



Committee of Whole

Meeting Date: October 12, 2021
Submitted by: Cindy Howard – General Manager, Finance and Community Services
SUBJECT: Social Assistance Transformation – Social Services

BACKGROUND:

Social Assistance Transformation:

Over the past few years the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services has been developing a framework for the delivery of social assistance in Ontario.

On September 30, 2020, the province announced the Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Plan, which is divided into two separate periods: the Recovery Period (Sept 2020 – April 2021) and the Renewal Period (Spring 2021 – 2024).

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/recovery-renewal-ontarios-vision-social-assistance-transformation>

The Recovery Period (Sept 2020 – April 2021) focuses on four key areas:

- Accelerated digital delivery solutions
- Centralized and automated delivery
- Risk-based eligibility review
- Access to employment and training

The Renewal Period (Spring 2021 – 2024) will concentrate on three main areas:

- Person-centred, supportive client approaches
- Centralization of financial assistance
- Renewed service delivery

In February 2021, the provincial government announced its vision for the future of social assistance. The vision is to create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on people, providing them with a range of services and supports to

respond to individual needs and address barriers to success so that individuals can move towards employment and independence.

Working with OMSSA and Deloitte Canada the province will collate and analyze feedback from clients and staff.

Early areas of focus include the current state (strengths and weaknesses) and the future state (high-level overview) with more details around what provincial and municipal roles and responsibilities will be.

It will take 12-18 months to complete the three-phased process.

The province acknowledges the critical role played by municipalities as service delivery partners and plans to co-design a new provincial-municipal service delivery approach with renewed operating, funding and accountability methods. With municipal stakeholders and partners, the province will undertake system transformation that is driven by outcomes, accountability and system performance.

The proposed provincial changes will have significant impact on the nature of the service being delivered locally by the County. These changes will also impact front line County social service staff.

ANALYSIS:

Ontario Works (OW) is a provincial program that offers financial, employment, and emergency assistance to local residents in need. The Province sets the policies and regulations for the program under the *Ontario Works Act*. OW is administered by service managers across the province called Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSAB). The local municipal expense of OW is 50% of the administrative cost to deliver the program, and all client benefit costs are funded by the Province.

The new human services model includes centralization of financial assistance at the provincial level with person-centred municipal supports at the local level. Work to actualize this model is already underway. Over the course of 2021-2022, there will be a gradual centralization of provincial functions beginning with intake, then financial benefits, and finally month-to-month eligibility. By the end of 2022 and into 2024, social assistance will be centrally delivered by the province while there will be local municipally-delivered life stabilization supports for OW and ODSP clients. In 2024 and beyond, municipalities will provide integrated life stabilization supports to social assistance clients and people in crisis in a broad human services model. In this longer-term vision, people seeking help and people in crisis are triaged by municipal caseworkers and supported as needed regardless of whether or not they are a social

assistance recipient. Social assistance will become one of the tools available to provide that wraparound life stabilization support rather than the entire focus of caseworker and client interactions. Person-centred municipal supports will provide warm referrals and personalized assistance navigating the broader system that includes childcare, housing, health care, mental health and employment.

Life Stabilization:

Life Stabilization focuses on ways staff can support clients to identify key needs, connect them to available resources, and coach them toward success and financial empowerment.

People can still work while addressing challenges, but the likelihood of finding and keeping employment and being independent is higher if they are able to address underlying issues that may be barriers to success.

The Framework has broken out different services that are provided to clients

- **Basic Needs** – Financial support, Housing needs, Crisis Resolution
- **Life Skills** – Self-efficacy, Literacy/numeracy, education
- **Health** – Primary care, Mental health and addictions supports, Ongoing medical concerns
- **Community Supports** – Dependent care, Justice and Legal support, cultural connections

Our current service model and the work currently being provided by caseworkers and case assistants in Social Services aligns well with the upcoming Life Stabilization framework. We continue to reach out and collaborate with our community partners to provide a holistic wraparound approach to supporting our clients.

