

A DISCUSSION PAPER: ISSUES AND IDEAS

COMMENTS ON:

the vision

issue 1: reasonable expectations and necessary supports to employment

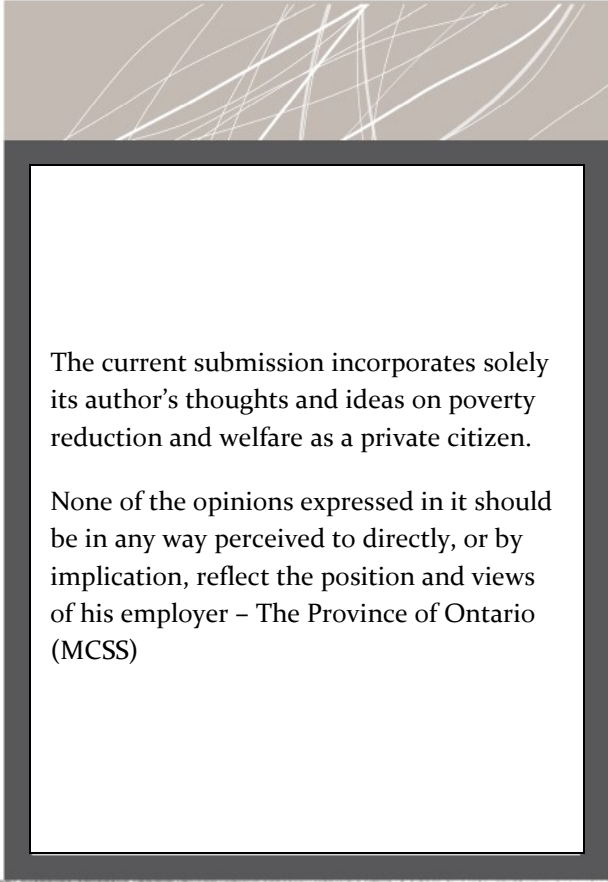
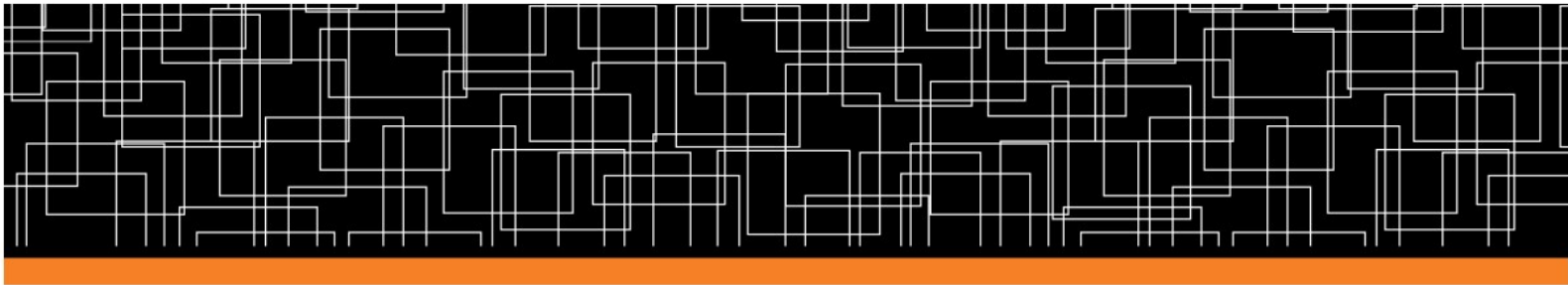
issue 2: appropriate benefit structure

