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**For Information**

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**REPORT TITLE:**      **Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance – Modernization and Transformation**

**FROM:**                Janice Sheehy, Commissioner of Human Services

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**OBJECTIVE**

To provide an update on how social assistance in Peel Region is being modernized in alignment with the provincial plan titled “Recovery and Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation.”

**REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- COVID-19 has accelerated the need to modernize the delivery of social assistance.
  - The ongoing and prolonged impacts of the pandemic mean that many Ontarians are unable to return to the labour market.
  - With elevated unemployment rates and the anticipated end of changes to federal and provincial government COVID-19 recovery benefits, it is forecasted that in 2021-2022 there will be a 21.2 per cent increase in demand for social assistance in Ontario.
  - The Province has developed a renewed vision for social assistance to create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on providing people with a range of services and supports to respond to their unique needs, and addresses barriers to success so they can move towards employment and independence.
  - The Region of Peel is working with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on a variety of initiatives in support of the renewed vision for social assistance transformation.
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**DISCUSSION**

**1. Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need to modernize the delivery of social assistance in Ontario. As the struggle with the impacts of the pandemic continue, many Ontarians are unable to return to the labour market. As a result of the higher unemployment rate and the expected end or changes to federal and provincial government COVID-19 recovery income benefits, in the most recent report received from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (*September 2020 Caseload Forecast*) a 21.2 per cent increase in the demand for social assistance in Ontario is anticipated for 2021-2022.

As such, the social assistance system must be ready to support increased numbers of people back towards stability, employment, and independence. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) is working with Service System Managers to

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develop a multi-year plan that will strengthen the system and enable people to obtain the right supports at the right time.

### **2. Vision for Social Assistance Transformation**

The Province's vision was announced through the "Recovery and Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation" document released on February 11, 2021 outlining the roadmap to an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on providing people with a range of supports to help them achieve self-sufficiency.

The vision for social assistance is an all-of-government approach that proposes a 'human services model' where people receive supports that are tailored to their unique needs with a focus on digitalization and streamlining of services, transitioning to a new employment services system and enhancing program integration.

Some key changes in this long-term vision include:

- Realignment of the provincial and municipal roles. The province will focus efforts on overseeing financial assistance, beginning with centralized intake functions, in addition to expansion of the digital and self-service options for clients. Municipal partners will use their expertise to deliver life stabilization supports and services and person-centred case management to recipients of the Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).
- Transformation of the employment services system, where Employment Ontario will align with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, as the employment and training service provider for all Ontarians who require assistance to find and keep employment. This will shift the responsibility of providing employment supports from OW and ODSP to Employment Ontario.
- Breaking down of silos between ministries and integration across municipal and community programs to create a model that will support and connect people to the services they need to stabilize their lives and attain greater independence.

Peel is working closely with MCCSS on numerous initiatives to achieve the renewed vision for social assistance transformation. Some of the initiatives implemented through Ontario Works in Peel include the following:

#### **a) Modernization and Digitization**

##### **i) Centralized and Automated Intake Prototype**

MCCSS will enhance the delivery of social assistance through the implementation of Centralized Intake. The objective of the prototype is to build a shared process for the assessment and granting of social assistance where the Province receives the majority of online applications, processes the less complex applications and transitions those that require additional support or are deemed 'high-risk' to the municipalities.

The initiative began in the fall of 2020. The Region of Peel is participating as a prototype site and launched in February 2021. Staff will continue to work towards refining the process to ensure a seamless client service experience.

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### **ii) MyBenefits and Electronic Document Management**

MCCSS will continue to expand digital and self-serve options through the Provincial MyBenefits application to reduce manual processes and the need for in-office visits by clients, allowing front-line staff more time to provide individualized support and person-centred case management.

As approved by Regional Council on September 10, 2020 through a report titled “Ontario Works Electronic Document Management”, Peel has implemented a digitized scanning and record storage process housed within the Provincial repository. The change has reduced paperwork and increased program efficiency.

### **b) Life Stabilization**

#### **i) Connecting Clients to Services**

MCCSS is transforming the traditional role of the Ontario Works caseworker from a singular focus on income (benefit) eligibility and maintenance to one of active client engagement and person-centred case management. Peel is developing an enhanced life stabilization strategy that builds on client strengths and actively supports them to manage challenges such as mental health, addiction, settlement, language training, housing, etc. and through formal partnerships, connects them to services across the community. The development and implementation of the new model will occur between January 2021 and March 2022.

#### **ii) Supporting Better Outcomes**

With the implementation of the life stabilization strategy, the following outcomes are expected to be achieved:

- Shorter stays on social assistance
- More people exiting to employment
- Fewer people needing to re-apply for financial assistance
- Reduced child welfare involvement
- Prevention and early intervention

### **c) Employment Services Transformation**

#### **i) Employment Services transition to Service System Manager (WCG Services)**

As one of the three prototype regions for Employment Services Transformation, The Region of Peel began the transition of clients to the new system in January 2021. Staff are working actively with WCG Services and Employment Ontario to support an effective transfer of services while continuing to monitor outcomes and the client experience at both the program and system level.

#### **ii) Employment Project for Youth with Disabilities**

MCCSS selected the Region of Peel to partner with ODSP to test an intensive, collaborative case management approach to help youth (ages 14-29) with

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disabilities stabilize their lives, plan their careers and access education, training, and employment opportunities. The initiative is being piloted from January 2021 to March 2022 and aims to assist a minimum of 100 youths with income support, life stabilization, community engagement and system navigation.

### **3. Next Steps**

To facilitate the Province's vision, the Region of Peel has undertaken key steps to prepare for changes to the social assistance system. The Region will continue to work in collaboration with the province on the co-design of the system and plan for the development of a human services model over the next four years.

Staff will return to Regional Council before the end of 2021, with an update on the status of the co-design of the social assistance system, new funding model, workforce impact and budget implications.

### **RISK CONSIDERATIONS**

In anticipation of the increase in service demand for social assistance, there may be potential resource implications. Staff will continue to plan and examine resource capacity within the service area to implement initiatives that achieve the renewed vision for social assistance.

Additionally, with the shift to digitalized services, it is imperative that OW clients have equitable access to affordable technology, internet plans and digital literacy to access and receive the supports they need to attain employment and self-sufficiency.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

As transformation of both social assistance delivery and employment services proceeds, the Province and municipalities will work together to develop a funding approach to address administrative costs and re-invest savings to enhance the system. Further consideration will need to be given to address the possibility of downloaded programs and their financial implications if any, as we continue to facilitate the transformation.

### **CONCLUSION**

The long-term vision for social assistance is the establishment a new human services delivery model which will streamline programs and services to better support people. It is envisioned that this new model will be achieved by breaking down silos among ministries and creating greater integration across municipal and community programs to better connect people to the services they need to stabilize their lives. Staff will continue to work in collaboration with the Province and the community to establish a system that will achieve the goals of life stabilization and community inclusion.

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*For further information regarding this report, please contact Jacqueline Johnson, Director, Community Access, [Jacqueline.johnson@peelregion.ca](mailto:Jacqueline.johnson@peelregion.ca)*

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