway has four basic stages:



While clients liked the idea of the Pathway, it was not because they thought it provided a clear picture of their overall experience. On the contrary, most had trouble relating it to their experience. In their view, if the system is a pathway at all, the various stages are blurred, the key tasks are performed poorly - if at all - and the roles and responsibilities of the various players, including the client, are confused and unclear.

Rather, clients regarded the Employment Pathway more as a *vision* of the system they would like rather than the system they have. As such, it provided a useful rallying point for a discussion of the issues, most of which fit quite comfortably into one or more of the four stages of the Pathway.

1.3 What Was Said

Although most participants genuinely appreciated having the opportunity to voice their views, overall, the mood of most sessions was quite pessimistic. (There were notable exceptions.) The depth of many clients' frustration with the system was very clear and is conveyed through two key findings.

First, virtually *all* participants agreed that the single most important factor in becoming employed is the client's level of motivation. A high percentage went on to say that their experience with the employment system was deeply frustrating and that, as a result, their motivation to find employment has fallen very low.

Second, at a number of the sessions the facilitator asked participants: (1) if they believe good jobs are available; and (2) if they feel they either already have the skills for such a job or the aptitude to acquire them. A strong majority answered affirmatively to both questions. Yet most were skeptical that they would ever get these jobs.

When it comes to connecting them with prospective employers, they said, the system usually fails them. When they do make contact, the stigma of being on Ontario Works or having a disability is a huge barrier to getting the job. Many clients described feelings of being trapped in a cycle they variously defined as unemployment, underemployment and employment in low-paying, unfulfilling jobs.

Nevertheless, a number of sessions ended on a note of optimism. As the discussions progressed, an idea emerged of a new partnership between clients and the social assistance system. Clients were asked to envision themselves working together with their caseworkers and other service providers to form and implement ***their personal pathway to employment*** - their plan for their future.

The next few sections of this paper report on the various issues participants raised in the sessions and some of the key points they made about them. Section 6 draws on these findings to sketch the idea of a partnership between clients and the system. Finally, the Conclusion provides a summary of some key suggestions made by clients on how to improve social assistance.

2. Caseworkers: Entering the Pathway

According to both Ontario Works and ODSP participants, their first real contact within the system - and along the Pathway - was their social assistance caseworker, who usually also remained their primary contact in the program. The client's relationship with the social assistance caseworker is extraordinarily important. Caseworkers are the lynchpin of the system and clients from both programs told us they depend on their caseworkers for a wide variety of tasks, including:

- Providing information about their responsibilities as client and their basic benefits
- Assessing their needs and identifying special needs programs
- Helping them navigate the system and develop a plan
- Streaming them into particular employment-related programs
- Providing advice and counselling
- Managing the administrative issues around their files

Participants also said they expect their caseworkers to be highly knowledgeable, available, efficient, supportive and personable. Many had positive things to say about how their caseworkers were performing. Others experienced frustration and concern.

According to the reports, the quality of service caseworkers provide - for both ODSP and Ontario Works clients - varies greatly, as do their levels of knowledge and skill and

their accessibility. Participants made it clear that, from their perspective, the difference in the support they received from getting a “good” versus a “bad” caseworker is the single most important factor in their experience, a point which was reinforced by the comments they made on particular aspects of the relationship:

- Clients want more reliable access to their caseworkers.
- Clients want their caseworkers to treat them with respect and courtesy.
- Caseworkers should meet basic standards of skills and knowledge and should be held to account.
- Caseworkers should receive special training on mental health issues.
- Some system of client feedback or evaluation of the caseworker’s performance should be implemented.
- Clients should have an opportunity to change their caseworker if the relationship is not working.

In discussions, most clients agreed that caseworkers cannot be all things to all people. They recognized that a caseworker’s time is usually in great demand and that he/she has a wide range of tasks to perform. Nonetheless, clients thought caseworkers’ position could be improved through:

- Better training
- Clearer assignment of roles and responsibilities, so clients know what they can expect from caseworkers
- Encouraging caseworkers to get to know the client's overall situation
- Support for more intensive case management

3. Needs Assessment: Stage Two of the Pathway

Once a client is in the system and has met with his/her caseworker, the logical next step is to assess the person’s needs. Although a few participants had trouble understanding the concept of needs assessment, many reported that, as far as they were aware, their needs had never been assessed. There was no formal process involving tests or questionnaires, beyond completing the application.