issue 3: easier to understand

issue 4: viable over the long term

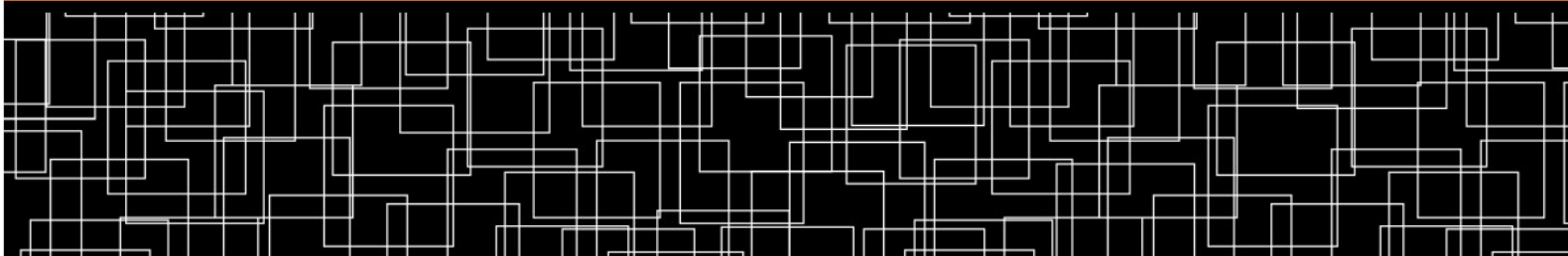


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The current submission incorporates solely its author's thoughts and ideas on poverty reduction and welfare as a private citizen.

None of the opinions expressed in it should be in any way perceived to directly, or by implication, reflect the position and views of his employer – The Province of Ontario (MCSS)





The Vision:

“A 21st century income security system that enables all Ontarians to live with dignity, participate in their communities, and contribute to a prospering economy.”

In formal interviews and informal conversations, recipients of social assistance have expressed dissatisfaction with being treated as objects of the current system of social assistance and attributed the role of passive recipients. They have shared frustration by the fact that the processes of initial and on-going eligibility substitute the control, discretion, choice and decision making powers in their lives with a rigid system of compulsory rules of compliance.

A recipient of ODSP who had been rendered ineligible for the month by a combination of fairly low earnings income and fairly high CPP-D rate shared once being aware that working 5-6 hours less, paid at \$10.25/hour, would mean losing \$51.25 – \$60.50 in taxable wages but qualifying for the tax free \$100 Work-related ODSP benefit. Still, this person chose to pick the extra hours regarding employment as the only way out of government dependence.

This person had consciously chosen to forgo an obviously beneficial alternative from a RECIPIENT’S stand point and thus become an active PARTICIPANT in the welfare system.

The Discussion Paper sets the tone for a shift in the philosophy of social assistance administration towards modifying the existing incentives and providing new ones to encourage participants to actively seek employment and move from government dependence to self-sufficiency. It will hopefully perpetuate a process of transition from the rigid, difficult to understand and administer equitably rule-driven system of social assistance to a more humane, participant-centered system in which participants feel like respected partners and which gives them a progressively growing responsibility, choice, self-help options, decision-making powers and degree of control over their lives while receiving assistance.

The submission generally views the Ontario Disability Support Program but the change in philosophy underlying it applies, to a higher degree perhaps, to the system of general welfare.



Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

Working with Employers


It is important to keep Employers actively involved in guiding employment services in the process of equipping ODSP participants with the right training and skills required to adequately meet the Employers' needs and take advantage of a labour market that is expected to shrink significantly with the generations of baby-boomers reaching retirement age. Though negative for the economy as a whole, the shrinking labour market may be a major facilitating factor in opening opportunities to participants in the system of social assistance. These opportunities, however, will materialize only if the developing labour market trends and skills demand are proactively monitored and the shaping trends anticipated, not followed, by adequately targeted employment services.

Considering that the process is already under way, it would be important to:

1. Establish an active on-going dialogue with industry and trade associations, chambers of commerce, regional economic and community development agencies, employer organizations, individual large employers, unions, regulatory, licensing and standardization bodies and agencies from all levels of government and other players in the field in an attempt to get as much information as possible on evolving labour market trends, employer needs and demand for labour, regional and community priorities.

Once summarized and analysed, this information can be used in improving the efficiency of existing employment services or designing, developing and delivering new services to meet growing or new demand by offering adequate skills upgrading and/or new capacity and skills building employment services to participants in the system of social assistance.

