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## **SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION FOR THE REVIEW OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN ONTARIO**

**The Community and Health Services Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report dated September 28, 2011, from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services.**

### **1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that:

1. As part of its collaborative advocacy mandate, the Human Services Planning Board of York Region be requested to work with the Region and community partners in providing a formal submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario.
2. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Human Services Planning Board of York Region, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association.

### **2. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with The Regional Municipality of York's submission to the Province's Commission for the Review Social Assistance in Ontario (the Commission) discussion paper and to request that the Human Services Planning Board of York Region (HSPB) work with the Region to undertake, as part of its first venture into collaborative advocacy, a process aimed at developing a multi-sectoral input paper to submit to the Commission prior to the release of their final report.

### **3. BACKGROUND**

#### **Province undertaking a review of Ontario's social assistance system – including engagement with stakeholders**

The Province has appointed a Commission to undertake a comprehensive review of social assistance in Ontario, with a goal of developing specific recommendations and a concrete action plan for reforming the social assistance system. This was a key commitment of the 2008 Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy and responds to growing pressures on social assistance to remove barriers and increase opportunities for people to work.

The Commission is expected to submit a final report to the Province by June 30, 2012.

As part of their work, in June 2011 the Commission released *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas* to engage stakeholders on possible solutions for reform. The deadline for feedback was September 1, 2011. Because of the timelines, staff prepared an internal response accompanied by a letter from the Regional Chairman and CEO (*see Council Attachment 1*) to ensure the opportunity for input was not lost.

### **Community & Health Services front-line and supervisory staff were engaged over the Summer to provide feedback to the Commission's discussion paper**

Social assistance in Ontario is composed of two key programs – Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). OW is intended to provide financial and employment assistance to help people in temporary financial need find sustainable employment and achieve self-reliance. ODSP is intended to help people with disabilities live as independently as possible and to reduce or eliminate disability-related barriers to employment.

ODSP is a provincially funded and administered program with approximately 13,000 beneficiaries in York Region.

OW is cost-shared and administered by municipal service managers. In York Region, OW is administered by the Community and Health Services Department (C&HS). Approximately 10,400 York Region residents participate in OW. Through the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review, the Province committed to a gradual up-load of the full cost of OW benefits by 2018. OW administration costs will continue to be cost-shared.

Over the summer, C&HS engaged its OW front-line and supervisory staff, along with program managers in key related services (e.g. child care, emergency shelters and domiciliary hostels, housing services), to respond to the Commission's discussion paper. The results of this consultation were compiled and summarized into a submission sent to the Commission on August 30, 2011 through the Regional Chairman and CEO. C&HS staff also participated in consultations through the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association.

### **C&HS submission included a copy of the 2010 York Region Social Audit**

Included in the C&HS submission is a copy of the report of the 2010 York Region Social Audit, *Behind the Masks – Testimonials from those Marginalized by Income*. The audit, organized by the Interfaith Social Reform Coalition and co-convened by the Poverty Action for Change Coalition and the York Region Food Network, aimed to inform policy and program development, among other things. The themes and recommendations of the audit report were endorsed in principle by York Regional Council in January 2011

through the adoption of Clause 3 of Report No. 1 of the Community and Health Services Committee.

The social audit report provides a community lens to many of the issues that relate to the work of the Commission and includes recommendations to build healthy communities and help people out of poverty.

#### **4. ANALYSIS**

### **COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SERVICES' RESPONSE TO COMMISSION**

#### **Commission guided by five key issues**

The Commission is working under five key issues that will guide its research, consultations and recommendations:

- 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
- Establish an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers, and supports people's transition into, and attachment within, the labour market
- Simplify income and asset rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance
- Ensure the long-term viability of the social assistance system
- Define Ontario's position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security for Ontarians

#### **C&HS submission highlights need to transform OW into a workforce development program, with greater focus on intensive supports for the clients with greater challenges**

The focus of C&HS feedback was to respond to specific questions identified by the Commission under these issues.

The following over-arching themes guided the C&HS response:

**Refocus OW into a workforce development program.** The current system is too focused on the administration of a large number of complex and punitive rules that can stall successful transitions to employment, particularly for the increasing number of clients with multiple-needs that make up a core part of the caseload. Workforce development would allow service managers to re-focus their resources on providing more intensive support to help clients overcome barriers and become employment ready, while working with employers and other stakeholders to better understand local labour market needs. This needs to include a greater focus on **job retention supports so OW clients**

**are supported to stabilize in the workforce after exiting assistance.** These could be delivered through OW or outside of OW, but would include counselling and life skills, employer outreach, health or dental benefits, etc.

