

Recovery & Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation

Read about Ontario's vision for a renewed social assistance system to help more people move towards employment and independence. Find out how the province is working with municipalities to develop Ontario's social assistance system into a modern, sustainable system that connects people to the supports they need.

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|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Minister's message | 6. People first |
| 2. Introduction – the vision | 7. The Path Forward |
| 3. The need for change | 8. Funding, performance, and |
| 4. Work underway | accountability |
| 5. Achieving stability | 9. Next steps |
| | 10. Conclusion |
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Minister's message

Ontario's social assistance programs play a key role in supporting Ontarians in need. Programs like Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are critical to helping those who have lost their jobs or are unable to work. But the system itself faces challenges that limit our ability to help people get back on their feet. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated those challenges.

In reviewing how our social assistance system can better support those in need, we found many of its processes are too bureaucratic, too paper-heavy, and more focused on enforcement and technical aspects than actually helping people improve their lives.

We owe it to individuals and families to do better.

Our caseworkers spend their time on routine administrative tasks which leaves them little time to help people stabilize their lives, support them into the workforce, or reduce their reliance on social assistance. Right now, the average caseworker spends a quarter of their day filing and organizing paperwork.

Meanwhile, those who rely on social assistance spend their time completing paperwork and qualifying for their next payment instead of activities that lead to independence and employment. Our ODSP offices alone generate over 35,000 pieces of paper a day.

We must modernize the system so those who rely on social assistance can get the help they need. Today, we have 47 municipal delivery bodies, in addition to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, replicating the same tasks and operating the same systems 47 times over. Meanwhile, the people who come to us looking for assistance must navigate a complex web of processes to get help. We recognize that early, active intervention is critical. The longer someone stays on assistance the less likely they are to leave.

This document lays out our government's vision for how we will work with our delivery partners to improve social assistance and make it easier to navigate.

Together, we will realign responsibilities and create a more responsive system. One that helps people get back on their feet, re-enter the workforce and live independently.

Todd Smith
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services

Introduction – the vision

To create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focusses on people, providing them with a range of services and supports to respond to their unique needs and address barriers to success so they can move towards employment and independence.

The need for change

Many people turn to social assistance needing more than what financial assistance alone can provide. They may have experienced family violence, illness or an accident, be facing physical or mental health challenges, or find themselves homeless, or at risk of losing their home or accommodations.

People are most likely to achieve economic and employment success when the rest of their lives are stable. This includes having a safe place to live, their physical and mental health needs met and feeling connected and supported within their communities.

Social assistance alone can't be the entire solution. What people require is an all-of-government approach focussed on the individual, so needs can be identified and people can be connected to the right supports.

In the fall of 2020, the province announced plans to build a more responsive, efficient, and person-centered social assistance system that will get people back to work and help Ontario's COVID-19 economic recovery. As part of this announcement, the province committed to working in close partnership with municipal delivery partners – and with others, like clients and families – to develop a shared vision and design a social assistance system that is modern, sustainable and supports people as they work to achieve greater independence and employment.

While this plan identifies a path forward, it is the start of collaboration, not the end. The province will continue to work closely with its municipal partners – and with others, like clients and families – to refine the plan to create a better system for Ontarians.

Recognizing the unique needs and priorities of First Nations, the province is working with First Nations on a separate plan to renew social assistance in First Nations communities.

Work underway

Both the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and municipal partners are making progress with early changes to the system that are already seeing positive and inspiring results. For example, prototypes to streamline and automate the approval of Ontario Works applications have been steadily decreasing the administrative burden since November, freeing up time for caseworkers to focus on supporting people in addressing barriers to employment – like childcare and housing.

Working with municipal partners, the government is developing a multi-year plan that will start by looking at how to better align service delivery so that people are getting the right supports at the right time. This is an essential component of a system that is streamlined and focussed on the people being served.

