

Commission for the  
Review of Social Assistance  
in Ontario

# What We Heard:

*A summary of discussions on  
social assistance*

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February 2012

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**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.

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## Introduction

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In the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Ontario government committed to reviewing social assistance — Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) — with a focus on removing barriers and increasing opportunities for people to work. It subsequently appointed the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (SARAC) to provide advice on a proposed scope for the review. Taking into account the advice of the Council, the government established the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario in November 2010.

Our task is to carry out a comprehensive review and provide specific recommendations for improving the social assistance system. The government has also asked us to provide advice on how an Ontario housing benefit aligns with social assistance reform.

We launched our engagement process with the release of *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas* and a *Summary and Workbook* in June 2011. The discussion paper asked questions to confirm the key issues in social assistance and to identify possible solutions. The paper was structured around the five outcomes contained in the Terms of Reference for the review:

- Reasonable expectations and necessary supports to employment
- Appropriate benefit structure
- Easier to understand
- Viable over the long term
- An integrated Ontario position on income security

This report summarizes the input we received through written submissions (workbooks, short comments, longer submissions), community conversations, stakeholder meetings and discussions with First Nations. The comments reflect people's own experiences with the social assistance system, but may not always reflect program policy. A number of reasons may account for this, including the complexity of the system and the way services are actually delivered. Also, as is inevitable in a summary document, some ideas will not be included or will be touched on only briefly. Please visit our website ([www.socialassistancereview.ca](http://www.socialassistancereview.ca)) to review the full submissions that interest you.

In addition to engaging with Ontarians, we conducted research to learn more about the issues in social assistance and the experiences of other jurisdictions. Some of the key themes from the engagement process and our research work are highlighted in a separate document, *Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform* (available on our website). That paper discusses approaches to improving some of the key areas of the social assistance system. It also asks questions to obtain input on approaches to transforming social assistance and on broader issues that affect the system. The feedback from both discussion papers, as well as our research findings, will be used to develop our final recommendations to government in June 2012.

## The Engagement Process

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We offered a number of ways to respond to the June discussion paper, including an online workbook. We received over 700 workbooks, written submissions and shorter comments in response to the paper.

We also encouraged community conversations on social assistance that would bring together different voices, as well as reflect unique regional and community perspectives. We made available a *Guide to Hosting a Community Conversation* to support these dialogues.

In each community, we invited local organizations to arrange sessions and site visits over the course of a day (three days in Toronto). The composition of the convening committees varied, but often included United Ways, Social Planning Councils, poverty reduction committees, and municipal service providers. In all, more than 2,000 people were engaged through the 11 community conversations in which we participated.

Many other communities responded to the invitation to organize opportunities for dialogue and to share with us the ideas that emerged from these sessions (see Appendix for a list of communities that organized conversations).

In addition to the community visits, we held meetings with groups of stakeholders with a variety of perspectives. We met with people with lived experience, including current and former Ontario Works and ODSP recipients and groups of people with particular experience, such as newcomers receiving assistance. We met with provincial and municipal government agencies and organizations, employer and labour organizations, social assistance and employment service providers, health and disability organizations, legal clinics, and poverty reduction networks and advocates.

In keeping with our mandate, and to ensure that approaches to reform would reflect the unique needs and priorities of First Nations, we held separate discussions with First Nations communities and Ontario Works administrators from across the province. We engaged with First Nations through a variety of different channels: the Chiefs of Ontario Committee on Social Services, communities and political leadership through attendance at Annual General Assemblies and an All Ontario Chiefs Conference, and through organizing regional dialogue sessions across the province that brought together First Nations in a particular geographic area.

We also met with social assistance administrators through the Ontario Native Welfare Administrator's Association (ONWAA). At ONWAA's Fall Assembly, we attended sessions specifically designed for us to hear and discuss the many challenges and options for social services reform for First Nations in different regions across the province. This strategy allowed us to hear from First Nations individuals living in diverse communities and circumstances.

To incorporate the views and experiences of Aboriginal people living off-reserve, we attended the Annual General Meeting of the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC). OFIFC staff, along with local Friendship Centre staff, attended seven of the 11 community conversations that we attended, and also organized an additional eight community meetings in Northern cities (see Appendix for a list of First Nations discussions).

We continued to meet with stakeholders throughout the fall to engage groups that were underrepresented in other facets of the engagement process, including business organizations, small and large employers, and labour unions. We also arranged meetings with academics, technical experts and others to address gaps in our understanding.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the engagement process. We were impressed by the insights of participants and the thoughtfulness of responses. We were struck by the commitment of many service providers and caseworkers to provide the best possible supports to people, despite the constraints of the system. We were also moved by the aspirations of the people with lived experience who shared their personal stories with us.

*All the people we interviewed had hopes – for themselves, their children and their community. They want to work, be productive and contribute. In fact, many were already doing so in numerous ways. Many wanted to turn their own lived experience and knowledge into an asset by working to help others. Ultimately people wanted to live as independently as possible given their circumstances.*

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—PEOPLE'S BLUEPRINT

## Chapter 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

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*The review will make recommendations that will enable the government to place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation.*

—TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

### *What We Heard...*

#### ***Barriers to Employment***

*As a former Ontario Works recipient and current user of mental health supports it is my belief that meaningful daily or weekly activity increases self-esteem, improves mood and offers hope. Often through volunteer work networking occurs and paid employment can happen. Meaningful work/volunteer activity allows a person to see themselves beyond disability. I believe there is a job for everyone. We just need to be creative!*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

We heard through the engagement process that people receiving social assistance – both Ontario Works and ODSP – want to work. Many people with lived experience shared their personal stories of the barriers that got in their way, including the stigma of being “on assistance.”

People with disabilities described how the stigma of social assistance could be compounded by negative attitudes, misunderstandings and fears about disability. They highlighted a lack of awareness of disability, particularly

“invisible” disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, some brain injuries), episodic disabilities and mental illness.

A number of submissions identified barriers stemming from racialized discrimination and exclusion. One report shared the experiences of many in Toronto’s Black Creek area who have faced discrimination in employment based on skin colour, language, accent, birthplace, and cultural and religious practices. Roundtable discussions organized by the Ontario Council for Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) highlighted the fact that social assistance recipients can face multiple forms of discrimination because of race, immigrant status, and disability.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres and the Ontario Native Women’s Association discussed the need to address racism and discrimination through cultural sensitivity training for social assistance workers. They also suggested that connecting urban Aboriginal social assistance recipients with Aboriginal organizations and culturally appropriate support services could help improve outcomes for clients.