**Provide a benefit structure that meets local costs of basic needs and supports good health.** Income adequacy provides people with stability. OW and ODSP clients are better able to focus on returning to employment when their basic needs are met. Under the current rates, OW and ODSP benefits are too low to meet local costs (transportation, housing, food) and push clients into monthly struggles to find cheaper housing or food. This creates additional barriers to employment and may lead to physical and mental health issues. There needs to be an acceptable approach to take into account the actual housing and basic needs costs in local markets in setting social assistance rates, including recognition of health implications.

Table 1 below provides an example of the current level of benefits for an OW and ODSP single adult and sole support parent with a child compared to Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off and HSPB's *Making Ends Meet* initiative.

**Table 1**  
OW and ODSP Annual Income/Benefits Levels (2010) –  
Single Adult and Sole Support Parent with One Child (under 6 years of age)

	OW*	ODSP*	Low Income Before Tax Cut-Off (LICO-BT)	Making Ends Meet Initiative**
Single Adult	\$7,952	\$13,600	\$19,496	\$38,992
Sole Support Parent with one child	\$18,340	\$24,882	\$24,269	\$48,538

\*Based on annualized maximum shelter and basic needs rates as of Dec. 2010. Includes federal and provincial tax credits and benefits, including the Ontario Child Benefit.

\*\*Based on Double LICO-BT as the income needed to have a decent standard of living in York Region.

Source: Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, Statistics Canada and Human Services Planning Board – York Region.

**Provide integrated supports across programs and services.** OW clients often need access to a range of ancillary supports to help overcome barriers and find employment (e.g. mental health and addictions, child care, housing supports, language services, etc.). However, York Region's rapid growth has often led to wait lists for these supports, if they exist at all. Program silos within the Province also hinder integrated local planning and case management at the front-lines. Successful outcomes for clients depend on the availability of ancillary services, and provincial policy that supports local collaborative planning.

**Service managers need flexibility and support.** OW service managers need flexibility to develop strategies and the right mix of supports that best meet the local needs of residents and employers. Service managers also require support to help foster local service integration and collaboration. Data collection, information technology tools, program evaluation, local plan development and community engagement are some of the additional resource pressures on OW service managers that need to be recognized as part of a reformed social assistance system.

## **NEXT STEPS**

### **Commission's Options Paper will provide another opportunity to provide input, including involving community partners in York Region**

The Commission is expected to release an Options Paper in the Fall of 2011 that will incorporate the input provided by stakeholders in the discussion paper.

Through the Options Paper, the Commission will seek further input and advice from stakeholders to help frame its recommendations to the Province.

In order to bring a broader perspective to the issues, it is being recommended that the HSPB be requested to work with C&HS and community partners to provide multi-sectoral input into the Options Paper as part of its *Making Ends Meet* initiative. Supporting collaborative advocacy is part of the mandate of the HSPB.

The capacity of low income residents to maximize their labour market potential, improve their income level, and achieve food security, all key elements of *Making Ends Meet* in York Region, are closely linked to social assistance. Recommendations to reform OW and ODSP will need to address key gaps in current support so low income residents who access these programs are better able to meet basic needs and transition where possible to economic self-sufficiency.

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications related to the report. Any potential costs of social assistance reform will depend on the scope of the Commission's recommendations and how the Province will respond.

## **6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT**

Residents participating in OW and ODSP live in all local municipalities. Social assistance reform has the potential to support healthy communities and vibrant local economies.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The Province has appointed a Commission to review social assistance in Ontario as part of its Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Commission recently released a discussion paper for stakeholder feedback. This report provides Council with the submission provided to the Commission outlining the Region's perspective as an OW Service Manager.

The Commission is expected to release a follow-up Options Paper that will highlight their proposed recommendations as a next step in their consultations. The Human Services Planning Board of York Region will be requested to work with the Region and community partners to review the Options Paper from a broader community perspective and as part of the *Making Ends Meet* initiative.