2. Create powerful incentives for employers to overcome the prevailing perception of "human capital depreciation" and stimulate them to employ people on social assistance, including people with disabilities like:
 - Wage subsidies to offset the mandatory employer contribution payments and taxes on salary, likely in combination with corporate tax incentives.
 - Assist employers who employ people with disabilities to meet the requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act;
 - Continue to provide funding to assist employers to accommodate employees' disabilities to help them reach their full potential, improve their productivity and prospects of keeping the job;
 - Offer employers professional liability (if needed) and WSIB insurance for each participant on social assistance employed;

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3. Fund 100% of the cost of employment services recommended or requested by the employer to appropriately upgrade the skills and train ODSP participants, provided the employer commits to a specified minimum term of employment.

The initiatives targeted at determining employers' needs and demand for labour, as well as improving the effectiveness of existing employment training programs and designing/developing new programs do not seem to require any specific regulation and may commence as one of the expected deliverables of the review process.

Improving, diversifying and introducing new incentives to employers who hire social assistance participants, on the other hand, seems to require a much greater interaction and intensive legislative collaboration between different levels of government and more time.

Effectiveness of Employment Services and Supports

In recent years, both the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario have moved to integrated service delivery models by establishing Service Canada and Service Ontario respectively.


Considering a similar "one window" approach in the delivery of employment services seems to make a lot of sense. It offers the potential user, a much easier access to ALL skills upgrading/training programs and creates opportunities for overcoming the current perception of fragmentation in the field by setting unified eligibility review, skills assessment and service delivery processes. In addition to considerable cost efficiencies, the "one window" approach offers greater flexibility and improved efficiency and effectiveness of employment services by eliminating areas of overlap.

Capacity and Aspirations of People with Disabilities

The current system of employment supports for people with disabilities is likely to benefit from improvements in at least two areas:

1. Reshape the offered employment related benefits and exemptions to provide strong incentives and motivate people to seek employment which will allow them to utilize their full potential.

The current ODSP legislation allows an exemption for "voluntary payments and financial gifts" of up to \$6,000 per member of the benefit unit, with no impact on the benefit unit's entitlement in each 12 month period. Each dollar of earnings, on the other hand, immediately decreases the earner's ODSP entitlement.



This puts ODSP participants with affluent friends and relatives in a privileged position and sends a wrong message to participants and the public. A hypothetical couple, with two dependent children who go to school and affluent friends or relatives could potentially add an extra \$24,000/year, fully exempt, to their ODSP income support, without losing a cent from it.

If the same hypothetical family could only rely on the skills and labour of the parents to improve their circumstances, and both parents earned a total of \$24,000 net during the year, they would receive \$2,400 in Work-related benefits but lose \$12,000 to the 50% deduction, or the addition to their ODSP income would be only \$14,400 for the year, clearly putting them at disadvantage.

In spite of the difference in the nature of the income and the question of fairness in comparing the incomes of people receiving social assistance and those working full-time in low-wage jobs, this disparity can hardly be considered motivating.

To eliminate it, and acknowledge that people in similar circumstances have similar needs, the reformed system of social assistance would likely need to consider levelling the field by exempting up to \$6,000 of net earnings, or a combination of financial gifts and net earnings for every BU applicant and spouse in every 12 month period, or charge financial gifts in a manner similar to earnings.

2. The employment supports programs currently offered to people with disabilities offer predominantly entry level job placements and do not seem to be sufficiently geared to:
 - a) adequately address the needs of participants with higher and/or highly sophisticated skills from education or previous employment, including foreign trained professionals and university graduates on ODSP income support; and
 - b) provide a viable alternative leading participants away from government dependence onto the road of self-reliance.

Though cases under a) above represent the exception rather than the rule, establishing working partnerships with other ministries, institutions of post-secondary education and private service providers catering to clientele with such skill sets would better position the currently offered employment services programs to serve such participants.



Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure


The new system of social assistance must establish an objective base to be used in determining fair levels for the social assistance rates that will both ensure that participants in the system are able to adequately address their basic needs and pay for housing, but not put low wage earners who are not on social assistance at disadvantage. To adequately address the trade-offs involved, it is often recommended that social assistance rates are tied to the Low Income Cut Offs produced statistically.