Participants suggested that the government undertake public awareness campaigns and employer education to help reduce misconceptions and biases about people receiving social assistance and create more welcoming workplaces. Some recommended that the Ontario Public Service and municipalities lead by example to change attitudes by hiring people receiving social assistance and people with disabilities through targeted recruitment initiatives. The ongoing implementation of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* was seen as an opportunity to do more employer education to support the hiring of people with mental illness and other disabilities.

*Since my induction to the system, my health has deteriorated in many ways. Mostly everything is stress related.... It doesn't help that I am alone... and have no support anymore from my family out of town.... I have not been able to sustain many healthy relationships anymore because I have no money to get involved in anything or do anything... Even volunteering costs money for transportation, clothing, grooming.*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

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Many people described the barriers to employment resulting from many years of living in poverty. A recurring example was not being able to afford needed dental work and the impact this has on health, self-confidence, and employment prospects. Other experiences included depression and social isolation. Participants shared how struggling to survive on a very low income makes it hard to socialize and develop a network of personal supports, and to develop the contacts in the work world that are often crucial to finding a job.

In addition to a lack of skills and appropriate training (discussed in the next section), the two most frequently cited barriers to employment were lack of affordable childcare and transportation.

Submissions from women's organizations and others emphasized how mothers receiving social assistance cannot plan to enter training or employment because reliable and affordable childcare services are often unavailable. Women with children who have special needs face even greater challenges. In Toronto, where the waitlist is longest, there were over 3,000 children, in families receiving Ontario Works, waiting for subsidized childcare spaces in December 2011.

Many participants pointed out that transportation is a fundamental barrier to securing employment. In urban areas, the cost of transit was a problem for people trying to look for work and get to interviews and jobs. At community visits in rural and remote communities, and in First Nations communities where there is limited or no public transit, people talked about having to find rides or spend scarce dollars on taxis to get to training or jobs. One example of a local solution was where a major employer in the community provided buses to get people to and from work. For people with disabilities, numerous safety, accessibility and affordability issues related to transportation were identified in all areas of the province.

*Employability is not an either/or – it is a continuum that depends on things like health, age, education, skills, experience, and coping abilities, as well as employment supports, accommodation of disability in the workplace, and the job opportunities available.*

—ODSP ACTION COALITION

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Many submissions and participants provided insights into the multitude of barriers faced by people with disabilities, in addition to those already

mentioned. For example, the lack of attendant services was cited as a significant barrier for people who require assistance with activities of daily living. According to the ARCH Disability Law Centre submission, “until the number of hours of attendant services a person can access is increased substantially, it will be impossible for many people who require these services to engage in employment or other activities outside their home.”

The nature of the jobs available for people trying to enter or re-enter the labour force, especially after a long absence, was consistently highlighted. Many jobs are part-time or short-term and without health benefits.

### ***Employment Services and Supports***

People receiving Ontario Works often said they felt the program emphasized completing the paperwork for a Participation Agreement over identifying and providing the employment supports that they really needed. Some service providers talked about the frustration of employers in small communities who get résumés every month from the same Ontario Works recipients because of the job search requirements built into their Participation Agreements. A common recommendation was that caseworkers should be more flexible in how they develop Participation Agreements to meet both individual and community needs.

Some submissions suggested removing the requirement to develop a Participation Agreement within 30 days of applying for Ontario Works. Many people accessing social assistance support may be in a state of crisis, and need to address it before focusing on employment.

*There seems to be people that are lost in the grey area where they don't qualify for disability but do not possess the physical, social or emotional skills to be successful in the workplace. Those are the people that are getting lost and seen as the 'lifers' on social assistance. They need long-term, in depth help which is not available under the current system.*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

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There was consensus in the view that a one-size-fits-all approach to employment services and supports does not meet people's diverse needs. Some people are job ready and require only minimal support to find employment. Others need more

intensive and ongoing support to address multiple barriers to employment. A number of submissions called for better and more consistent use of assessment tools to identify barriers and the right level of supports. For example, psycho-educational and psycho-vocational assessments to determine strengths and needs, necessary accommodations, and appropriate employment goals were highlighted as critical for people with learning disabilities.

A variety of pre-employment supports and training are currently available through Ontario Works, ODSP and other programs in the province. In our discussions, however, we heard from people who were referred to training courses that did not lead to jobs. Some women talked about being trained as personal support workers in locations where there was no demand. Highly skilled immigrants described being sent to résumé-writing courses, which they did not need.

People identified a wide range of employment services and supports that would help them. While some of them are currently provided, they are neither consistently available across the province nor sufficiently accessible to people with disabilities. The following are some of the services and supports mentioned:

- More stabilization and pre-employment programs to assess and build life skills, such as communication, social skills, planning, and time management
- Improved access to literacy and numeracy upgrading, high school completion, and training geared toward the demands of the local labour market
- More on-the-job training, mentoring, internships, and networking opportunities, especially for internationally trained professionals and other newcomers
- Expanded post-employment supports, such as job coaches and continued access to caseworkers for six to 12 months after starting a job
- Increased support for alternatives to traditional employment including self-employment, especially for people with disabilities, and social enterprises for people with mental health issues and others who may be socially marginalized

A number of submissions recommended that social assistance recipients be supported to attend full-time post-secondary education. They argued that higher education is necessary to obtain sustainable employment and self-reliance in today's labour market, particularly for people supporting families or for people with disabilities who have been out of the labour market for a long time. Various

approaches were suggested for supporting post-secondary education, including allowing people to receive their full social assistance entitlement in addition to an Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) loan, or exempting the OSAP living allowance as income while receiving Ontario Works.

*For individuals with multiple barriers to employment, the current design of Ontario Works is not meeting their needs. They are not considered 'disabled enough' to qualify for ODSP, yet the employment focus of Ontario Works is not responding to their fundamental and more deeply rooted barriers, which in our experience, are primarily addictions and undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues.... These clients and their Ontario Works workers are caught between the inappropriate employment expectations of Ontario Works, and the paucity of community services and time to support these individuals....*

—THE DISTRICT OF THUNDER BAY  
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD

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Many participants and submissions also highlighted the need for more intensive services to meet the needs of people with multiple barriers to employment who may have been receiving social assistance for many years. Some Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) estimated that 70 to 80 per cent of their Ontario Works clients have multiple barriers to employment.