For more information on this report, please contact Cordelia Abankwa-Harris, Acting General Manager, Social Services at Ext. 2150 or Lisa Gonsalves, Acting Managing Director, Strategic Service Integration and Policy Branch at Ext. 2090.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

*(The attachment referred to in this clause is attached to this report.)*



**Bill Fisch**, B.Com., LL.B., J.D.  
Chairman and CEO



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August 22, 2011

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario  
2 Bloor Street West  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Suite 400  
Toronto ON  
M4W 3E2

Dear Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh:

**Re: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario**

On behalf of The Regional Municipality of York, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Commission for Social Assistance Review in Ontario as it addresses the important task of reviewing and proposing reforms to the Social Assistance system in Ontario.

York Region's response to the issues and questions identified in the Review are outlined in the attached table. Our response was developed through a series of internal consultations that sought the input of staff ranging from social assistance front-line, supervisors and managers of key programs that address the needs of York Region residents.

As a service system manager, York Region provides a range of human services and programs that address the needs of our low income residents, including the administration of social assistance. Over the years it has become increasingly evident that key aspects of the social assistance system could be refocused, restructured and simplified to provide improved services and outcomes for its clients. Areas that need to be addressed include:

- A refocus of Ontario Works (OW) into a workforce development program where understanding of local labour market needs are matched with more intensive supports. This will assist clients to overcome barriers and become more employment ready, with enhanced capability to successfully participate in the economic life of their communities.
- The provision of a range of integrated supports to clients that allow them to meet the basic cost of living and become stabilized in their local communities. This could have a positive impact on both their becoming employment ready and on their job search and retention.
- An enhanced and simplified administration and accountability system that supports a workforce development focus for social assistance, providing greater service efficiencies and the potential for enhanced outcomes.

York Region strives to improve the outcomes for residents in need. Recent provincial uploading and other initiatives following the Provincial Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review

(PMFSDR) provide support and flexibility as we help residents reach their potential and in fostering new approaches to local collaboration. However, we still face significant constraints in relation to federal/provincial funding and policy as well as York Region's own fiscal and resource capacity, particularly as we move toward a more outcomes-based approach to service plans and accountability.

Our "ideal" system would be for OW administrators to be better resourced and focused to support OW participants overcome barriers to employment through intensive and more focused case management and collaborative planning with other services (e.g. mental health and addictions, other employment sectors, housing).

I am also including with this submission, a copy of the report of the 2010 York Region Social Audit, *Behind the Masks – Testimonials from those Marginalized by Income*. The audit, organized by the Interfaith Social Reform Coalition (ISARC) and co-convened by the Poverty Action for Change Coalition and the York Region Food Network, aimed to inform policy and program development, among other things. The themes and recommendations of the audit report were endorsed in principle by York Regional Council in January 2011. The report provides a community lens to many of the issues that relate to the work of the Commission.

Should you have any questions regarding York Region's submission, please contact our Commissioner of Community and Health Services, Adelina Urbanski, at 905-830-4444, ext. 2023.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our input into this review and we look forward to a new Social Assistance system that is properly resourced and more responsive, integrated and focused towards better outcomes for our residents.

Yours Truly,



Bill Fisch  
Chairman and CEO

MB/cb

Attachment – 1) A Response from The Regional Municipality of York  
2) ISARC Social Audit Report – Behind the Masks – Testimonials from Those Marginalized by Income



**Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas  
A Response from The Regional Municipality of York**

**Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment**

<b>Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission</b>	<b>The Regional Municipality of York Comments</b>
<p>a) <i>What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help clients become more employment-ready:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Provide clients with more pre-employment programs, job maintenance supports, marketing of client skills</li> <li>○ Take the opportunity at intake to put clients on an intensive employment program rather than an independent job search</li> <li>○ Increase the use of the Employment Placement Initiative (wage subsidy program)</li> <li>○ Increase placement of clients in unpaid positions to promote skill development and training</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Make it easier for employers to hire Ontario Works (OW) clients by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Improving communication about the OW program with employers</li> <li>○ Marketing the program better</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Have employer liaisons and job developers strengthen and develop local workforce opportunities:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Treat employers as customers – do not encumber them with stringent requirements</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Improve analysis of local labour market needs:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Strengthen the relationships between OW Service Managers and local labour markets, especially with small businesses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Ensure local labour market information is available at intake</li> <li>• Ensure that the child care needs of all OW clients are considered and addressed to: (1) allow those clients who do not have participation requirements but are willing and able to participate in employment activities be prioritized for child care fee assistance, and (2) provide the province with a more accurate picture of the funding needs for child care fee assistance to support the employment objectives of the OW program</li> </ul>
<p>b) <i>In what ways can the skills of people receiving social assistance be better developed to meet the needs of employers?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redesign OW from an income support program to a workforce development program</li> <li>• Recognize that many OW clients need significant supports to become ready to accept and maintain employment</li> <li>• Enhance funding for pre-employment and employment specific training</li> </ul>



Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a more stratified system of steps to employment where people have to meet standardized criteria to pass each step. This is to build trust in employers for referrals coming from OW:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have a core group of specialized employment workers conduct stronger initial screening of clients to assess barriers to employment</li> <li>○ Build a more structured approach to develop readiness to employment (currently varies with the skill and/or interest of the case manager), with more emphasis on addressing barriers to employment (life skills, addictions, mental health issues) rather than encouraging people to look for jobs before they are really ready to maintain employment</li> <li>○ Offer apprenticeships and community training programs</li> <li>○ Only refer people to jobs who are employment ready</li> <li>○ Train based on hiring occupations</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Have the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) offer incentives to employers to hire employment ready candidates (this will help to improve consistency across the province)</li> </ul>
<p>c) <i>What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need more timely and integrated case management between OW case managers, employment specialists and other services (e.g., health services, counselling, job maintenance supports, child care fee assistance) to help with sustaining clients' employment</li> <li>• Take the opportunity at intake to put clients on an intensive employment program rather than an independent job search, where the client's needs for other services (e.g., child care fee assistance) are addressed</li> <li>• Improve collaboration with community agencies, health care providers, etc. to meet clients' needs for pre-employment supports (e.g., life skills, counselling, and addictions treatment). This will facilitate a smoother transition to employment</li> <li>• Need better collaboration and information sharing between MCSS and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), and between OW and MTCU and Service Canada to know outcomes of referrals</li> <li>• Need provincial recognition of the importance of child care fee assistance in supporting employment so that sufficient time and funding are allocated by the province to provide this support</li> <li>• To make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access, a team approach with other service providers is needed in case management to help meet the clients' needs for transportation, child care or appropriate clothing and grooming</li> <li>• For newcomers to Canada, consider funding the costs of equivalency programs and exams so that foreign credentials will be recognized</li> <li>• Adopt the "Housing First Model" to ensure that social assistance recipients have their housing needs addressed as a support required for finding and maintaining employment</li> </ul>



Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
<p>d) <i>What would improve services to people receiving social assistance who face multiple barriers to employment?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide intensive case management:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Need more supports for vocational assessments to uncover barriers such as learning disabilities</li> <li>○ Provide additional funding to expand the Enhanced Employment Services Program (EES) and to provide greater supports to clients by allowing EES workers to go out in the community with participants</li> <li>○ Coordinate supports with other service providers (e.g., addiction services, mental health, child care fee assistance) for higher-needs clients</li> <li>○ Put strong investment in critical life skills to help clients be ready for sustainable employment (hygiene, conflict resolution, reliability)</li> <li>○ Provide outreach and intensive case management if needed for clients who have become employed for up to one year to help them maintain their employment</li> <li>○ Aim to prevent recidivism - Ensure that non-standard employment is not substandard employment</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Acknowledge that for some severely-barriered individuals, fast-tracking them to a disability pension is more financially prudent than providing intensive supports towards employment</li> </ul>
<p>e) <i>How can Ontario's social assistance system better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they may need?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Match the employment supports and training provided to the labour force needs</li> <li>• Build inclusive workforce development strategies between service providers, education/training, employers, etc. that include ODSP clients</li> </ul>

**Missed or Misunderstood Issues**

- The current system allocates too many resources to administration and rule enforcement, rather than employment - particularly for higher needs participants. An overall shift to "supportive" case management is needed, where OW staff have the time and resources to help clients move through/along the "employment continuum" (e.g., from vocational assessments, counselling, access to ancillary services such as mental health and addictions, and other pre-employment support to job development/employment placement, relevant training and education, job retention counselling, etc.).
- A reformed Social Assistance system needs to be re-cast into a workforce development strategy at the local level where understanding local labour market needs and employer engagement (demand-side strategies) are matched with more intensive case management (supply-side strategies) so OW participants are better able to find and keep sustainable employment. However, OW Service Managers need the local flexibility to find the right mix between demand- and supply-side strategies within the



framework of workforce development. In some jurisdictions, the need for pre-employment supports is higher than in other areas. The resources for employer outreach need to be balanced with funding to help clients become employment ready.