At the core of this transformation are the following principles:

- prioritizing the outcomes of employment, financial resilience, independence and well-being
- supporting positive client and staff experiences
- assigning roles to where they make the most sense and improve efficiency
- improving program integrity by leveraging data and technology
- designing in partnership with municipal delivery partners
- building a system that puts people at the centre, with services that work effectively together to support them
- using data, evidence and the voice of clients to inform design

Work is now underway to transform employment services in Ontario with a plan to integrate social assistance employment supports into Employment Ontario with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. The province and municipalities are working together to test a new model where Employment Ontario caseworkers are focussed on employment services while working collaboratively with social assistance caseworkers to support Ontario Works and ODSP clients.

This will free up resources from social assistance offices, which have traditionally taken on the task of ensuring the provision of employment services. Social assistance caseworkers will become an integral part of the support network that helps people stabilize their lives so they can achieve their full potential and job success.

Achieving stability

Provincial–municipal collaboration has resulted in a social assistance framework based on helping people achieve stability in their lives. This means a system where caseworkers focus on the building blocks of greater independence and long-term employability, using their time with clients to:

- understand people’s needs – beyond just employment - and build trust
- help guide individuals through personalized planning
- provide hands-on support to help people navigate the broader system of community supports and services that could include:
 - primary health care
 - housing
 - child care
 - parenting and family supports
 - youth programs
 - digital access
 - tax filing, including access to federal tax credits and benefits
 - financial literacy
 - literacy and library services
 - mental health and addiction services

People on social assistance will benefit from the in-depth, personalized focus of life stabilization alongside coordinated access to Employment Ontario supports and services. This approach will support better outcomes, such as:

- more people exiting to employment
- shorter stays on assistance
- fewer people needing to re-apply for financial assistance
- reduced child welfare involvement
- prevention and early intervention

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services expects these changes to have a positive impact for those on social assistance and Ontario’s [Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario](#), which has set a goal of increasing the number of social assistance recipients moving to employment each year from 35,000 in 2019 to 60,000 by 2024. These changes go beyond the borders of ‘social assistance’ and toward a ‘human services model’, where people get the services they need in a way that is tailored to their unique needs and circumstances.

This shift to a new life stabilization framework will take time. So far, in three regions, municipalities have started to transition employment services to Employment Ontario so that municipal service delivery teams can focus on life stabilization activities. This shift will continue as transformation proceeds in other regions.

People first

A system that is focussed on the person is one where social assistance is just one of many tools available to help them improve their quality of life. Instead of using financial assistance as the entry and exit point for access to one-on-one support, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services will prioritize access to knowledgeable and supportive municipal caseworkers to create a person-centred support system so that:

- qualifying for financial assistance is not the only way to access one-on-one support
- financial assistance and other benefits come together as a comprehensive set of tools for caseworkers
- caseworkers are able to help people access community supports and services
- personalized support doesn't necessarily end when someone finds a job

The social assistance system has made it hard to access services and support from a caseworker unless the person is getting financial assistance through Ontario Works or ODSP. If they didn't qualify for these programs, they may get information about local community supports, but not the ongoing planning supports that might keep them from eventually needing social assistance. If they did qualify, then their access to personalized support ends once they find a job and cease to qualify, whether their lives are stable or not.

Understanding the needs of Ontarians from their perspectives, rather than from the point of view of any one program or benefit, is a key component of our transformation vision. We know that early intervention is critical, as is ongoing support for the newly employed. The government must do more to connect people to programs other than social assistance and these connections need to be seamless for clients.

There is a wide range of benefits and local services available in communities across Ontario, but it can be hard for Ontarians to find an entry point. When they do find an entry point, it can still be difficult to navigate to other programs because the programs aren't connected. When the service system fails to connect with people when they are in need and looking for help, there is a higher risk they will require long-term financial support from social assistance before finding a path back to stability.

This approach will remove barriers to other programs so that people can access the help they need, and sooner. By helping people stay employed, housed, and safe, the system can help them before they need to turn – or return -- to social assistance.