Ontario Works Act Amendments:

In April 2021, the ministry proposed amendments to the *Ontario Works Act*, this was to align the legislation with the upcoming changes to the Social Assistance framework. On June 3rd, 2021 Bill 276, *Supporting Recover and Competitiveness Act 2021* passed.

Engagement Sessions: Staff and Clients:

Starting in April 2021 the province began the process of engaging both staff and clients. Throughout the SA Transformation process, the provinces plans to incorporate insight and feedback from several sources, including social assistance staff and directly from clients Middlesex County serves.

The feedback generated will be shared with Deloitte and Provincial-Municipal Social Assistance and Employment Committee (PMSAEC) to aid in the creation and updating of current and future programming.

Client engagement:

Social Services managers contacted approximately 20 clients over a period of one week (August 23 to August 27) to complete a survey to help better understand the current state of the client's journey and the supports they are receiving.

The questions fell under the following headings:

- Caseworker Relationship
- Type of Support
- Community Channels

Staff engagement:

Social Service managers met with front line workers to discuss and gather feedback on the delivery of the Life Stabilization framework, services and supports.

Centralized Intake (CI):

The Centralized Intake (CI) process was developed and Launched in November 2020. The roll out will be through a staged approach. The CI process is designed to optimize user experience and reduce admin burden.

The CI Process will also bring forward other electronic updates:

- Electronic ID portal for ID verification and eSignatures for contents
- Risk-based eligibility determination (RBED) framework – data from application to determine eligibility
- Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA) updates

There have been thirteen sites phased in since November 2020. Middlesex was paired with Chatham-Kent Social Services as a Peer Support Mentee. A CI prototype specialist from Chatham-Kent was invited to meet with Middlesex County Social Services front line staff through a virtual platform, to discuss challenges and successes of this new process.

Middlesex County Phase 5 rollout was scheduled for December 6th, 2021.

Unfortunately, due to unforeseen system challenges, The Phase 5 rollout has been paused until January 31st, 2022.

The Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA) for online application has been up and running for the past year and half; Middlesex County has successfully completed 54 online applications.

Electronic Document Management (EDM):

The Electronic Document Management (EDM) model was developed as part of the Ministry's Social Assistance Reform mandate. EDM provides the foundational base for enhanced user experience, administrative efficiencies and process optimization through the digitization of paper into digital records accessible through the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS).

All ODSP sites were equipped with Electronic Document Management tools. As of June 2021, 25 municipal/OW sites have moved to full EDM.

Middlesex has started implementing many of EDM processes and practices e.g. reviewing and purging files to remove any unnecessary documents.

After discussions with Middlesex County Information Technologies department it was determined the best course of action to have all current and future files digitized is to purchase the services of a company called Nimble. Nimble has been used by many different OW and ODSP offices throughout Ontario, and has a deep understanding of the provincial program SAMS. Middlesex County will need to sign and agree to a Master Service agreement and Statement of work.

Fees for this program include an initial setup of Client Master File Digitization, Digital Mail Room Services, and Digital On-site Scanning services; going forward there will be ongoing yearly fees for Mail Room Services and the Digital On-site Scanner.

A report will be provided at a future Council meeting on this initiative.

RPC – Reloadable Payment Cards:

In 2016, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) worked with Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) to launch the Reloadable Payment Card (RPC) program – an RBC Right Pay Prepaid Visa Card product – in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and subsequently in for Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities (ACSD). While the Ministry's preferred method of payment remains direct

bank deposit (DBD), the RPC offers a safe, inexpensive and reliable electronic alternative for people unable to use DBD.

The next phase of implementation was expansion of the RPC to Ontario Works offices across the province. Middlesex County is part of the current phase.

The ministry has set a 95% provincial target for cases that receive electronic social assistance payments – currently the County is at 88%. With the help of the RPC program we will reach the 95% required by the ministry.

In June and July 2021, caseworkers conducted a review of clients who receive monthly paper cheques to encourage the use of Direct Bank Deposit (DBD) and to understand how clients are cashing their monthly cheques. This final DBD review brought the total number of clients receiving benefits via electronic social assistance payments up by 15. This review has alerted Social Services that some clients are using cheque-cashing businesses; the use of these businesses reduces the already low amount of funds clients receive daily and monthly. In September 2021, 37 clients received paper cheques.