- In York Region, local priorities include:
  - More focus on employability supports to meet a higher need caseload. This includes access to critical ancillary services, such as housing supports, mental health and addiction services and child care. York Region's rapid population growth has often meant growing wait lists. The capacity of SA reform to improve outcomes for clients will be linked to the availability of local strategies and supports
  - Helping mature workers return to the workforce, particularly those faced with job loss from the 2008/09 downturn in manufacturing
  - For newcomers to Canada: transition to the Canadian workforce, providing accreditation supports, and providing self-employment supports

## Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
<p>a) <i>How should Social Assistance Rates be determined?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter rate should match the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) average market rent, considering that rents are variable across the province</li> <li>• Basic needs should match local cost of food basket</li> <li>• Rent-Geared-to-Income rent scales for OW and ODSP clients need to be better co-ordinated with the maximum shelter allowances set by OW and ODSP</li> <li>• Consider different ways to deliver housing benefits to help keep people housed. For example, introduce a shelter amount for a defined length of time (e.g., six months or 12 months) for clients whose rent exceeds shelter allowance to allow them to maintain their housing and focus on finding employment, rather than finding cheaper housing</li> <li>• Sole support parents need higher rates to address the issue of reducing children living in poverty</li> <li>• Increase the per diem rate for emergency shelter operation costs</li> <li>• Raise the allowed rate for informal child care to local market rates. The current allowable deduction of \$600 per month for informal childcare is too low to cover the cost of full-time child care for preschool children, restricting the ability of people with young children to participate in full-time employment activities. By raising the allowed rate for informal child care, OW clients can participate in employment activities while waiting for formal child care</li> </ul>
<p>b) <i>How should benefits be designed to deal with the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need incentives to begin/return to work, and supports in place to help them maintain employment:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Transportation, child care, housing supports needed to help find and maintain employment</li> <li>○ Expand Extended Employment Health Benefit (EEHB) from one to two years when person finds employment and make it automatic, not something to be applied for (need dedicated EEHB workers)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
<p><i>are better off working?</i></p> <p>c) <i>Considering the potential for increased costs, what new benefits, if any, should be provided to all low income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Provide supplementary supports, e.g., health-related needs, vision, drug coverage, transportation costs, daycare, dental, and job retention supports for six months</li> <li>o Provide budgeting supports for clients after they leave OW</li> <li>o Help clients develop financial literacy, especially credit management</li> <li>• Reconsider the rules around income exemption. Look at a 70/30 income exemption (rather than current 50/50) or have a sliding scale for income exemption</li> <li>• Eliminate current three month waiting period for income exemption</li> <li>• Establish a grace period where child care fee assistance will continue to be provided for employed OW clients who lose their employment to help them find new employment</li> </ul>
<p>d) <i>Should asset limits and exemptions be changed to improve the SA system?</i></p>	<p>Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asset and income levels should be raised, perhaps to three months, to allow client a bigger buffer when leaving assistance</li> <li>• For newcomers to Canada, the issue is the funds that they are required to bring and having to deplete them before being able access OW supports</li> <li>• RRSPs and life insurance policies with a cash value should be exempt as assets for Ontario Works and ODSP</li> <li>• Have one income-test system of eligibility and then base service planning for financial/employment assistance, housing, and/or child care fee assistance on that test</li> </ul>
<p>e) <i>How should benefits for people with disabilities be designed and delivered?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve access to benefits</li> <li>• Incentives provided in ODSP are not strong enough to encourage people to work</li> <li>• Consider having workers who act as trustees for certain clients to ensure their rent gets paid and their housing maintained</li> </ul>

**Missed or Misunderstood Issues**

- Income adequacy is an important support to stability. OW and ODSP clients are better able to focus on returning to employment when their basic needs are met. Under the current rates, OW and ODSP benefits are too low to meet local costs (transportation, housing, food) and push clients into monthly struggles to find cheaper housing or maintain food budgets. This creates additional barriers to employment and may lead to physical and mental health issues. There needs to be an acceptable approach to take into account the actual housing and basic needs costs in local markets, including recognition of the health implications of keeping benefit rates well below established measures of low income.