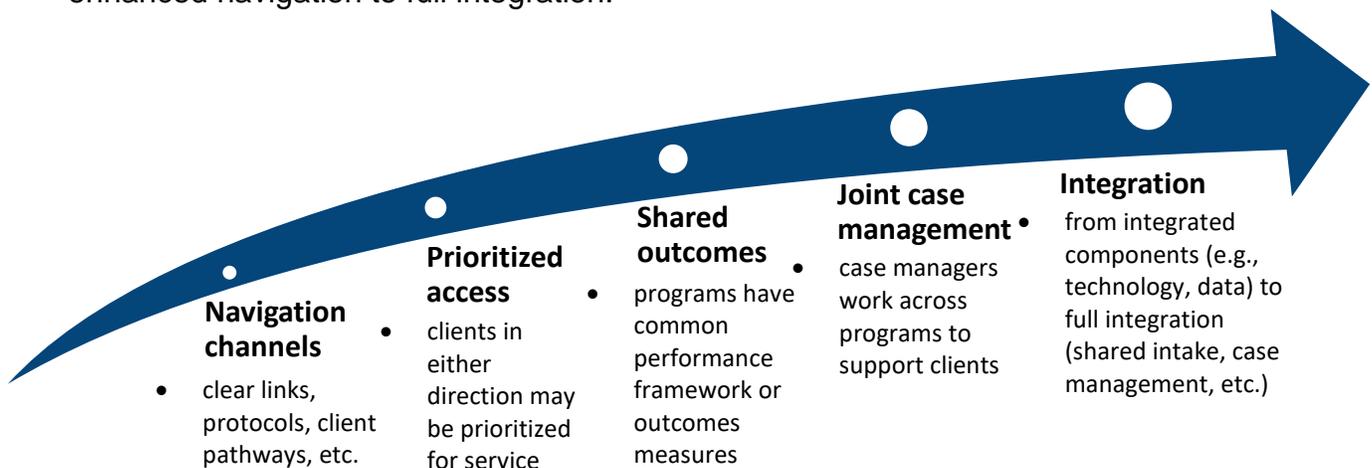
A recent study by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies found that 42% of Ontario households indicated a need for additional support from social service providers during COVID-19; within this group, 67% were unsure how to access the right supportive services in their community¹.

¹ Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, [*Study to Measure Societal Need for Social Services in Ontario during COVID-19 Pandemic*](#) (October 13,2020), 5, 7

Collaboration and integration

The province, municipalities and the community at large must all work together to create a system that will achieve the goals of life stabilization and better outcomes for those who need help. The new vision is a starting point for further discussion among all sectors. The province will continue to work with our municipal and sector partners, including urban Indigenous organizations, to engage with clients, staff, community and those who will be an essential part of this transformation.

Personalized support from within the social assistance delivery system will include prototypes, testing new approaches, and measuring early results ranging from enhanced navigation to full integration.



Work is already underway to support greater integration of municipally delivered housing, childcare and social assistance programs to overcome challenges that municipal partners have identified, including:

- incompatible technology platforms
- different policy rules
- how to use information more effectively across programs

Work is also underway with other ministries to build better connections between programs so Ontarians can access the supports they need. Taking a whole of government approach will not only help more people succeed in employment, it will also support better outcomes in other areas of life, like health and education.

There is a long road ahead and key questions to address as both the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and municipalities develop the multi-year plan:

- Who can benefit most from intensive support?
- How can government ensure that the supports people need are available when they need them?
- What is the entry point to access these supports?

Answers to these questions will help build the conditions for success.

The path forward

At the core of this plan is a new delivery model for social assistance that looks at provincial and municipal roles - not along the traditional program lines of Ontario Works and ODSP, but around who can best provide the service to get the best results.

The province will focus on overseeing financial assistance, making it quick and easy for people to access the system while ensuring program integrity.

At the same time, municipal partners will use their expertise in delivering person-centred casework and knowledge of local community supports to provide all activities that support people on a pathway to greater independence and employment.

The first step is exploring how to realign 'who does what', designing with our municipal partners a phased multi-year plan that will transform the delivery of social assistance in Ontario. Broad engagement, testing and prototyping, and appropriate phasing will be key.