Some CMSMs and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) in Northern Ontario also told us that intensive case management should be the program model for people with multiple barriers, and that additional provincial funding would be required to provide this level of support. CMSMs, DSSABs, and others recommended that wraparound programs, such as the Addiction Services Initiative (ASI) and Hostels to Homes pilot programs, be extended to all communities in the province.

The Ontario Native Welfare Administrator's Association recommended that ASI be extended to all First Nations employment assistance delivery sites to address pressing mental health and addiction challenges. They stressed that in urban centres, Aboriginal-specific services are necessary to improve mental health and addiction treatment outcomes.

Participants in rural areas described the difficulty of accessing employment services and supports. They emphasized the importance of online access and satellite offices.

Many people with disabilities, disability organizations, and employment services working with people with disabilities said that improving employment outcomes is not a primary focus of ODSP. Among those who commented on the ODSP Employment Supports program, most found it successful in placing some people who are job ready into employment, but they recommended that its mandate and funding be expanded to cover assessments, pre-employment preparation, training, and further education.

We heard mixed views about the program's outcome-based funding model, which pays service providers for placing and retaining people with disabilities in employment. While the model focuses on achieving results and providing ongoing workplace supports, the funding maximums can result in a tendency to help those who are easiest to serve. The Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN) and other employment service providers described how they weave together funding from a variety of sources to try to meet clients' needs. ODEN cited five different sources of employment services funding for people with disabilities: the *Developmental Services Act*, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, ODSP Employment Supports, Employment Ontario, and the federal Opportunities Fund. This means that employment service providers spend a lot of time trying to administer and reconcile the different program funding arrangements.

*People with disabilities have higher expectations of themselves than government will ever have.*

—MEETING PARTICIPANT

A number of submissions and participants commented on the first outcome for the review, which includes reasonable expectations and supports for people with disabilities, including treatment or participation requirements. There was general agreement among these submissions that treatment and participation requirements should not be mandatory for people with disabilities. It was argued that treatment is a personal decision, and that many more people with disabilities would voluntarily participate in employment to the maximum of their capacity if barriers were removed and appropriate supports were provided.

*Ensure the social assistance program is both employment and socially focused. While there is general acceptance that the desired end is to assist a person to find and maintain employment, the path and duration this will take is dependent on many variables. Accepting this, the program needs to formally recognize that the true objective of the program should be increasing a person's employability.*

–ONTARIO NATIVE WELFARE ADMINISTRATOR'S ASSOCIATION

First Nations told us about the healing journey their people and communities are undertaking in the wake of the historical relationship between First Nations and Canada through the provisions of the *Indian Act* and the impact of residential schools. Many First Nations communities want flexibility to define their employment programs to better reflect this context. They said that services and supports should be culturally appropriate, developed within the community, and respect local structures. Services and supports should also be integrated with other policies and programs related to First Nations social and economic development, and be connected to the local economy and sustainable employment.

The Ontario Native Welfare Administrator's Association recommended that taking part in cultural or community development activities should be recognized as part of a continuum of employment-related activity under Ontario Works, since they contribute to improving people's job readiness and can help people who may be dealing with mental health issues, trauma or addictions that need to be addressed before employment. Such activities can also have a significant impact on improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities where there are few job opportunities available.

We heard how the lack of job opportunities on-reserve, in some Northern cities, and in communities in close proximity to many First Nations presents a barrier for First Nations people who are seeking employment but have concerns about leaving their cultural communities. For some First Nations people, leaving their home communities to take a job in a non-First Nation cultural environment can be difficult. Discrimination compounds this challenge and becomes a further barrier for First Nations people entering the workforce.

## ***Access to Services and Supports***

Many people commented on the patchwork of employment programs in the province now offered by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities through Employment Ontario (EO), the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, Ontario Works, not-for-profit employment service providers, and others. This results in confusion for social assistance recipients, employers, and service providers, competition among employment service providers, overlaps and gaps in services, and administrative inefficiencies such as duplication of costs.

In order to improve the range of employment programs available to social assistance recipients and facilitate referrals, some municipalities and others recommended that Ontario Works delivery agents should have a clear partnership with their local EO service providers. Some suggested that an agreement could be developed between the Ministry of Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to focus roles and responsibilities. For example, municipalities and First Nations could provide intensive case management to people who have multiple barriers to employment, and refer people who are job ready to EO, or, for First Nations, to the supports available through the federal Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS).

Participants suggested a spectrum of arrangements to improve coordination of employment services. For example, municipalities could provide the full delivery of EO employment services and municipal Ontario Works services, an Employment Resource Centre could be co-located with the Ontario Works office, or a formal network of all local employment service providers could be established to share information.

Some submissions suggested that there should be single points of access in communities, called “Employment Services,” for example, rather than “Ontario Works.” Such a point of access would provide income assistance as well as employment and training supports for all Ontarians, whether they are receiving social assistance or not. This approach would help ensure the same level of service for all job-seekers and remove the stigma of receiving social assistance. However, there was some concern that a move to a one-stop service model could reduce flexibility and the ability to tailor supports to individual needs.

In addition to fragmentation of services, many participants identified the large caseloads per worker as a major barrier to being able to provide people with individualized supports. According to a submission from the Canadian Union of

Public Employees (CUPE), the union representing many Ontario Works caseworkers, the majority of caseworkers have caseloads that range from 150 to 200 clients. A submission from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), the union representing ODSP caseworkers, indicated that those caseworkers have caseloads that range from 230 to 380 clients.

Large caseloads, combined with the need to administer so many rules (discussed in Chapter 3), cause stress for workers and make it extremely challenging for them to provide customized supports. Many people receiving social assistance, particularly ODSP recipients, described negative experiences in dealing with caseworkers.

### ***Working with Employers***

*Many job coaches still approach business owners with a tired and unsuccessful ‘ask’ based on charity or ‘my client will do a good job for you.’ Unless the candidate is a good fit and unless the employer is actively searching for a candidate to fill a position, the job developer will fail. The business case works, charity doesn’t.*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

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Employer representatives stressed that it is important that employment service agencies focus on what businesses need, in addition to the needs of clients. As one employer put it, “what works is an agency that listens.” They noted that it is critical for the employment service provider to understand how particular businesses operate and what their specific requirements are. For example, some small and medium-sized employers said they need candidates who are pre-screened and already trained. Some larger employers said they prefer to do on-the-job training themselves.

