



Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

September 2011

This document represents the consolidated feedback and response from March of Dimes Canada to the Discussion Paper, "Issues and Ideas", issued June 2011. This document may also be found online at www.marchofdimes.ca/advocacy.

Introduction

Established in 1951, March of Dimes Canada is one of Canada's largest service providers and a tireless advocate for people with disabilities, serving as a resource for all Canadians requiring disability supports.

With a wide range of programs and services offered, many of our consumers utilize more than one of our services to help them gain greater independence. Solutions for independence include employment services, attendance services, financial support for assistive devices, Conductive Education®, home and vehicle modification funding, peer support for stroke and post-polio survivors, and much more.

Last year alone, March of Dimes provided support to children and adults with all types of disabilities, representing more than 2.25 million hours of service to upwards of 50,000 Canadians with disabilities.

Responding to Commission

Shortly after the Commission's public consultation document, "Issues and Ideas", was released in June 2011 March of Dimes Canada solicited staff and consumer feedback throughout our offices in Ontario. Internal consultation and feedback to the Commission's discussion paper occurred throughout the summer of 2011.

Issues and Concerns: What We Heard

Northern Perspective (Thunder Bay example):

The Ontario government needs to contract with specialized agencies that focus on assisting individuals with disabilities.

Opportunities for skills development would support return to work for many in accessing jobs that pay more than minimum wage. Currently, the system is limited in skills development.

Many employment programs that we have provided are not ongoing and many are based on time-limited funding. This does not support the development of services, and the constant change in services is a challenge for participants.

Changes in internal staffing structures with Ontario Works is a problem, as gaps continually exist in addressing client referrals to a program.

There are a number of individuals on social assistance who may be better served in ODSP due to a disability. However, the process for adjudication in the system is problematic as many do not have a health professional to clearly identify disability issues.

Social assistance rates are too low to allow individuals and family to manage daily needs.

The extension of benefits in finding employment when benefits are not provided can many support individuals and families, much like the ODSP system.

Special needs benefits are not clearly defined, and access to special needs benefits is challenging.

A clear definition of what the plan is for Employment Services for those on social assistance would be useful in terms of a longer plan that creates sustainability to programs.

**Issues and Concerns: What We Heard
Southeast Perspective (Kingston example):**

Individuals who are currently receiving Ontario Works are having difficulty securing employment due to the following six issues:

1. The lack of daycare alternatives: Minimum wage, combined with high daycare costs, is little incentive for OW recipients to pursue employment.
2. Transportation: Some individuals feel it should be mandatory for recipients to receive a monthly bus pass for networking/job searching reasons.
3. The lack of client-driven employment searches: Some individuals feel that they are being forced to obtain employment infields in which they have no interest.
4. Insufficient information available about employment services within a specific area. Little to no information is available to recipients and OW case managers about local programs offered (such as Employment Ontario services, wage subsidies, GST benefits, Community Coordinator Project, etc).
5. Many individuals feel strongly about universal health benefits being available. When recipients begin their employment, the costs of healthcare often outweigh any income being made.
6. The need for a higher monthly allotment for rent. Individuals often tend to live in profound poverty due to the small monthly allotment for rent.

Questions, Answers and Recommendations

Section 1

Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

- What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?

RESPONSE

The existing mechanisms are sufficient. More outreach to employers promoting the viability of the candidates would be useful.

- Can you suggest ways in which the skills of people receiving social assistance could be better developed to meet the needs of employers?

RESPONSE

Better funding mechanisms, or more funding, for short-term training for social assistance clients to enhance their existing skills to better match labour market requirements is needed. Perhaps a way to have employers “pre-select” people could constitute an improvement in meeting the needs of employers.

- What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access?

RESPONSE

Faster processing of employment service applications is needed so they can be approved in four to six weeks. This would ensure that the impetus of their desire to obtain employment is not lost through the passage of time.

One tool that might help facilitate access would be through the creation of a user web portal online.

- What would improve services to people receiving social assistance who face multiple barriers to employment?

RESPONSE

One approach would make available more services and access to extra supports that would be required for them to obtain employment, and possibly consider the use of a single case manager.

- How can Ontario's social assistance system better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they many need?

RESPONSE

A system of independent assessment of a client is needed in order to establish what they need to return to work, using specialized skilled case managers. A move to generic services may make it more difficult. Improve the linkages among the spheres of health, social services, labour, education, etc.

Section 2 Appropriate Benefit Structure

- How should social assistance rates be determined?