A version of this approach could perhaps be offered by tying social assistance rates to the minimum hourly wages regulated by provincial labour legislation and taking into consideration the cost of health benefits which participants in the system of social assistance receive “in-kind”. The differences in the treatment of income from social assistance and low wage earnings for income tax purposes, as well as the role of other programs – e. g. The Trillium Drug Program should also be factored in the process of establishing adequate social assistance rates. Generally, people with incomes in the same tax bracket and similar family composition, enjoy similar tax credits and child benefits.

In addition, provisions should be made to ensure that participants whose ability to participate in employment initiatives is severely limited by their medical condition have their benefits adjusted to allow them to live with dignity. This could perhaps be accomplished by applying a graded adjustment coefficient based on the participant’s medical condition and the level of participation it allows.

The reformed system of social assistance has a definite place for the Employment Related health benefits – Extended Health Benefit and Transitional Health Benefit. These benefits ensure that people are better off working by providing health benefits to social assistance participants whose incomes from earnings and paid training programs have made them ineligible for financial support.

Offering free basic dental coverage, in addition to coverage through the Trillium Drug Program, to all low-wage earners and their families who do not get health benefits through their employers or social assistance comes to mind as a fairness measure that will ensure that they are not put at disadvantage.




The current philosophy of social assistance seems to be entirely based on the understanding that as part of their wealth-redistribution function, governments/levels of government administer systems of welfare in which the cost is covered 100% by transfer payments. In those systems the social assistance administrator staff are entrusted with all program and benefit entitlement eligibility decisions. They are guided by complex sets of rules detailed in acts, regulations and directives, and a great deal of discretion. Participants are often in the role of objects of the system and are expected to contribute to the process merely by complying (report, provide documents, attend interviews, make applications for income from other programs, etc.)

The reformed, participant-centered, system of social assistance can greatly benefit by a new philosophy; one that allows participants growing opportunities for self-help and increased choice, decision making powers and control over their lives. A philosophy that regards social assistance as a temporary stage in the lives of most participants and will put in place a process to enable them to move away from government dependence to self-reliance. The new system will establish a new benefit structure and set new levels, organization and administration of exempt assets and earnings to reflect and support the participants' new role as subjects of the reformed system of social assistance. The new benefit structure can include, in addition to the already existing benefits, a new set of SELF-FUNDED benefits through which participants will be allowed to assume a progressively larger portion of their monthly costs with the increase of their earnings or assets accumulated through employment and/or "voluntary payments and financial gifts".

To allow participants to accumulate the financial resources to finance SELF-FUNDED benefits, the reformed system of social assistance can consider setting up Participant Accounts (PAs) upon admission. Those PAs will be jointly administered by the participants and the assistance administrators' staff and organized in a manner that allows participants to spend or withdraw money from them to fund additional Self-Funded benefits. The spending related to those self-funded benefits will be authorized by the social administrators' staff and will always have an impact on the participants' entitlement for the month. Depending on the purpose of the requested spending and the level of liquid assets available to the participant, that impact will range from 10% to 30%.

In addition, people receiving "voluntary payments and/or financial gifts" will be asked to follow the same rules and deposit amounts exceeding the asset levels allowed to people with no such contributions into PAs.



Establishing PAs and allowing new levels of exempt assets and earnings can set the foundation that will allow participants the stimulus and the means to move away from government dependence to self-reliance and self-sufficiency. To accomplish the transition, participants will be expected to assume progressively higher portion of the costs associated with their participation in the system of social assistance. This portion will grow in direct proportion to the growth of their earnings and/or assets, irrespective of the source of income contributing to the growth of the participants' liquid assets.

Even though the level of liquid assets allowed to a single participant at application may be limited to \$10,000 when determining initial eligibility, or proportionate level depending on the family composition, once admitted single participants can be allowed to keep in their PAs a balance of up to \$14,999, or such other proportionate amount depending on the family composition.

Participants who can work and those who receive voluntary payments and financial gifts will eventually come to a point where they will be able to assume some or all of the costs associated with their participation in the system of social assistance.