Some submissions recommended that the number of employer liaison and job developer positions in Ontario Works/ODSP offices and employment service agencies be increased. People in these positions act as intermediaries to proactively approach employers, and they can understand employers’ needs, connect employers with suitable candidates, and provide post-employment advice and support to both the employer and employee. A number of employers who have hired people receiving ODSP identified job coaching, and an ongoing relationship with the employment service provider or job developer, as key to successful placements.

It was clear from discussions with employers that they, like people receiving social assistance, have diverse needs. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to matching people receiving social assistance with prospective employers or to providing support to both parties to ensure successful placements. Rather, a toolkit or menu of approaches is needed, which may include information, technical advice, and financial incentives such as wage subsidies and tax credits.

Some employers suggested that providing financial incentives to small and medium-sized businesses would assist them in covering recruitment and training costs involved in hiring people receiving social assistance. For example, it was recommended that the Employment Placement with Incentives (EPI) program under Ontario Works be offered for a longer period. EPI provides for up to six months of job retention supports, and incentive packages of up to \$4,500, to employers who hire Ontario Works recipients. Also recommended was the creation of a fund to assist smaller employers with the costs of accommodating people with disabilities in the workplace. Other employers said that they do not favour wage subsidies or other financial incentives, and that employers hire people because there is a good business case for doing so.

We also heard from employers about the effectiveness of business-to-business approaches. For example, through the Ontario Chamber of Commerce Global Experience at Work program, local Chambers conduct outreach to employers in their communities to encourage them to hire internationally trained professionals. This program could be a useful model for improving employment opportunities for people receiving social assistance. Another example is the members of the Ontario Disability Employment Network Champion's League, who promote the benefits of hiring people with disabilities to other business owners and operators.

Other recommendations from employers included establishing a common portal where they could post job opportunities, segmenting employment service providers by industry sector, expanding funding models that reward employment services based on job retention rather than the number of placements, and developing standards of practice for employment service providers.

*Deliver region-specific job skills and life skills training as identified in consultation with local employers, chambers of commerce, industrial associations, economic development agencies, training boards, and perhaps the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Consider joint training opportunities with community partners to provide specific skills required for employment in the [local] area.*

—HASTINGS COUNTY

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We heard from a number of municipalities and not-for-profit employment service providers who are working successfully with employers in their communities to match people receiving social assistance with jobs. Critical to their success is developing relationships with local employers and having a good understanding of the local labour market. Several submissions proposed that the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities should make available better information on current and future workforce requirements.

Several municipal submissions called for social assistance to be recast as a workforce development strategy. Local labour market needs would be matched with training and supports for Ontario Works recipients so that they would be better able to find and keep sustainable jobs.

## Chapter 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

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*The review will make recommendations that will enable the government to establish an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers and supports people's transition into, and attachment within, the labour market.*

—TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

### *What We Heard...*

*The current social assistance rates are one of the greatest challenges to human services in the province. Inadequate income (social assistance rates, living wage, and improved security income) and absolute poverty impedes the individual's and family's ability to move beyond a crisis level to positive mental health, good physical health, participation in the community, safe and affordable housing and gainful employment.*

— CITY OF HAMILTON, COMMUNITY SERVICES

Many people told the Commission that social assistance rates are too low, under both Ontario Works and ODSP. Many people commented specifically on the inadequacy of the rate for single adults receiving Ontario Works. Ottawa Public Health estimated that a single person in Ottawa can expect to pay \$254 per month for nutritious food, and an average rent of \$715 for a bachelor apartment. If relying on Ontario Works and tax credits, it estimated that this individual would be short \$334 each month. The submission also estimated that a family of four with children over the age of six can expect to pay \$759 for a nutritious food basket and an average rent of \$1,227. If this family were relying on Ontario Works, as well as children's benefits and other tax credits, Ottawa Public Health estimated that it would be left with only \$25 after rent and food costs.

People with lived experience identified housing costs as the greatest obstacle to making ends meet. They also identified stable and secure housing as the most important factor in being able to stabilize their lives before looking for work. Many said that rates should reflect regional variations in housing costs, as well as the cost of other necessities, such as food, clothing, and transportation.

People singled out the costs of transportation and telephone service (and sometimes also Internet access) for inclusion in the basic rate. Some recommended that transportation costs be covered through reduced-rate transit passes or subsidies. It was recommended that ODSP cover transportation costs directly for people with disabilities who are involved in educational, volunteer, or other community activities. Currently, people with disabilities have to access this support through Ontario Works.

There was support for the proposal to provide a monthly \$100 healthy food supplement for all adults receiving Ontario Works or ODSP. A nutritious food supplement was also recommended to help address First Nations' predisposition to diabetes and the high costs of food in Northern and remote communities. One submission showed pictures of food prices in the only grocery store: \$5.69/kg for bananas, \$67.39 for a box of 116 diapers and \$17.69 for a 10-lb bag of potatoes.

Many people said that the rates should be more closely tied to the cost of living, citing the average cost of rent determined by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the "Cost of a Nutritious Food Basket" compiled by Ontario Public Health Units. Some people said that rates should be set above the poverty line, but there was no consensus on how to define poverty or the adequacy of benefits.

Some submissions endorsed the idea of an arm's-length "Social Assistance Rate Board," which was put forward in a Private Member's Bill in the Ontario legislature in 2007. The board would recommend rates to the government annually, based on an analysis of the cost of living. There was strong support for updating rates annually, based on the Consumer Price Index or a similar mechanism.

Some recommended that additional benefits be established to meet special needs, such as a "flee fund" to support women escaping domestic violence.

Others recommended that flexible funding be available to meet people's needs as they arise, as opposed to prescribing specific special benefits.

*The adequacy of benefits is a key factor in a woman's decision whether to leave or return to an abusive situation. When benefits are so low that they barely cover shelter costs and necessitate hardships like doing without nutritional food, women simply don't leave abusive homes.*

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—CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

Disability organizations urged the Commission to consider the extra costs associated with disability in any new benefit structure. These costs can be both direct (e.g., medical supplies and equipment) and indirect (e.g., taking more time to complete tasks of daily living). They acknowledged the difficulty of assessing these costs, given the individual and variable nature of disability, and recommended that the government work in partnership with people with lived experience and disability organizations to arrive at a cost assessment method.

