



London
CANADA

151 Dundas Street
P.O. Box 5045
London, ON
N6A 4L6

August 30, 2011

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
2 Bloor Street West
4th Floor, Suite 400
Toronto ON M4W 3E2

Dear Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh,

Regarding: London Community Response to A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas

Enclosed, please find London's response to the Commission's call for community feedback on social assistance issues and solutions.

The City of London has a history of working with the Province of Ontario and our community in the delivery of social assistance in a manner that is consistent with Provincial policy as well as being innovative and progressive in implementing these policies in ways that meet the needs of the people served by Ontario Works in London. For these reasons, we are excited to share with you the summarized and themed results of the community conversations held on June 29, 2011 and staff conversations held on August 10, 2011.

The attached submission: City of London Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance is the product of community conversations which you attended and which engaged approximately 200 community members including people with lived experience, community agency representatives, and social service delivery staff. The raw data collected in these sessions has already been shared back with the Commission as well as those who participated to inform their own independent submissions. In now summarizing and formatting this same material, we have focused on highlighting possible solutions as well as validating the issues that were well documented and articulated in the Commission's Discussion Paper, and Summary and Workbook publications.

Commissioners, this submission complements recent social assistance policy work completed by London's community. Since 2010, the City of London has endorsed two policy papers recommending immediate changes to social assistance: *First Steps to "Clearing the Path out of Poverty. Immediate Policy Changes to the Ontario Works Program"* and *"Clearing the Path out of Poverty"... Step 2: Immediate Policy Changes to the Ontario Disability Support Program* and has endorsed London's Child and Youth Network's policy position brief: *"A Housing Benefit For Families With Low Income"*.

Over the past several years, London's Municipal Council has also endorsed the London Community Addiction Response Strategy (CAREs), our successful Hostels to Homes Pilot, London Community Housing Strategy, Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy, and others – all which consistently point to the importance of integrated policies and solutions to support individuals and families in need. Each of these strategies, which we presented to you in your visit, has engaged our community in their development, design, and implementation. We also separately engaged a round table of OW and ODSP staff, to capture more specific input related to their daily work in the delivery of these essential services.

Finally, I wish to bring to your attention an important matter that has emerged over the course of the past few months in many municipalities. The financial instruments for making payment to participants still rely strongly upon highly administrative printed cheque and direct bank deposit supports. Recognizing this, a number of OW and ODSP recipients are not strongly connected to our traditional financial institutions and instead utilize alternative services instant cheque cashing at private businesses. Although these services are legal, they often create cycles of costs and dependency. As we prepare to report back to our Municipal Council, we recognize that other jurisdictions including Toronto, are exploring options for participants to access bank cards and administer other benefits electronically. We are hopeful that the Commission will explore this area of emerging policy and service delivery and we will endeavour to keep the Commission apprised of ongoing social policy work that remains on our agenda past your September 1, 2011 deadline for submission.

I know I am reiterating the comments we have heard many times since your visit when I say that we are very appreciative of the opportunities to contribute to the work of the Commission. We look forward to future opportunities including the opportunity to review and respond to the Options Paper that the Commission will release later this year.

Yours truly,



Ross L. Fair,
Executive Director,
Department of Community Services,
City of London

Attachments: Att 1: City of London Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance

Att 2: Themes Emerging from Social Services Staff Discussions Regarding the Review of Social Assistance

City of London Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance

About London's Community and Staff Input Sessions

On June 29, 2011, the City of London welcomed Commissioners Francis Lankin and Dr. Munir Sheikh and facilitated community sessions to provide input into the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. Over 150 community agency and social services delivery staff, people with lived experience, and interested members of the public attended one of two sessions to provide their input into the design of a "21st century income security system" in Ontario.

In addition to these discussions, the Commissioners met with service representatives and consumers during a tour of community agency locations. These discussions highlighted the linkages between social assistance delivery and the related areas of homelessness and housing, mental health, health, and addiction sectors. These issues of integration were also reflected in a morning breakfast meeting of key community leaders of service sectors including child welfare, immigration, employment, and health services.

The community input session was comprised of a series of six 15 minute roundtable conversations, with each conversation focusing on one of the issue areas specified in the Commission's community consultation workbook. Each conversation was facilitated by a community member, who used the workbook questions to guide the discussion. Note takers at each table documented the comments and discussion on flip chart paper providing participants with the opportunity to review what was recorded. Participants rotated from table to table and in this way had the opportunity to contribute to each discussion.

The notes from the session of June 29th were transcribed by City of London staff and circulated to session attendees including staff of the Commission, recognizing that several attendees indicated interest in using these notes to help inform their own agency or community submissions to the Commission. City of London staff have also reviewed and summarized these notes into the following themed report: Themes Emerging from Community Discussions. This report attempts to stay true to the comments provided as well as respond to the issue areas as they were provided in the Commission's consultation workbook.

