
For Information

REPORT TITLE: Ontario Works Social Assistance Update

FROM: Sean Baird, Commissioner of Human Services

OBJECTIVE

To provide an update on the Ontario Works program and the Ontario Social Assistance Renewal Plan in Peel, and to increase Council's awareness of the barriers facing Peel clients.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- Since January 2020, Peel has been a key player and one of the first regions to implement Ontario's Social Assistance Renewal Plan.
 - The Region of Peel (Peel) now has greater responsibility for delivering supports to help Ontario Works clients stabilize their lives so they can become self-sufficient.
 - Barriers that social assistance clients face are more acute in Peel due to the unique needs of a diverse community, the high cost of living, and limited access to mental health services.
 - Staff have worked creatively and collaboratively to address barriers and will continue to work with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and community partners to highlight the needs of Peel.
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DISCUSSION

1. Background

As described in the March 25, 2021 council report from the Commissioner of Human Services, titled "Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation and Modernization", the province had made changes to social assistance as of January 2020. This includes moving employment services to Employment Ontario and WCG Services and shifting Peel's focus to providing stability support services to help clients become employment-ready. Peel was one of three prototype areas for the transformation that is now being rolled out province-wide.

The division responsible for this transformation at the Region of Peel is Income and Social Supports (formerly Income Support/Community Access). The mission of Income and Social Supports is to lift Peel residents out of poverty by supporting them to take steps towards employment, greater independence, and improved quality of life. It achieves this by providing a range of services including:

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- Income support which involves administration, oversight and accountability of social assistance benefits such as Ontario Works
- Stability supports which include providing coaching, system navigation, goal setting and tailored case management to help clients access the support and community services they need to move towards greater self-sufficiency and out of poverty
- Emergency supports to families and individuals facing an immediate crisis or emergency including those impacted by fire, flood, natural disaster, or for people awaiting refugee status.

Over the past three years Income and Social Supports has been adapting to the social assistance renewal plans and has reorganized staff and processes to effectively and efficiently serve our clients and to fulfill our mission and mandate.

2. Ontario Works Overview in Peel

a) Current State

- In 2022 approximately 23,000 Peel residents (1.6 per cent of our population) received Ontario Works assistance.
- Demographics of Peel's Ontario Works caseload:
 - 54 per cent are single clients
 - 7 per cent are single parents
 - 9 per cent are youth clients
- In 2022, the maximum Ontario Works benefit for basic needs and shelter for a single person was **\$733 per month**, which is less than a third of Peel's Living Wage (\$3,858 per month) and well below the poverty line (Statistics Canada Low Income Measure) of \$2,208 per month.
- The Ontario Works benefit rate, which is a standard rate applied across Ontario regardless of the cost of living, was last updated in 2018. For an Ontario Works client, \$733 can buy far less today as the value of \$733 in 2018 has been eroded by inflation to about \$636 in December 2022.
- The average Ontario Works monthly caseload in Peel for the last three months of 2022 was more than 13,000.
- From September 2022 to January 2023 the Ontario Works caseload has increased by 7.6 per cent and continues to climb.
- The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) is forecasting Peel's caseload to increase by 14 per cent in 2023.
- 100 per cent of Ontario Works benefit costs are paid by the province; the Region pays 50 per cent of the cost to administer the program in Peel.

b) Peel Dynamics

Although Ontario Works is a provincial program, with standard benefit rates across Ontario, there are dynamics at play in Peel which exacerbate the situation for Peel clients.

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- 52 per cent of Peel's population are immigrants.
- 33 per cent of residents speak a language other than English or French at home.
- 68 per cent of people in Peel identify with a racialized group (vs 34 per cent of Ontarians and 27 per cent of Canadians) and therefore often face additional barriers or challenges in accessing services.
- In 2022 the unemployment rate in Peel was 6.4 per cent which was higher than Ontario's rate which was 5.6 per cent.
- Many people are in seasonal or part-time jobs and therefore may cycle on and off of social assistance.
- Average rent in Mississauga and Brampton in February 2023 was \$2,167 and \$1,886 respectively for a 1 bedroom.
- Visitors to food banks increased significantly over past three years and many of them are Ontario Works clients.
- Wait times for mental health counselling can be 6-12 months or longer for services that are culturally or linguistically appropriate.

3. Trends and Barriers Facing Clients in Peel

As staff work to support clients, they are reporting more complex needs and greater barriers to achieving health and self-sufficiency. The three most significant barriers are the cost of living, access to mental health services and sufficient digital tools.

The cost to live in Peel is the most significant challenge facing clients on social assistance. The dramatic increase in the cost of living in Peel in recent years, combined with the low Ontario Works benefit rates, has created a growing challenge for Peel clients to afford basic needs such as food, clothing and transportation.

Mental health is one of the top barriers Peel's Ontario Works clients face. This is expected to be an ongoing issue, especially given the scarcity of timely and appropriate mental health and addictions counselling services in Peel.

The digital divide is another barrier for many clients. Digital devices, internet plans and digital literacy are essential tools for accessing social supports and are required to participate in the digital economy, school and work, yet some Peel residents do not have access to the knowledge, technology or data to equitably participate. We are continuing to assist clients to access the tools they require.

In support of the Province's vision for social assistance renewal and to enhance our ability to deliver stability supports, the Income and Social Supports division has designed a client-centred service delivery model that strengthens partnerships with community services in order to help clients overcome the barriers they face.

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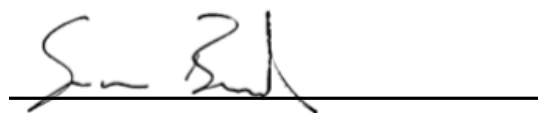
4. Next Steps

To support clients to achieve successful outcomes, staff will:

- Continue to work with the MCCSS to implement the Social Assistance Renewal Plan while providing feedback to increase understanding of Peel's unique needs and barriers
- Continue to collaborate with WCG Services to ensure client success and sustained employment
- Collect the data to quantify the impact of the barriers on Peel clients and the community
- Assess existing advocacy strategies from other municipalities and sector organizations
- Provide updates to Council as needed as additional information becomes available and outline proposed advocacy to address client barriers and potential challenges in implementing the Social Assistance Renewal Plan in a future council report.

CONCLUSION

Income and Social Supports has made effective progress in transforming social assistance services in Peel and will continue to look for ways to address the barriers facing Peel residents. Some of the long-standing issues will require greater support and investment if they are to be addressed. Without finding long-term solutions to mitigate the barriers outlined in this report, Peel residents will be at a disadvantage and may not take steps towards greater independence, including employment. Staff will continue to address these barriers with colleagues at the MCCSS as well as working collectively with community partners to have an effective and united voice for the needs of Peel residents. Staff will return to Council with a report outlining advocacy required to address the barriers to Peel residents taking important steps towards employment, greater independence, and an improved quality of life.



Sean Baird, Commissioner of Human Services

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