Submissions pointed out that, given the multitude of barriers to employment for people with disabilities, ODSP income support is the main, ongoing source of income for many people. Some recommended a higher long-term rate to cover more than basic needs, such as replacing or repairing "household infrastructure, such as furniture, utensils, bedding and linens, winter clothing, small appliances, etc." One idea was to make ODSP assistance comparable to the level of support provided to seniors who have no other income.

*For a majority of people with an intellectual disability, ODSP is not a 'last resort' but a stepping stone to the community. It is the only income they receive, and is the means through which they can gain independent living and social skills. It cannot be assumed that there are any other avenues to access funding or support.*

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—COMMUNITY LIVING TORONTO

A number of submissions suggested that a non-contributory pension (like that proposed by the Caledon Institute)<sup>1</sup> or a refundable tax credit would be a better way of structuring disability benefits to guarantee income security for people with disabilities who cannot work. The Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario, and others recommended against a pension program or separate disability benefit for people with severe disabilities who are not expected to work. They argued that an approach that divides people by severity of disability does not account for the “episodic and non-linear nature of mental health recovery.”

Most disability organizations argued that the benefit structure should not try to differentiate between people who can work and people who cannot work. As one group put it, “there is no such dividing line in the lives of people with disabilities.” They pointed out that disability is rarely a static condition, and there are too many other factors that affect whether someone can work, including discrimination and other barriers to employment. Some others thought that it was important to make the distinction, so that people who cannot work receive adequate income support and “can still live in dignity.”

Many participants considered the current earnings exemptions too low, and felt that such low exemptions discouraged them from finding work, increasing their hours, or getting ahead in even modest ways. Various solutions were proposed, including raising the current earnings exemption from 50 to 75 per cent, or setting a flat rate after which the phase-out of social assistance benefits would begin.

Currently, people first starting to receive Ontario Works must wait three months before they can keep any income from work. It was strongly recommended that this requirement be eliminated. Submissions also suggested that people should be able to retain more of their earnings if these additional amounts went into savings accounts to address emergencies or to assist with costs when people leave social assistance.

Some people concurred with the view that the market wage, together with benefits available from employers or universally, must be higher than social assistance benefits. This is intended to provide an incentive for people to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Mendelson, Ken Battle, Sherri Torjman & Ernie Lightman (2010), *A Basic income plan for Canadians with severe disabilities*. The Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Retrieved from the Caledon Institute of Social Policy website: <http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/906ENG.pdf>

work. Many people recommended continuing to increase the minimum wage, in part as a way to address the balance between adequacy and incentive to work.

Several submissions challenged the way this issue was presented in the Commission’s discussion paper. They argued that it “pitted the poor against the very poor,” and that the wages of the lowest income earners are not an appropriate comparison. Some said that balancing adequacy with work incentives was an “age-old question” that will never be fully resolved.

*If removal of disincentives to employment for social assistance recipients highlights the plight of those in low-paying jobs who do not have access to similar supports, the response should not be the cutting off those supports. Rather, this should focus provincial and federal government attention upon that segment as well, and new and expanded programs may be developed.*

—EMPLOYMENT SECTOR COUNCIL  
LONDON-MIDDLESEX

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Many recommended that adult dental benefits under Ontario Works be provided consistently across the province and match those provided by ODSP.

The potential loss of dental and other health benefits was frequently identified as a major disincentive for leaving social assistance. The Extended Employment Health Benefit provides coverage for up to 12 months for eligible people who leave Ontario Works for a job that does not have employer benefits. However, submissions indicated that this benefit is not always administered properly across all municipalities, and there is confusion over the application process.

While recipients who leave ODSP for employment can continue to receive health benefits unless or until the employer provides comparable coverage, many people did not seem to be aware of this support, or did not trust that their benefits would continue.

There was consensus in our discussions that prescription drug coverage, dental care, and vision care (some specified eyeglasses included) should be

available to all low-income Ontarians, whether or not they are receiving social assistance.

*Most jobs are temporary with no benefits, so lots of times you're in worse shape if you work. Don't cut us off immediately. There are some start-up funds that you can apply for, but it doesn't help for long-term.*

—FROM A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

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Many submissions also called for the establishment of a housing benefit for all low-income people, paid outside of the social assistance system. Several recommended that a Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) be explored to ensure that everyone has a secure, basic income.

Participants had mixed views on benefits provided through the tax system, in the way the Ontario Child Benefit is delivered. Those who supported using the tax system saw it as a way of treating all low-income people fairly and removing the stigma of social assistance. However, some organizations were concerned about the number of people, mainly poor, who do not file income tax returns because of complicated past financial situations or lack of knowledge. First Nations also noted that tax credits may not be available to people who do not have to file taxes. They recommended that alternatives should be available to get benefits directly to families.

## Chapter 3: Easier to Understand

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*The review will make recommendations that will enable government to simplify income and asset rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance.*

–TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

### *What We Heard...*

*We need to create a system that is less prescriptive. The system must be nimble enough to respond to individual needs.... The redesigned system must be grounded in the philosophy of true partnership between persons receiving social assistance and service delivery agents.*

–REGION OF PEEL COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

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*Streamline the level of eligibility monitoring. For example, limit the withholding of benefits for failure to provide information to only those circumstances that involve serious issues of current eligibility; eliminate income reporting where there is no income; and reduce ongoing documentary review to a practical level.*

–ONTARIO FEDERATION OF LABOUR

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A recurring theme in our discussions was the overwhelming emphasis in social assistance system on monitoring for eligibility and compliance. Many people with lived experience said this made them feel like “cheaters,” just because they needed support. Administrators and frontline workers experienced stress and frustration from having to administer so many rules when they want to focus on supporting people to improve their lives. From

many different perspectives, participants across sectors said that this culture has to change before anything else can change.

Many participants talked about how complex the social assistance system is, making it difficult for people who need help to figure it out and time-consuming for caseworkers to administer. Some Ontario Works administrators said they can spend up to 70 per cent of their time enforcing rules, leaving little time to identify the barriers that people face and help them access the right services and supports.