The RPC program will:

- Reduce the amount of money lost in fees through cheque-cashing businesses
- Build client financial self-efficacy and empowerment
- Reduce administrative burdens on both the finance department and OW caseworkers
- Decrease time between funds being issued and funds received by client(s)

The County and RBC will be required to enter into a Services Delivery Agent Agreement and Statement of Work, as well as to open a RBC deposit account and provide a transactional risk facility (credit) with RBC against the deposit account.

Fees for this program include set up fee for each client, monthly RBC banking and fees to load cards monthly.

A report will be provided at a future Council meeting on this initiative.

Employment Services Transformation (EST):

The provincial government has started to restructure Employment Services in Ontario. Service System Managers (SSM) will plan and deliver services that meet the needs of their local economy. These SSM's will be selected through a new, competitive process that is open to any public, not-for-profit and private sector organization.

Beginning fall 2019, the new system was implemented in three regions in Ontario so lessons learned may be applied and rolled-out across the province gradually.

Those three regions are Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula, Muskoka-Kawarths, and Peel.

The Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development will use a two-staged competitive selection process to select Service System Manager (SSM)

A Request for Qualifications was released in the spring of 2021, with the Request for Proposals will be required the following stages:

- Lowest complexity areas – Fall 2021
- Medium complexity areas – by the end of 2022
- High Complexity (Toronto) – sometime in 2023
- Lowest Complexity SSM will be identified in Spring 2022

June 10, 2021 the government announced a multi-stage competitive process which would see SSMs selected for all catchment areas in Ontario between now and the end of 2023. On June 10th Ministry of Labour Training and Skills Development announced 9 more catchment areas:

- Durham
- Halton
- Kingston–Pembroke
- Kitchener–Waterloo–Barrie
- London (which includes Middlesex, Elgin and Oxford)
- Ottawa Region
- Stratford–Bruce Peninsula
- Windsor-Sarnia
- York

On September 13th it was announced that the four Lowest complexity catchment areas will start the Employment Services Transformation process:

- York
- Halton
- Stratford-Bruce Peninsula
- Kingston-Pembroke

On September 13th, the Province also announced the Qualified Applicants under the Request for Qualification Tender. Given the scope of the London catchment area, the County did not apply through the RFQ process. The City of London applied and qualified through the RFQ process to participate in the Call for Proposal for the London area which includes Middlesex, Elgin and Oxford. The City of London is just one of the

Qualified Applicants and the list is posted on the Provincial website. The proposal submission date has been moved to the spring of 2022. As with the three prototype catchments, new SSMs will have Planning and Transition periods before taking full responsibility for the local service delivery network and prior to the referral of Ontario Works clients into Employment Ontario service delivery. Lessons learned from the prototype phase demonstrated that this was key to successful transition.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

As transformation of both employment services and social assistance delivery proceeds, the funding model will evolve alongside the shifts in roles and responsibilities. The co-designed system will include a new approach to funding and a new performance and accountability framework.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC FOCUS:

This report aligns with the following Strategic Focus, Goals, or Objectives:

Strategic Focus	Goals	Objectives
Cultivating Community Vitality	Advance a diverse, healthy, and engaged community across Middlesex County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote and support community wellness • Innovate social and community services • Attract, retain, and engage youth in our community • Champion and encourage active transportation and public transit opportunities
Strengthening Our Economy	Encourage a diverse and robust economic base throughout the county	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support opportunities to create a stronger and sustainable agricultural sector • Create an environment that enables the attraction and retention of businesses, talent, and investments • Attract visitors to Middlesex County • Support the development and prosperity of downtown core areas in Middlesex County
Promoting Service Excellence	Innovate and transform municipal service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate and align municipal service delivery to emerging needs and expectations • Engage, educate and inform residents, businesses, and visitors of county services and community activities • Strengthen our advocacy and lobbying efforts with other government bodies • Collaborate with strategic partners to leverage available resources and opportunities • Build organizational capacity and capabilities