- A greater focus on job retention supports would also help OW and ODSP clients stabilize in the workforce after exiting assistance, ideally through programs (e.g. dental or health related benefits, housing benefits) that are available to all low income residents, including social assistance participants, so there is a seamless approach to transitioning and sustaining self-sufficiency. This helps people who are new to, or re-entering the labour market, to succeed when they find employment. It also gives people, who are likely to remain in lower paid work, the additional resources they need to sustain themselves and their families and stay employed. The Province has taken important steps in this direction over the last number of years, including the Ontario Child Benefit, the Extended Employment Health Benefit and incremental increases to the minimum wage. Social Assistance reform needs to build on these.

### Issue 3: Social Assistance Rules Should Be Easier to Understand

Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
<p>a) <i>Are the SA rules meeting their objectives? Are there rules that are not working? What changes can be made?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider if the purpose of the rules is to move people to employment or to be restrictive (punitive) about eligibility. Currently rules are based on punitive mind-set. They should focus on moving persons to independence and not on excessive restrictions</li> <li>• Majority of case workers' time is spent on financial support. A shift to focussing on workforce development is needed</li> <li>• Rules and low rates contribute to fraud</li> <li>• Contrary to the discussion paper, OW program staff felt that to best serve clients keep areas of discretion open for workers</li> <li>• Give more authority to OW Service Managers</li> </ul> <p>Rules needing closer review to improve fairness and consistency include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living with spouse</li> <li>• Loans as income</li> <li>• Living with parents</li> <li>• Income exemption waiting period of three months (Earnings exemption program)</li> <li>• Self-employment</li> <li>• Emergency two-week assistance (need flexibility to increase it)</li> <li>• Special diet rules</li> <li>• Temporary care – Need broader and integrated case planning between the OW worker and child care fee assistance program to serve the best interests of the family when temporary care monies are issued. In some cases, the child may be benefit from participating in formal child care</li> </ul>



Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
	<p>Suggestions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change the program image from being last resort to a program of supports that empower people, enhance their independence and develop the workforce</li> <li>• For non-English speaking clients, provide stronger interpretation and translation services so clients understand the rules and their responsibilities in order not to jeopardize eligibility</li> <li>• Reduce administrative workload to allow more time to focus on clients</li> <li>• To assist clients with shelter costs, allow them to receive housing allowances from social housing programs that will not be treated as income</li> </ul>
<p>b) <i>How can special-purpose benefits be delivered more efficiently and equitably?</i></p> <p>c) <i>Should some be delivered outside of the social assistance system?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, deliver to all low-income people</li> <li>• Provide clients with one-stop access to the many supports available to them</li> <li>• Outreach staff are needed to make connections and develop protocols for working with other programs, community agencies and service providers for addressing clients' immediate needs (e.g., counselling, life skills supports, access to housing, and health care)</li> <li>• Be proactive in offering psychological help to clients in need sooner rather than later. Consider providing funding for treatment (e.g., counselling, addictions, etc.) as an alternative to placing clients on long wait lists for subsidized treatment programs</li> </ul>

**Issue 4: Making Social Assistance Viable Over the Long Term**

Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
<p>a) <i>What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased quality of life, well-being, housing and economic stability</li> <li>• Receive support in timely manner, where support matches need</li> <li>• Sufficient provincial funding for formal child care fee assistance is available for people when they need it</li> <li>• Reapplication rate declines</li> <li>• Decreased reliance on food banks and other emergency social services</li> <li>• Clients will have improved knowledge of and access to supports and services provided by community agencies when they leave social assistance</li> </ul>