*The information a worker must understand and apply rules to — from interpreting Equifax reports to analyzing cash surrender values on life insurance to various government legislation — is so baroque and so far removed from what the applicant wants, needs and can comprehend, that the system is set up to create conflict rather than helping relationships.*

—THE DISTRICT OF COCHRANE  
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD

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We received a number of proposals for structural changes to reduce the complexity of the benefit system. These included consolidating the basic needs and shelter allowance into a standard rate for all adults, delivering income support by way of a Guaranteed Annual Income through the tax system, and providing all health-related benefits to all low-income people through the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care or the tax system.

Some people commented on underlying policies that they thought were unfair, or that create barriers to employment or community participation. Others remarked on the way certain rules are administered, such as the inconsistent application of rules from one municipality or office to another. Both the lack of consistency and the need for flexibility were highlighted regarding many of the rules. There were also many recommendations for changes to specific rules. A few examples are provided here.

Many submissions argued that the rules defining spousal relationships are complex and intrusive. They recommended that the Ministry of Community and Social Services adopt the same definition of “spouse” as in the *Family*

*Law Act*, for both Ontario Works and ODSP, in order to eliminate the cohabitation questionnaire.

Some ODSP recipients described how the definition of the benefit unit means that they cannot be economically independent—they must access the financial resources of their spouses before being eligible for ODSP. According to the ODSP Action Coalition, this rule prevents people from forming new relationships, because the potential partner is unwilling or unable to assume financial responsibility for the person with a disability.

*[I want] to be able to live common law or married and still receive my disability benefits without having to depend on my partner for support. And, for instance, if I were to meet someone and ODSP threatens to cut off my income and benefits because my new partner makes good income, should they be responsible to support me? Who would take that on? What chance do I have for a relationship?*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

Changes to the Living with Parents rule were recommended frequently. This rule was of particular concern in First Nations communities, where housing shortages can be dire and young adults have no option but to live with their parents. In some cases, being a “dependent” may undermine a young person’s ability to contribute to family and community life. First Nations participants advocated that anyone over the age of 18 receiving social assistance should be able to get the full adult basic needs amount, with shelter calculated accordingly.

Also discussed by First Nations were the negative interactions between Ontario Works and Children’s Aid Societies interventions. At the discretion of administrators, mothers have on occasion had their benefits reduced if their children are in temporary care with CAS. First Nations stated that this rule is being applied inconsistently and unfairly, and that all parents should continue receiving the full amount of social assistance, including the shelter allowance for their children, in order to maintain the child’s place in the home while they are working toward family reunification.

Many participants said that child support payments should not be deducted from social assistance because they are intended to benefit the children. We also heard that while the current rules do not oblige women to seek child support in situations of domestic abuse, there is need to apply this exemption consistently.

Negative interactions between social assistance and Rent Geared to Income (RGI) housing were often described in our discussions. Social assistance recipients pay rent at artificially low levels, according to rent scales established by the Province. If they start work, and their earnings exceed a certain amount, their rent will begin to be calculated at 30 per cent of their monthly earned income. Some people said this caused them to experience significant rent increases, even when they started working only part time. Another issue that people identified was that RGI is based on gross earnings and does not take into account the 50 per cent earnings exemption under social assistance.

The interaction between the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and social assistance was often mentioned as a cause of concern. Currently, the amount of OSAP received for educational costs is exempt as income under both Ontario Works and ODSP. ODSP recipients' living costs are covered by ODSP, but Ontario Works recipients must apply for OSAP for their living costs as well as their educational costs. The majority of funds received through OSAP are provided as repayable loans. Many concerns were raised regarding the ability of social assistance recipients to repay these student loans. A frequently recommended solution included exempting all portions of OSAP loans as income, or allowing Ontario Works recipients to continue to access living costs through social assistance as ODSP recipients are allowed to do.

It was often recommended that people be assisted with the application process for social assistance. Some people may not have the literacy skills to be able to complete an application on their own, or do not have the computer skills or access to a computer to submit it online. A frequent suggestion was that the Province and municipalities should hire people receiving social assistance to act as "peer navigators" to help applicants and new recipients understand how the program works. It was felt this would allow people to be mentored by others who have had similar experiences and create job opportunities for social assistance recipients.

The Commission heard numerous stories of how daunting the ODSP application and appeals processes can be and how challenging it is to access appropriate medical specialists. During lengthy applications and appeals, people may lose all contact with the labour market, or the community more broadly, and have no access to employment services or other supports. Some people with disabilities said they felt the process required them to focus on what they cannot do rather than what they can do. Some community legal clinics indicated that a large part of their practice is dedicated to representing people who are applying for ODSP or appealing eligibility decisions to the Social Benefits Tribunal.

First Nations communities highlighted multiple barriers to accessing ODSP, including the lack of ODSP staff located on-reserve and the difficulty of accessing the medical resources required to obtain proper documentation for applications. People who may be eligible for ODSP often choose to be served by the Ontario Works caseworkers in the community because they know them and are more comfortable with them. This can result in Ontario Works caseworkers helping people with ODSP applications and correspondence. It can also result in people who may be eligible for ODSP accessing Ontario Works instead, and receiving less income support. The Ontario Native Welfare Administrator's Association (ONWAA) recommended that First Nations directly administer ODSP within their territory.

Many people commented on the Special Diet Allowance (SDA). Recommended changes included returning the SDA to its previous rules, raising the amount of the benefit, and paying eligible recipients a flat rate to simplify administration. Some argued that the SDA should be delivered through the health system, not social assistance, to all low-income people who require medically prescribed special diets.

*I work with families who are on Ontario Works and I often have to help them navigate the rules pertaining to Ontario Works. Far too often families will receive a letter in the mail informing them that their cheque has been suspended because they have failed to provide necessary information, however, the letter does not specify the missing information. This creates confusion for families who must then attempt to contact their Ontario Works caseworker. The Ontario Works caseworker has limited*

*open phone times and can be very difficult to reach and voicemail messages are often not returned. In the meantime these families are left without the money to pay rent and hydro and get into arrears. Often the missing information is minor and easy for families to provide once they know what is required.*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

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People receiving social assistance and administrators both objected to the numerous computer-generated letters automatically sent to recipients. It was felt that they are administratively burdensome, difficult to understand and cause considerable stress to clients. It was recommended that all information on rules, as well as letters regarding overpayments or suspensions, should be in plain language and available in multiple languages. Also shared at some meetings were examples of where francophone clients living in areas designated under the *French Language Services Act* received correspondence in English only.