RESPONSE

Rates should be based on the needs of the individual/family plus the cost of living in the area in which they reside.

- How should benefits be designed to deal with the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people are better off working?

RESPONSE

One approach would ensure that the client is physically capable of working and the type of work they do, then periodically review their progress to employment and their engagement in the process. Most importantly, establish a threshold below which no one should fall. There should also be a way to protect health and dental benefits for at least one year.

- 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?

RESPONSE

Funds need to consider the job-search process and access to employment, as well as access to transportation. Funds also need to include clothing to attend interviews and access to childcare. One could also include a consideration for choice of therapies (such as March of Dimes' Conductive Education program).

- Should asset limits and exemptions be changed to improve the social assistance system?

RESPONSE

The system should focus on helping those individuals able to work to actually search for and obtain employment. Stripping away assets simply means that when the client finds work, there will be a hand-to-mouth paycheque, potentially making the client more susceptible to having to return to social assistance should their employment be lost. There should be no requirement that everything is used up.

- How should benefits for people with disabilities be designed and delivered?

RESPONSE

The system should be open and transparent. Clients should be able to establish quickly if they are eligible for support and what level of support they will get. This will enable them to better plan for the immediate future.

The level of disability also needs to be considered (eg. permanent, temporary) and “points” could be provided for volunteering. Always consider if the person can find and sustain work – with the constant need to maintain quality of life, maintain health, and avoid isolation.

Section 3 Easier to Understand

- How can special-purpose benefits be delivered more efficiently and equitably? Should some be delivered outside of the social assistance system?

RESPONSE

Some special purpose benefits are delivered inconsistently or have been subject to frequent change. Consistency should be the first objective so clients know where they stand. Many, such as federal, private, RRAP, could be synchronized with other programs.

Section 4

Viable over the Long Term

- What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?

RESPONSE

Certainly one outcome should ensure that a client will receive the type of support required for them to maintain their dignity. Outcomes should include people keeping their dignity, being valued, working when and if they can, have access to preventative health care, keeping their families intact, and have access to a relevant support network.

- 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?

RESPONSE

If the need is warranted, then yes, additional data ought to be collected – to ensure maximum effectiveness and ease of access.

- What can the provincial government and municipalities do to better integrate services?

RESPONSE

Better coordination between the various programs, enhancing the ability to cross-refer if that is deemed the best option for the client. The ideal would see the development of one integrated system that includes aligning transportation, income and social supports.

Section 5

An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

- What should Ontario do to address the short-term income support and training needs of people who are not eligible for EI?

RESPONSE

One approach would be to provide funding, where appropriate, for interventions for clients who are not EI eligible – in essence, address their short-term income support needs.

- What should the interaction be between income-tested benefits, such as the WITB and child benefits, and the social assistance system?

RESPONSE

Have access to an independent review by someone with the experiential knowledge of the types of income-tested benefits and their eligibility requirements to establish the probability of a client being able to access them.

- Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance?

RESPONSE

As the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is more than 40%, there needs to be a task force to review what is required of the service providers and employers in order to drastically reduce this number.

It would be fantastic to have an integrated system focused on social, physical and psychological well-being that recognizes the multiplicity of life's day-to-day contributions, such as volunteering, homecare, child rearing, eldercare, and part-time work.

Conclusion

Ontarians with disabilities have a much higher rate of unemployment than the general population, especially people with lifelong disabilities who have both barriers to employment and little work experience. When the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) replaced Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the provincial government eliminated funding for front-end supports to this group – supports such as vocational assessment, career exploration, and building work skills and self confidence. Now, Employment Ontario is considering eliminating special pre-employment and placement services, and requiring the job applicant to use a generic employment centre. This will effectively strip this employment-disadvantaged group of all supports to seek, acquire and retain employment.

To successfully access and participate in the labour market, and gain meaningful employment, people with disabilities require specialized vocational services that address the nature and severity of their disability. The Ontario government must make a greater investment in the services and supports that help people who have a disability actually get into and remain in the workforce, thereby enhancing their independence and improving their standing of living.

Additional copies of this document may be at:
www.marchofdimes.ca/advocacy

General inquiries regarding this Submission should be directed the following:
Steven Christianson, Manager, Government Relations & Advocacy
March of Dimes Canada
10 Overlea Boulevard, Toronto, ON M4H 1A4
Tel: 416-425-3463
Fax: 416-425-1920
Web: www.marchofdimes.ca