For example, a single participant applying for ODSP can be accepted with a total of \$10,000 in liquid assets. Of these \$5,000 can remain directly accessible to the participant and the other \$5,000 can be deposited in the participant's PA for assisted administration in paying for self-funded benefits. Income from earnings and/or financial gifts will be used to grow the balance of the PA.

Participants will be able to assume part or full responsibility of their budget costs because the amount of assets they keep in their PAs or their earnings, or a combination of those have grown to allow, and require, them to do so. Using current rates in the table below, starting at a PA balance of \$7,000 the single participant in the example will be assuming proportionately larger share of the cost associated with his/her participation in the system of social assistance and at a PA balance of \$15,000, s/he will practically fund 100% of her/his monthly budget needs receiving only health related benefits.


PA Balance up to:	Exempt Liquid Assets	TOTAL Liquid Assets	Asset Level Coefficient%	Basic Needs \$584.00	Shelter \$469.00	SDA \$86.00	Medical Travel \$72.00	TOTAL from Assistance	TOTAL from PA	Total budget month
\$6,999	\$5,000	\$11,999	0%	\$584.00	\$469.00	\$86.00	\$72.00	\$1,211.00	\$0.00	\$1,211.00
\$7,999	\$5,000	\$12,999	10%	\$525.60	\$422.10	\$77.40	\$64.80	\$1,089.90	\$121.10	\$1,211.00
\$8,999	\$5,000	\$13,999	15%	\$496.40	\$398.65	\$73.10	\$61.20	\$1,029.35	\$181.65	\$1,211.00
\$9,999	\$5,000	\$14,999	20%	\$467.20	\$375.20	\$68.80	\$57.60	\$968.80	\$242.20	\$1,211.00
\$10,999	\$5,000	\$15,999	30%	\$408.80	\$328.30	\$60.20	\$50.40	\$847.70	\$363.30	\$1,211.00
\$11,999	\$5,000	\$16,999	40%	\$350.40	\$281.40	\$51.60	\$43.20	\$726.60	\$484.40	\$1,211.00
\$12,999	\$5,000	\$17,999	60%	\$233.60	\$187.60	\$34.40	\$28.80	\$484.40	\$726.60	\$1,211.00
\$13,999	\$5,000	\$18,999	80%	\$116.80	\$93.80	\$17.20	\$14.40	\$242.20	\$968.80	\$1,211.00
\$14,999	\$5,000	\$19,999	100%	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$1,211.00	\$1,211.00

Table 1 – PA Balance and the Asset Level Coefficient of the participant cost responsibility

Higher rates of exempt earnings will further stimulate participants to seek to utilize their full potential engaging in employment or self-employment initiatives and eventually assume partial or full responsibility of the costs associated with their participation in the system of social assistance. The table on the next page assumes that the participants PA account balance is within the \$6,999, allows a flat net earnings exemption of \$500 for a total of \$6,000/year, eliminates the work-related benefit of \$100, applies a direct 100% deduction of the net earnings above the allowed \$500 and offers an option to deposit the net equivalent of the excess gross earnings into the PA account as fully exempt:

Earnings										BU Budget				Income Source Analysis			
Gross Earnings Month	Gross Year	Fed Tax	Prov Tax	CPP	EI	TOTAL Deduct	Net Earn	Exem Net Earn	100% Flat Deduct	BN	Shelter	SDA	MSN Travel	TOTAL Gross Income Month	Amount of Transfer Payments		Potential Amount of PA deposit
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16(11:13)	17(11:14)	18
25.00	300.00				0.45	0.45	24.55	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,236.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
50.00	600.00				0.85	0.85	49.15	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,261.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
100.00	1,200.00				1.78	1.78	98.22	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,311.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
200.00	2,400.00				3.56	3.56	196.44	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,411.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
300.00	3,600.00			0.41	5.34	5.75	294.25	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,511.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
400.00	4,800.00			5.36	7.12	12.48	387.52	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,611.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
500.00	6,000.00			10.31	8.90	19.21	480.79	500	0.00	584	469	86	72	1,711.00	1,139.00	1,211.00	0.00
600.00	7,200.00			15.26	10.68	25.94	574.06	500	74.06	584	469	86	72	1,736.94	1,064.94	1,136.94	74.06
700.00	8,400.00			20.21	12.46	32.67	667.33	500	167.33	584	469	86	72	1,743.67	971.67	1,043.67	167.33
800.00	9,600.00			25.16	14.24	39.40	760.60	500	260.60	584	469	86	72	1,750.40	878.40	950.40	260.60
900.00	10,800.00			30.11	16.02	46.13	853.87	500	353.87	584	469	86	72	1,757.13	785.13	857.13	353.87
1,000.00	12,000.00			35.06	17.80	52.86	947.14	500	447.14	584	469	86	72	1,763.86	691.86	763.86	447.14
1,100.00	13,200.00	11.16		40.01	19.58	70.75	1,029.25	500	529.25	584	469	86	72	1,781.75	609.75	681.75	529.25
1,200.00	14,400.00	25.15	2.88	44.96	21.36	94.35	1,105.65	500	605.65	584	469	86	72	1,805.35	533.35	605.35	605.65
1,300.00	15,600.00	39.14	12.30	49.91	23.14	124.49	1,175.51	500	675.51	584	469	86	72	1,835.49	463.49	535.49	675.51
1,400.00	16,800.00	53.13	21.72	54.86	24.92	154.63	1,245.37	500	745.37	584	469	86	72	1,865.63	393.63	465.63	745.37
1,500.00	18,000.00	67.12	31.14	59.81	26.70	184.77	1,315.23	500	815.23	584	469	86	72	1,895.77	323.77	395.77	815.23
1,600.00	19,200.00	81.11	37.78	64.76	28.48	212.13	1,387.87	500	887.87	584	469	86	72	1,923.13	251.13	323.13	887.87
1,700.00	20,400.00	95.10	44.49	69.71	30.26	239.56	1,460.44	500	960.44	584	469	86	72	1,950.56	178.56	250.56	960.44
1,800.00	21,600.00	109.10	55.20	74.66	32.04	271.00	1,529.00	500	1,029.00	584	469	86	72	1,982.00	110.00	182.00	1,029.00
1,900.00	22,800.00	123.09	65.91	79.61	33.82	302.43	1,597.57	500	1,097.57	584	469	86	72	2,013.43	41.43	113.43	1,097.57
2,000.00	24,000.00	137.08	76.62	84.56	35.60	333.86	1,666.14	500	1,166.14	584	469	86	72	2,044.86	-27.14	44.86	1,166.14

TABLE 2 Gross Earnings with a flat net earnings exemption of \$500 (maximum of \$6,000/year), no \$100 work-related benefit and a flat 100% deduction of the excess earnings unless the net amount over the allowed \$500 were deposited in the PA



The exempt \$500 of net earnings account for approx \$520 of the participant's gross earnings per month – i.e. participants earning up to \$520/month will end up receiving their full entitlement and keeping 100% of what they earn for a gross monthly income of \$1,731 in the provided example, compared to gross earnings of \$1,822/month for a person working 40 hours/week and paid at \$10.25/hour, other government credits and payments kept equal for families of similar composition.

Net earnings above the allowed \$500 are to be charged at 100% unless their equivalent –Column 18 of Table 2 – is deposited in the PA account in which case they will be fully exempt.

This additional exemption will stimulate participants to build their PA balances out of which they would be able to finance additional Self-Funded benefits and eventually assuming a growing part of the costs associated with their participation in the system of social assistance by allowing them to keep 100% of their earnings with no immediate impact on their monthly entitlement at the beginning.

The proposed modifications aim at directly changing the role of participants in the system of social assistance.

Examples of Self-funded benefits may be:

- paying for optional product features not covered by the basic coverage provided through social assistance
- going away on vacation;
- an occasional night out with friends;
- going to the (movie)theatre and having dinner out after the performance;
- other entertainment;
- purchasing appliances which are not normally covered by transfer funding;
- buying a gym membership;
- paying for vitamins and supplements not covered under OHIP or SDA;
- making a donation to a registered charity or a natural disaster fund, etc.