Many participants highlighted the problem of cashing social assistance cheques. Low-income individuals and families tend to use instant cash or payday loan services, which charge high interest rates and default penalties. People in some First Nations communities said they are forced to pay high cheque-cashing fees to the only local store or to a person who will cash cheques for a percentage. Suggestions to address this problem included considering alternatives to cheques (e.g., debit cards) and providing banking services to all social assistance recipients at low or no cost.

One of the most common recommendations in the engagement process was that social assistance payments be reconciled yearly or quarterly instead of monthly. Many people thought that dividing earnings over a longer period would increase administrative efficiency and reduce the high number of overpayments. It was noted that these are not predominantly the result of misreporting, but are due to in-month income fluctuations that result in changes to entitlements. Some felt that the focus on overpayments, for example, by the Auditor General of Ontario, gave the public the false impression that many social assistance recipients are misusing the system.

*The current pre-existing condition that limits welfare to those who have no assets is wrong. It only undermines any possibility of their getting back on their feet, fiscally speaking. As a business person who on occasion has relied on leveraging his personal assets for business loans and who could easily be unemployed had I been unable to do so, we are truly crippling the opportunity for people to recover if social assistance is withheld until they've divested everything they own. Can you imagine telling a pensioner the government is withholding their Old Age Security until the proceeds from the sale of their property have been exhausted? That would be unjust, but no less unjust than this!*

—FROM A SUBMISSION

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Participants universally recommended that asset levels be raised. Currently, people are not eligible for Ontario Works if their liquid assets exceed about one month's assistance (\$599 for a single person). For ODSP, the liquid asset limit for a single individual is \$5,000. People argued that the low asset limits do not allow people to develop the financial resilience to cope with unforeseen expenses and life events. Depleting all of their assets also makes it difficult for people to make the transition to employment.

There were various suggestions for changing the asset levels, including making Ontario Works asset limits the same as those under ODSP, eliminating ODSP asset limits altogether, or raising them, as proposed by a Private Member's Bill in the Ontario Legislature in 2010, and allowing people to keep their assets, up to a reasonable level, if they are on social assistance for only a short time (e.g., six months). Another suggestion was to allow assets to be used for critical expenses, such as education, car repairs, and emergencies, and exempt items such as snowmobiles, and fishing and hunting equipment that are necessary for northern life and promote self-sufficiency in the North and in First Nations communities.

Many submissions and participants identified the need for more savings opportunities for people receiving social assistance, including exempting Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs) as assets. Also recommended were programs to assist people in developing financial literacy skills.

## Chapter 4: Viable over the Long Term

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*The review will make recommendations that will enable government to ensure the long-term viability of the social assistance program.*

—TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

### *What We Heard...*

*The Commission should build health and health equity into its values and strategic foundations so that no one's health and well-being is stunted by social or economic inequality. Reform goals should include ensuring the conditions of life needed to maintain health and expanding the opportunities of all to reach their potential and achieve a good life. This means a fundamental shift in approach from rigid enforcement and surveillance to building individual and community capacity and enabling opportunity.*

—THE WELLESLEY INSTITUTE

This chapter of the June discussion paper asked readers what they thought should be the expected outcomes of social assistance. A number of submissions addressed this question.

The Wellesley Institute and partners, for example, presented a comprehensive vision of a system that would embed health equity into all its objectives and success indicators. Their submission shows the connections between the living conditions of people living on low incomes and poorer health, including mental health. It recommended that people receiving social assistance have access to the “full basket of supports essential to maintaining health such as adequate income, housing, nutritious food, and health services.”

The Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) outlined nine principles that should be applied in designing and implementing a new system. They are integrated services, people-centred services, poverty reduction and self-sufficiency, social inclusion, income that people can live on, a focus on ability rather than disability, the least intrusive level of intervention, locally driven planning and flexibility, and innovation in the provision of services.

As mentioned in the discussion of employment services and supports (see Chapter 1), First Nations called for broader social assistance objectives to recognize the different pathways that people take to employment and the specific circumstances of First Nations communities.

A number of submissions recommended that Ontario Works and ODSP be integrated into one program in order to ensure the long-term viability of the social assistance system. Some suggested that the program should be delivered by municipalities, with appropriate funding from the Province. They argued that this would reduce administrative complexity and duplication and ensure that people with disabilities have access to the same level of employment services as others do. In addition to childcare and housing supports, which are already delivered by municipalities, people with disabilities would be able to access employment services at the local level.

*It would seem that two programs using the same technology, with different legislation requirements, and different case management styles is counterproductive to helping the vulnerable in Ontario's society.*

—ONTARIO WORKS BRANT  
CONSOLIDATED MUNICIPAL SERVICE MANAGER

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Others recommended that ODSP should remain a distinct program delivered directly by the Province, but with much-improved employment services and supports. They argued that ODSP was created as a separate program, with its own culture and mandate, to meet the unique needs of people with disabilities. The Ontario Public Service Employees Union and other submissions suggested that ODSP and Ontario Works offices be co-located to facilitate access for clients and collaboration for workers.

*Ontario Public Service Employees Union firmly advocates for a client-focused ODSP, in which the provincial level delivery model directly administered by the Ministry of Community and Social Services is the best way to serve the people with disabilities in our Ontario.... Downloading ODSP responsibility to the municipalities will not serve the clients, but will just add another bureaucratic layer creating more confusion and distance.*

—ONTARIO PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES UNION

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A number of municipalities said that the Province should continue the momentum begun with the 2008 Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review and support integrated delivery of social services at the municipal level. They suggested making the Consolidated Municipal Service Managers and the District Social Services Administration Boards the service managers for Ontario Works. They argued that this would help municipalities to develop integrated human service plans to deliver Ontario Works, childcare and housing services. Some suggested also including ODSP in these service plans.

Also recommended were a common technology base and information-sharing agreements so that people would only have to provide their information once when applying for social assistance, childcare or housing. Social assistance recipients and administrators both expressed frustration that information could not be shared across services because of different legislation and privacy rules.

Several submissions noted that more data should be collected and made available on successful programs that are supporting vulnerable populations to find employment. People from racialized communities, people with disabilities, sole-support parents and Aboriginal people were mentioned in this context. Comments emphasized that the collection of ethno-cultural and racial data must be tied to non-discriminatory purposes that help develop better programs and appropriate supports that improve outcomes.