Realigning 'who does what' and streamlining to free up resources

Where it makes sense, the province will oversee the financial side of social assistance and back-office administrative functions, including the financial controls. This helps provide a more consistent, efficient, cost-effective, and technology-based delivery system than is possible through 47 separate municipal delivery entities.

These changes will allow for faster decision making, reduced paperwork and manual process and create a more streamlined experience for those applying to, or on social assistance.

Clients will also be supported through the process - from intake to exit - with more digital and self-serve options, in addition to the traditional channels of phone and in-person service, where available.

To save time and resources, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services will be using a quicker, more streamlined approach to determine eligibility, both when people apply and for ongoing, monthly financial eligibility. Using new digital tools that can evaluate data collected through information sharing agreements the ministry will assess risk in real time. This will support faster decision making for most cases, while identifying the cases that need a more in-depth review. This will improve program integrity by effectively targeting resources.

This approach will have benefits across the system. For clients, this will mean fewer documents to gather and send to a caseworker, and they will get their payments sooner and with less burden.

For municipalities, this will mean less time spent on administration and paperwork, more time for caseworkers to spend on high impact life stabilization activities and a greater capacity to build stronger connections across the broader system of supports

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services will also look at how to administer benefits that some people receive on top of their standard monthly payment. These benefits provide critical additional support, like helping people meet their medical needs, but can also take up hours of a caseworkers' time. By streamlining the policies and processes around these benefits, caseworkers can spend less time on administrative tasks and more time on helping clients and creating a better experience.

Enhancing access to local supports

Over the many years of providing frontline support within their communities, municipalities have become experts in person-centered and connected supports and services. They understand their local communities, have strong relationships with local organizations, and know what services are available.

Designing a system where municipalities deliver life stabilization supports to people receiving ODSP has the potential to also provide significant benefit to Ontarians with disabilities. Streamlining and automating ODSP financial assistance and expanding digital and self-serve options will allow us to redirect resources to provide more intensive life stabilization supports. The province and municipalities will explore how to best achieve this without creating additional administrative costs for municipalities.

While one-on-one support is critical for many people on social assistance, not everyone wants or needs the same level of support. Building the evidence base on which interventions work best for which clients will support design of a more effective, efficient system. The government is working with partners to test case management models that vary in intensity to evaluate and identify best practices.

Funding, performance and accountability

The province currently shares the cost of Ontario Works delivery with municipalities. 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. The province and municipalities will work together to develop a funding approach that addresses administrative costs appropriately and re-invests administrative savings to enhance the system.

Next steps

The province is taking a measured and phased approach to transformation, starting with basic products and services that can expand as new features are developed and older ones are refined. Phases will begin at different times in different regions to support

smooth transitions in a gradual process that causes little or no disruption to those who rely on these supports with the goal of making significant progress in all areas by 2024. The province will propose legislative and regulatory changes where necessary to enable a flexible and gradual approach to transformation.

The first step is the redesigning of the intake process for applicants to social assistance with a new, easy-to-use digital application. Features include:

- the ability for applicants to verify their identity digitally
- the ability to sign forms electronically
- a new-risk based model that can automatically grant most cases while flagging the complex cases that require in-depth review

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services launched its new streamlined system for intake of applications in November 2020 and has been working with municipal partners to expand its features and fine-tune its processes. As the new intake model rolls out, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services will turn its attention to realigning the delivery functions and streamlining financial benefits, and then finally, will assume responsibility for month-to-month eligibility for social assistance.

As realigning of roles and responsibilities continues, municipalities will begin to apply resources to high impact casework. At the same time, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, municipal partners and other ministries will work together to build the new human services model.

Conclusion

The government's vision is bold – but bold change is needed. By working collaboratively with municipal and sector partners, a system will be created that helps people move towards employment and independence and participating more fully in their communities. It will also ensure the system is responsive and sustainable in the long-term so future Ontarians can access the help they need, when they need it.