Others told us their needs were assessed. For these people, it was usually linked to a positive personal relationship with the caseworker. Some clients reported having extensive and detailed conversations with their caseworker, who asked them about their situation, goals, plans, hopes and needs.

Participants felt a fair assessment of their needs was crucial to a successful journey through the Pathway. For the most part, they also agreed that the system did a poor job of recognizing the range of needs they have. There was nearly universal agreement that the system defines these needs too narrowly. The following are some of the concerns they raised about the overly narrow view of needs:

- **Medication:** Many ODSP clients reported that, while the program paid for some of their medication needs, it did not pay for all of them. As a result, they had to pay for those medications by using their income support or do without them.
- **Illness and Disability:** A significant number of participants said they had illnesses or disabilities that prevented them from working normally, but still wanted to be employed. Some clients proposed that there be a specialized Ontario Works caseworker for persons with an illness.
- **Psychological and Emotional Needs:** Mental illnesses are widespread and can be particularly debilitating. Yet the resources available to help people cope with these illnesses fall far short of the need. Several clients proposed that ODSP and Ontario Works be able to link/refer such people to a therapist easily and quickly.

4. Access to Services and Supports: Stage Three of the Pathway

4.1 Are Benefits Adequate?

It will not be surprising to hear that most of our participants felt basic Ontario Works and ODSP benefits were not adequate or that they had serious questions about how benefit levels are set. They made a number of comments and suggestions related to benefits:

- Very few clients feel the basic rates on either ODSP or Ontario Works are adequate.
- Some Ontario Works clients talked of problems meeting basic nutritional needs. Many clients say they have special dietary requirements that raise the overall cost of food but receive no support for this.
- Housing is a major concern and the available allowances are seen as far too low.
- Dental and health benefits for recipients of Ontario Works were said to be inadequate.
- Ontario Works clients think minimal transportation needs (usually a bus pass) should be met.
- Benefits should be indexed to the cost of living.
- Rates should be evidence-based.
- Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs) should be protected.

Participants also identified many employment-related services they felt would enhance their prospects for finding good jobs. While not all were seen as needs, most participants thought at least some were:

- Clients need access to a much better website with up-to-date information on employment programs, supports, networks and opportunities.
- Clients should have access to a skilled employment specialist.

- Some of the best employment opportunities are found in some of the least likely places. There should be a workshop on finding the “hidden job market.”
- Automated tools now exist to help assess needs and the type of services clients require. The Ministry should be using such tools to assess client needs more objectively and quickly.
- Some training schools have “borrow a person” programs, which allow clients to “borrow” someone with expertise in a relevant area for an hour or so. The Ministry should consider developing such a program.

4.2 Correspondence, Claims and Accountability

When it came to the practices around reporting income, most clients found the system rule-bound and bureaucratic and felt they did not understand either the rationale or the requirements well.

- Suspension letters sent in the mail were seen as particularly stressful. Some clients called for the wording of such letters to be changed. They felt it was accusatory, failed to treat clients respectfully, and automatically blamed the client for having failed to meet some requirement.
- Many clients reported having had documents and files lost by social assistance offices. The moment records get lost, they said, suspension letters start going out. Several clients reported having received such letters, even though they say they had submitted their forms. Even after this was corrected, they said, no one apologized or explained to them what had happened.
- There were many stories from clients about their inability to get errors corrected when something goes wrong in the system, whether because of human or technical error. They felt the system generally had no accountability to them and that the default option was to blame them for failings in the system.
- Verifying income on a monthly basis is frustrating. One woman indicated that the amount of reporting required for self-employment - and the worry over having her benefits simply cut off - caused her so much stress that she finally gave up on the idea of becoming self-employed.
- Some self-employed clients reported that they incurred business-related costs that they had no way of claiming back. As a result, they were not reimbursed for them. They felt the reporting rules around self-employment should be revisited, clarified and simplified.
- The delayed deduction of funds due to earnings was seen as problematic, as it is difficult to determine what one will receive in the following month. This was also seen as a disincentive to find work.