### ***Other Programs***

Those who commented on the Temporary Care Allowance (TCA) thought that the program should be integrated with the goals of the Ministry of Children

and Youth Services. Some suggested that, instead of Ontario Works, the program might be a better fit with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services altogether, and provide supports, financial or otherwise, through Children's Aid Societies. The program provides support for children in financial need while in the temporary care of an adult, such as a grandparent. Grandparents and others also argued that TCA benefits are inadequate and temporary care parents do not usually qualify for other children's benefits.

TCA provides financial assistance of up to \$247 per month for the first child (\$312 for a child living north of the 50th parallel and without year-round road access) and up to \$200 per month for each subsequent child (\$254 for a child living north of the 50th parallel and without year-round road access). In comparison, foster parents caring for children through Children's Aid Societies receive payments, on average, of \$900 per month.

Although Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities (ACSD) was not often raised as a program that needed significant review, some people felt that it needs better marketing to the public to ensure that families are able to access its support. Some respondents also felt that the program might be better delivered through Community Care Access Centres rather than tied to ODSP legislation.

## Chapter 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

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*The review will make recommendations that will enable government to define Ontario's position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security for Ontarians.*

–TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

### *What We Heard...*

*It is important to examine the role that Ontario Works and ODSP actually play in Ontario's social safety net today.... In today's world of a degraded labour market and the erosion of many of the programs that provided support in the past, the failings of social assistance programs become acute and a different approach is required. For example, when fewer than 40 per cent of the unemployed in Ontario are eligible for Employment Insurance and Ontario Works becomes the only source of support, the impact of failures in the current program is far-reaching – either because of the impoverishment it creates for those who require support, or the debt that households take on in order to avoid such a stigmatizing program.*

–INCOME SECURITY ADVOCACY CENTRE

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Many people turn to social assistance during the application process for other programs, like federal Employment Insurance (EI) or CPP-Disability, while they are awaiting a decision on whether they are eligible or during the waiting period before benefits are provided. People said that the current arrangements for the reimbursement of social assistance funds received during these periods are confusing and time-consuming.

Frequently highlighted was the number of work hours required for initial eligibility for EI. Concerns raised included the inability to reach the high number of hours and the difference in the number of hours required in Ontario versus other regions of the country. Some people noted that the required 910 work hours are too difficult for people to achieve because of the prevalence of precarious employment, and that the requirement is particularly disadvantageous to newcomers and people with disabilities.

A number of submissions identified a gap in training. Some programs are only available to people who are currently receiving EI or who have been receiving it recently. People receiving social assistance, especially people with disabilities, may not have current or recent labour force attachment. The Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians recommended that the Ontario government “press the Government of Canada to extend eligibility to include historically disadvantaged groups such as persons with various disabilities.”

Some people called for enhancements to the Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB) to provide better incentives for employment and to provide an income supplement to people who are not receiving social assistance but have low earnings.

A few submissions suggested the need for overall reform of Canada’s income security system. They said that all federal and provincial income support benefits, including EI, social assistance, and the Canada Pension Plan, should be integrated through legislation and delivered under one roof. Several submissions called for the creation of a Guaranteed Annual Income program.

Some First Nations pointed out that the issue of who has jurisdiction and responsibility for services and funding to First Nations is not resolved between the federal and provincial levels of government, and this exacerbates problems for First Nations. The establishment of a tripartite (Federal/Provincial/First Nations) process was recommended to evaluate and modernize the 1965 Welfare Services Agreement, which governs the cost-sharing arrangements for on-reserve social services in Ontario. First Nations were not consulted, nor are they signatories to the terms of this agreement. The agreement currently covers Ontario Works and other social services, including child welfare services and daycare, but not ODSP.

An overarching theme in our discussions with First Nations was that services developed externally will continue to be ineffective in meeting the needs of

their people, families, and communities, and will perpetuate the cycle of dependency on the social assistance system. In order to fully restore individual and community capacity and facilitate meaningful participation in the economy, a journey of healing must be supported.

We heard that under the current system, the conditions that create the need for social assistance in First Nations communities are not addressed. Changes are required that fundamentally shift the relationship between First Nations people and the provincial and federal governments. The social assistance reform proposals from First Nations were based on the principles identified in 1992:<sup>2</sup>

- “Social services must be First Nation controlled – provided under the authority and sanction of First Nation government and fully accountable to First Nation members
- Social services must be First Nation determined – designed and developed within the community by the membership
- Social services must be First Nation specific – designed to address community needs in harmony with local culture and social structure
- Social services must be First Nation based – managed and delivered within the community”

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario, Minister’s Advisory Group on New Social Assistance Legislation in Ontario (May 1992), *First Nations’ project team report: Principal report on new social assistance legislation for First Nations in Ontario*, p. 12. Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario.

## Appendix: Community Conversations

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The Commissioners participated in community conversations over the summer of 2011 in the following places:

- Hamilton
- Kingston
- London
- Niagara Region
- Ottawa
- Peel Region
- Peterborough
- Thunder Bay
- Timmins
- Toronto
- Windsor

Many other communities organized sessions or conducted surveys to gather input on the issues raised in the discussion paper:

- Brant/Brantford
- Cambridge
- Cornwall
- County of Dufferin
- District Municipality of Muskoka
- Durham Region
- Guelph
- Kitchener-Waterloo
- Lanark, Leeds-Grenville
- Neighbourhoods across Toronto
- North and Centre Wellington
- Renfrew County
- Sarnia-Lambton
- Sault Saint Marie
- South River
- Sudbury
- Sundridge
- Tillsonburg

The engagement process was based on local initiatives and opportunities, and more communities may have held events and meetings than are listed above.

In addition, the Commission met with many provincial and sectoral organizations to hear their advice. A list of these organizations, and copies of written submissions we received, can be found on our website: [www.socialassistancereview.ca](http://www.socialassistancereview.ca)

## ***First Nations Discussions***

### **Community Hosts**

- Fort William First Nation
- M'Chigeeng First Nation
- Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte
- Moravian of the Thames First Nation
- Six Nations

### **Organization Hosts**

- Timmins Native Friendship Centre
- Fort Frances Chiefs Secretariat
- Kenora Chief Advisory

### **Assemblies/Annual Meetings**

- Chiefs of Ontario (All Ontario Chiefs Conference)
- Grand Council Treaty #3
- Mushkegowuk Annual General Assembly
- Ontario Native Welfare Administrator's Association
- Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres

Thank you to all who participated.

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