Participants will request self-funded benefits for things that people who do not depend on government assistance have the discretion to do or purchase and whose cost they are unable to accommodate within their regular monthly budgets.

Self-funded benefits will always have an impact on the amount of assistance participants get from the government for the month in which they request the self-funded benefit and that impact will act as a deterrent the participants will have to consciously overcome in the process of making the decision to request a self-funded benefits.


The shortfall in the participant’s monthly budget resulting from making the request will be covered by funds from the PA – a minimum of 10% of the participant’s entitlement – including their SDA and MSN. In the Table below, a single participant receiving SDA \$86 and MSN Travel \$72 requests \$450 from the PA to purchase a flat panel TV. Depending on the balance of the recipient’s PA, the components of his/her monthly budget, using the currently valid shelter and basic needs allowances may look as shown in the Table below:

PA Balance up to:	Orig Exempt LA	TOTAL Liquid Assets	Req from PA	Self-Funded Benefit Coeff %	Asset Level Coeff%	Basic Needs \$584.00	Shelter \$469.00	SDA \$86.00	Medical Travel \$72.00	TOTAL from Assist	TOTAL from PA	Total budget month
\$6,999	\$5,000	\$11,999	\$450	10%	0%	\$525.60	\$422.10	\$77.40	\$64.80	\$1,089.90	\$571.10	\$1,661.00
\$7,999	\$5,000	\$12,999		15%	10%	\$438.00	\$351.75	\$64.50	\$54.00	\$908.25	\$752.75	\$1,661.00
\$8,999	\$5,000	\$13,999		15%	15%	\$408.80	\$328.30	\$60.20	\$50.40	\$847.70	\$813.30	\$1,661.00
\$9,999	\$5,000	\$14,999		20%	20%	\$350.40	\$281.40	\$51.60	\$43.20	\$726.60	\$934.40	\$1,661.00
\$10,999	\$5,000	\$15,999		20%	30%	\$292.00	\$234.50	\$43.00	\$36.00	\$605.50	\$1,055.50	\$1,661.00
\$11,999	\$5,000	\$16,999		30%	40%	\$175.20	\$140.70	\$25.80	\$21.60	\$363.30	\$1,297.70	\$1,661.00
\$12,999	\$5,000	\$17,999		30%	60%	\$58.40	\$46.90	\$8.60	\$7.20	\$121.10	\$1,539.90	\$1,661.00
\$13,999	\$5,000	\$18,999		20%	80%	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$1,661.00	\$1,661.00
\$14,999	\$5,000	\$19,999		0%	100%	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$1,661.00	\$1,661.00

Table 3 – Coordinating the Self-Funded Benefit Coefficient and the Asset Level Coefficient

Self-funded benefits will allow participants to behave as responsible, rational consumers who are in control of a process in which they will have to forego receiving full monthly entitlement and fund the shortfall by committing personal resources, instead of just getting and spending extra “free” “government” money.

CONSIDERATIONS: All numbers provided here are provisional and given as examples, needing to be further detailed to cover more family types, refined, cross-referenced and coordinated to be considered final and ready to be applied to real-life situations.



Issue 3: Easier to Understand


Upon joining the system of social assistance, rules of compulsory compliance replace the participants' choice and decision making powers, technically divesting them of control over their lives. The rules, regulations and directives, although available to the general public, are of such volume and complexity to confuse seriously the average applicant/participant and be referred to as incomprehensible (stupid) by many participants.

Confusion and misunderstandings can occur in life situations in which all participants are expected to have good knowledge of the situation governing rules – work-place, traffic, every day social interaction, etc. Starting a new job or moving to a new place can be stressful and frustrating at first until we learn the rules organizing the new environment. Normally, this initial period of discomfort is over within one to three months depending on the breadth and depth of the change.