<p>b) <i>What additional data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of social assistance benefits and services? For example, should ethno cultural and racial data be collected in order to evaluate and improve supports for people from racialized and ethno cultural communities?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus for data collection needs to be on employability assessment and support</li> <li>• Measure success points - how clients move through the continuum of employment. Employment and earnings are the current indicators, but for many people outcomes come earlier, e.g., learning to read</li> <li>• Conduct employability assessments up front</li> <li>• Look at benchmarking information and gap analysis to assess what we are missing</li> <li>• Data on criminal records, addictions, literacy, mental health supports and education can help for program planning and supports</li> <li>• Racial and ethnocultural data should only be collected if it is clearly related to assisting with employability, e.g., languages spoken. Sensitivity and care are required not to appear judgmental or create stereotypes</li> <li>• Should address issues of settlement (integration) as this can also affect employability (e.g., language issues, previous qualifications, education and work experience, etc.)</li> <li>• Collect qualitative data on health and well-being (level and type of supports)</li> </ul>
<p>c) <i>What can the provincial government and municipalities do to better integrate services?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrated programs and case managers: All programs should be working towards improved outcomes for residents that are result of multiple interventions</li> <li>• Child care fee assistance and OW programs need to be better integrated at both provincial and local levels. Providing child care fee assistance should be considered as part of what OW does</li> <li>• Continue momentum of the Provincial/Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review</li> <li>• Improved integration of Social Assistance technology for improved reporting capability</li> <li>• Address the inconsistency for both the eligibility and the rates for discretionary OW benefits, (e.g., differing funeral/burial rates between municipalities)</li> <li>• Improve integration with Local Health Integration Networks to fund the mental health supports needed for OW clients in the shelters</li> <li>• Improve integration of and communication between programs at all levels of government:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Improve the co-ordination between social housing programs, ODSP, OW, CRA</li> <li>○ Align requirements for program eligibility where possible</li> <li>○ Update the <i>Ontario Works Act</i> and the <i>Ontario Disability Support Program Act</i> and other relevant acts to facilitate information sharing with social housing at the Service Manager level and holistic delivery of financial, employment, housing and child care fee assistance programs</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



**Missed or Misunderstood Issues**

A greater focus on outcomes-based programs is welcomed. However, it will require policy work at the Province and additional resources to municipal service managers to move in this direction. Staff training, data collection and tracking, information technology tools, program evaluation, service coordination, and local plan development and community engagement are some of the additional resources pressures on municipalities that need to be recognized as part of social assistance reform.

**Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security**

Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
<p>a) <i>What should Ontario do to address the short-term support and training needs of people who are not eligible for EI?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The OW program could shift to two-tiered programming: First tier is for people who are employment-ready, where the focus is on job development and training. This is consistent with the earlier stated idea of transitioning OW from an income support program to a workforce development program. The second tier is for people on OW who require additional supports and intensive case management by providing more job training, job search supports, and structured, individualized supports and resources to maintain employment (e.g., conflict resolution, anger management). People need timely interventions to provide the best opportunity to reintegrate into the workforce or move to a disability supports if workforce attachment is unlikely to be sustained</li> <li>• Municipalities need to be given more flexibility to support families in finding and maintaining employment by meeting their child care needs</li> <li>• Need more relationship building and collaboration with other community agencies serving these groups, particularly through local partnerships between OW and Employment Ontario</li> </ul>
<p>b) <i>What should the interaction be between income-tested benefits, such as WITB and child benefits, and the social assistance system?</i></p> <p>c) <i>Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal provincial interaction related to social assistance?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A broad review of income security is needed to break down the current fragmented approach between federal, provincial and municipal programs, and between the income tax, employment, disability support and social assistance systems. There have been a number of proposals put forward by policy groups for reform. The Commission provides the opportunity to explore these and consider how programs can better work together</li> <li>• However, any broad review needs an overall vision that will provide adequate income, employment, housing and child care supports to prevent people from falling into deep poverty and to support those who do to transition to sustainable employment. The range of programs needs to fit within this vision, with appropriate roles and responsibilities assigned to each part. OW is best positioned to support people who face significant barriers to employment and require sustained case management and ancillary supports to improve outcomes</li> <li>• Any changes should be based on the principle that recipients are provided with a net benefit. They should not be worse off</li> <li>• Think of OW as a system that supports families with children. Rules, eligibility, and supports (e.g., child care fee assistance) for participation requirements need to be considered from that perspective</li> </ul>



Discussion Questions Posed by the Commission	The Regional Municipality of York Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improve the coordination between social housing programs and OW and ODSP for sharing of sponsorship information to help verify income and family status within all programs</li></ul>

**Missed or Misunderstood Issues**

Municipalities have experience in providing discretionary benefits to address one-time emergency needs of individuals and families outside of social assistance. This is a critical role that is often not fully recognized as part of the broader income security system and needs to be appropriately resourced as part of Social Assistance reform.