4.3 Making Information Available

When it comes to accessing services and supports to meet their needs, clients told us repeatedly that they need reliable, relevant and timely information, yet a great many of them said they were unable to get it.

When pressed, most also admitted that they usually turn to their caseworkers for such information, even though caseworkers are often overloaded with tasks. As a result, many caseworkers do not have time to provide information about what may be available within social assistance or how program rules may apply, let alone to research programs or opportunities to meet a client's special needs for training, networking, volunteer positions, job placements, and so on.

When we challenged clients on this, they recognized and agreed that it was unrealistic to expect caseworkers to do everything. Generally, clients agreed that, if information were more accessible, they would be willing to take on more responsibility for searching for information that was essential to their progress along the Pathway.

This, in turn, would take the pressure off caseworkers, who could then assume more of an advisory or oversight role by helping clients to decide what kind of information they needed and how to use it. However, in such an arrangement, clients noted, the information would have to be readily accessible on a website and clients would need internet access. Some suggested that ODSP offices could have computers for clients to use to access information while they wait to see their caseworker (others noted that these are available in some offices and are a helpful resource).

5. Transition to the Workforce: Stage Four of the Pathway

In Stage 4 of the Employment Pathway, clients transition to the workplace. Many clients saw this as the weakest link in the chain. They felt the system did very little to connect them to prospective employers who might actually consider them for a job they had trained for or were otherwise qualified to do.

Some clients complained that, rather than being connected with real opportunities, they were sent to courses on how to write a resume, and then advised to send out copies as widely as possible. This, they insisted, is a hugely ineffective strategy for getting a job.

Others went further: The more skilled they were, the more important they said it was that their training period should include opportunities to connect with employers and organizations in their field. This is necessary to begin building the relationships and networks that might eventually get them a job, yet it rarely happens.

Finally, we heard about the cultural and social barriers that must be overcome. Even when clients manage to connect with employers or get a job interview, employers are

often reluctant to hire individuals who may have social barriers or disabilities or who have been out of the labour market for a long period.

A number of options were discussed to help address these issues:

Job Placements: Participants had mixed experiences with such programs. Some found that they were steered towards lower paying jobs. Others noted that, even though not everyone gets a job from such a placement, it helps them adjust to working conditions and demonstrate that they are ready, willing and able to do the job.

Volunteering: Many participants spoke positively about their experiences doing volunteer work. They said it was a great way to gain experience, build skills, fill out a resume and make contacts. However, some strongly resisted the idea that ODSP clients should be required to do volunteer work as part of an employment plan. They said it causes anxiety and stress for many ODSP clients. People should be encouraged and supported to take on such roles, but not forced.

Access to Networks: A strong message coming from these discussions was that training is not enough. Clients need to make connections with the networks in their prospective fields.

Peer Support: Peer support networks were suggested as one promising strategy to help guide clients through the system and to share experiences and provide support and encouragement which could, in turn, help link clients into the networks where real opportunities exist.

Additional Comments: Additional comments on facilitating the transition to the workplace included the following:

- Perhaps employer/service provider networks should extend to greater geographical areas
- Government and industry have to speak to each other more
- Many participants underlined the importance of having access to post-secondary education
- Ontario Works has employment/industry specialists, but most clients never speak to such a person. The system should make it easier to link clients to organizations that are more specialized in their respective areas of training
- Clients should be informed on the real prospects for jobs and then channeled into the programs that can connect them to prospective employers
- If a specific kind of training is unlikely to lead to a placement, clients should be informed of this from the outset
- Many clients have high levels of expertise. They don't just want a job, they want a good job. The system does little to connect them with the right employer match.