Participants in the system of social assistance, on the other hand, are introduced to an environment with rules inherently unclear to them and no realistic prospects of ever becoming much clearer as they do not and cannot be expected to take all the required training that enables the staff of the social assistance administrator to apply the myriad of rules governing initial and ongoing eligibility. The number of rules, and the even larger number of exceptions as well as the wide scope of discretion applied, make it difficult for participants to perceive the system as a logically organized network of supports aimed at assisting them to cross a difficult stretch in their lives. In this new environment they have very limited control on decisions of vital importance to their lives and have to fully rely on the competence of their caseworker to navigate the system on their behalf, WITH THEIR BEST INTEREST AT HEART and hope that that caseworker will not take “short-cuts” at their expense. Participants have reported that their lack of control and inability to comprehend how and why the system works the way it does often result in confusion, suspicion, apprehension and anger.

Discretion in administering benefits, although intended to help by allowing consideration of individual circumstances, in fact confuses participants further.

The complexity of rule-based systems of welfare and the latitude of allowed discretion, in spite of being recognized as sources of frustration and confusion, seem to have been features of social assistance in Canada for at least the last 25 years, because they are clearly defined as flaws of the system in “Welfare in Canada - The Tangled Safety Net” (Le bien être social au Canada – Un filet de sécurité troué) a publication of the National Council of Welfare dating as back as 1986-87. And that same publication recommends that the rules are simplified and the delivery of social assistance benefits is standardized.



“Now that I have a new worker, I walked in to see her two weeks ago. She said as she was handing me my support payments for the month: “You know, considering that you are unemployable; I don’t think it’s fair that you should take such a loss. I will go and talk to Mr. M.” She left the office, came back and said: “You will get an additional \$196.” Now I had previously been denied that amount. I walk across the hall and I’m given it from another worker. These are rules I don’t understand.” (*Welfare in Canada - The Tangled Safety Net, Chapter-1 Complex Rules, Page 15, November 1987*)

A considerable step towards standardizing the service delivery within ODSP was made by compiling and publishing the Business Processes Manual within the Modernization project in 2010. The standards included in the manual could perhaps be more streamlined by eliminating the allowance for “established office practices/procedures” and only allowing variations to accommodate regional and demographic differences.

The reformed system of social assistance can benefit greatly by becoming more defined and predictable, offering participants the same level of service and asking them to comply with the same requirements with regards time-lines, documentation, benefit eligibility cycles, etc. and producing similar results when addressing similar circumstances.

Work on simplifying the rules, however, seems to have not begun yet.



Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

It seems that to make the reformed system of social assistance viable over the long term, efforts must focus on:

1. Ensuring the reformed system of social assistance is participant-centered and allows participants growing levels of responsibility, choice, decision making powers and control over their lives. As discussed under Appropriate Benefit Structure above, this can materialize through improved stimuli , supports and incentives for participants to seek employment and actively contribute to their communities;
2. Ensuring the reformed system of social assistance proactively addresses real life developments and anticipating, instead of following, shaping trends;
3. Setting up a mechanism of maintaining an on-going dialogue with participants, staff, community partners, stakeholders and cooperating departments and agencies aimed at keeping its focus on evolving priorities;
4. Making it resistant to politically motivated setbacks by measures like:
 - Removing political biases from it;
 - Turning it into a provincial instead of a single party initiative by developing a shared vision of the social assistance reform supported by all political parties represented in the Legislature;
 - Using the shared vision to build a broad consensus and commitment documented in a long-term Memorandum of Understanding.
5. Introducing proactive anticipation of real life trends and needs as an important feature of the culture of the reformed system of social assistance which will enable it to flexibly adapt to and accommodate them instead of trying to fit new developments into the already existing rules;
6. Modernizing and improving the efficiency of the system's operations by measures like:
 - Digitizing all paper files on fast networks of secure servers;
 - Removing physical file rooms from offices;
 - Eliminating the current practice of circulating paper files province wide;
 - Moving and storing all paper files to a central secure location (Central File Depot);
 - Equipping offices with high speed document scanners;
 - Limiting the circulation of paper documents.



The wish-list of possible improvements could go on. However, it will only represent the writer's point of view, with its biases and limitations.

This submission is made in spite of them, in the belief that the real value of the process initiated by the Discussion Paper lies in summoning as many points of view as possible that will look at the system from different perspectives and levels, and will hopefully contribute to a better whole.



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