6. Good Jobs or McJobs? Getting Back in the Workforce

Almost everyone in our sessions wanted employment of some kind. Employment was not just about income. It was also about self-respect. The challenges around finding a decent job, however, left many participants anxious and frustrated. They felt the system had been designed to get clients back into the workforce as quickly as possible. Rather than enroll someone in a program that costs more money and takes more time, service providers seek to “get them out the door.”

Some clients argued that keeping people on social assistance is more costly than making the investment needed to get them off. “Why invest in “McJobs” if you know the client is going to be back on social assistance in a few months?” one asked. “This is not a savings.”

Clients also said they seldom received accurate information about the labour market. They suggested that a much stronger emphasis be put on connecting clients with service providers who are closer to real and meaningful job opportunities.

Discussions such as this prompted the facilitator to probe and explore with clients what kind of relationship with the Ministry they thought would work best. The following synthesizes and systematizes some of the key ideas that emerged from these discussions.

Government services fall into two very different categories. Transactional services are when government makes goods and services available to the public in exchange for money. An example of a transactional service could include a client paying for a drivers' license, health card or parking ticket.

However, many programs and services rely on much more than transactions to be effective. Services to rehabilitate youth in conflict with the law or improving health have high levels of personal involvement that also require a high level of trust between the client and the service provider. We can say these relationships are collaborative to distinguish them from transactional services.

Collaborative relationships are inherently different from transactional services. Collaborative services are dynamic, interactive and emphasize the importance of human relationships in delivering that service. A client's view regarding the quality of this interaction will critically alter the effectiveness of the service. Social assistance programming provided by ODSP is a prime example.

ODSP provides a wide range of employment services and supports to help clients prepare for, find and keep employment, with clients working closely with a caseworker to access these services and supports, which are provided by third party organizations. However, many clients say they are confused by the employment system. They say it is bureaucratic, controlling and unresponsive to their concerns. In short, the relationship may be more transactional than collaborative. These clients need to feel they have

some personal control over their future, which requires a different kind of relationship with the system and the caseworker.

A promising strategy would be to build on work that is already underway around active case management to establish a partnership between clients and the social assistance system that emphasizes the collaborative relationship, rather than the transactional one. Clients would work closely with their employment service provider and/or caseworker to develop a personal plan to become employed or achieve other goals.

This plan would include several stages. Each stage would have clear goals and a practical strategy to achieve them, along with a statement of the resources and supports required. Each stage would also build on the last one and include milestones and measures for success, such as completing a training course, researching employment opportunities or identifying possible employment contacts.

This idea of a more personalized plan was warmly received by a large majority of the participants who heard it. It struck them as a promising way to provide them with some control over their situation and their futures, while allowing them to work constructively within the social assistance program.

7. Conclusion

Throughout the 11 discussion sessions, clients offered a wide range of comments and suggestions on specific aspects of Ontario Works and ODSP, which have been summarized in this report. By way of a conclusion, it may be useful to recap this with the following highlights:

- **Caseworkers:** Clients want more reliable access to their caseworkers and expect to be treated with respect and courtesy.
- **Shared Accountability:** Clients believe accountability should not flow in one direction only. Clients and the system should be accountable to one another, so when the system makes errors, it too should take responsibility and answer for them.
- **Needs Assessment:** The current system does a poor job of assessing clients' needs and defines needs too narrowly.
- **Benefits:** Very few clients feel the basic rates on either ODSP or Ontario Works are adequate, especially for housing, dental, nutritional needs and transportation.
- **Correspondence and Claims:** Clients find the system rule-bound and bureaucratic and do not understand either the rationale or the requirements well.

- ***Program information:*** Clients need reliable, accurate and timely information on programs and supports. Generally, clients concluded that they should be less dependent on caseworkers for this information and should assume more responsibility for getting it. However, this won't work unless information is more easily accessible and clients have internet access and computer literacy.
- ***Labour Market Information:*** There should be access to accurate, current and timely advice and information about employment opportunities and realistic career paths within clients' communities.
- ***Connecting with the Workplace:*** There should be a stronger emphasis on connecting clients with service providers who are closer to the real job opportunities.