City of London Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance

Summary of Themes

Londoners envision a system that treats people with respect and dignity honouring individual choice rather than a system that is punitive and criminalizes those who need its support. They envision a broader social service system that is connected, easy to access, easy to understand, and focuses on individual needs. The current system is seen as disjointed, disconnected, confusing, difficult to access and understand. Easier language, a single point of access at various locations in the community, and being able to have personal support to navigate the system and apply for benefits for programs were common suggestions.

Londoners expressed interest in simplified social assistance rules. While they want consistency, they also want workers to be able to respond to their individual needs. They want a program that better provides enough income to meet the cost of living particularly for food and shelter and they want a program that includes transportation as a basic benefit. They want a program that allows people to keep more of the income they earn from working and want a program that does not require that assets virtually be depleted as a condition of eligibility. Having access to adequate housing is fundamental.

There was a general sense that many benefits could be provided outside of social assistance, including medical and dental benefits, special purpose benefits, and transportation or that these benefits should continue for a period after a person has gained employment. Many references were made to need for a benefit program that is based on the needs of the individual rather than a benefit program that is “one size fits all” type program in order to recognize the varied and unique needs of each person. They want people with disabilities to be able to access the same supports and programs as people without disabilities.

In order for people to gain and keep employment that is suitable and long term, community session attendees want social assistance recipients to be able to access the right training as determined by employer need as well as more formal assessment of the employment skills, abilities and needs of people receiving social assistance. They believe that more mentoring, placements, and on-the-job training are important. To support employers, they want to see job coaching services to be provided and incentives for employers to hire people receiving social assistance. London’s Purchase of Service model of employment program service delivery as well as its intensive case management approach are seen as examples of things that are working. London attendees felt that the outcomes of a social assistance program should go beyond employment and should include quality of life, health, life skills, and housing measures.

Attendees want a social assistance program that is connected closely to other programs that are commonly accessed by people who need financial and employment support: housing, child care, mental health supports, disability supports, education and training were often mentioned as key supports. They spoke of needing and wanting clear and accessible information as well as personal support to help with navigating these as well as knowing what supports are available and for whom. They spoke of the need for immigration and employment insurance policies to better address the realities experienced by immigrants and unemployed workers, and spoke of the need for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) to be part of a broader financial review.

Attachment 1: Themes Emerging from the Community Discussions
London Convention Centre, June 29, 2011

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
<p>An employment program that understands the needs of employers and job seekers and that more closely connects employers with social assistance recipients so that people, with or without diagnosed disabilities are supported in obtaining the training they need, and gaining and maintaining employment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer employers incentives such as subsidized wage hiring, and on-the-job supports such as job coaching services for people who are hired, • Government support to employers to help employers give employees benefits • Educate employers so they better understand the needs of people who may be dealing with health and personal issues • Opportunities to link employers and potential employees through network or data base, and partnerships in the community • Emphasis on placements, mentoring and co-operative experiences, particularly for people with certifications from other countries • Integrate training programs offered through different ministries and funding sources and connect programs with educational institutions • Support the training that best meets the needs of the person including access to specialized, higher level, and longer term training. Conducting assessments of learning style, skills, employment, personal needs et cetera can help people identify the training they need • London's Purchase of Service arrangement, intensive case management, Enhanced Employment Services, Hostels to Homes, and the federal Job Creation Partnership are examples of employment programs and supports that are working and should continue to be supported or expanded • Outcomes and expectations that go beyond employment to include: suitable employment and career-focused jobs, quality of life, enhanced life skills and literacy, positive impact on health and housing, satisfaction surveys, and feedback from employment centres 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Ensuring the long term viability of social assistance</p>

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
<p>Assets levels that don't require participants to completely deplete savings before they may access social assistance and income rules that encourage working</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the amount of assets people can have when applying for Ontario Works, or allow a grace period for the cashing in of assets. For example, similar to the grace period for the selling of a vehicle that is above the maximum allowable, allow people to hold onto their assets for a time period, and then establish requirements for cashing these in • Change income rules for people with earnings from employment so that they may keep more of their income, including self-employment income • Simplify income reporting requirements by having longer intervals between reporting and be clearer about what constitutes income 	<p>Simplify income and asset rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance</p> <p>Establish an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers and supports people's transition into, and attachment within, the labour market</p>
<p>Benefit structure that more appropriately supports people in receipt of social assistance and that ensures people are better off working</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefit rates that reflect the current local or regional cost of living for different family types and ages, particularly for shelter and food • Costs that support employment and education should be covered including transportation while job searching and working, child care while job searching, phone and technological supports, costs associated with applying to school, and costs associated with medical needs including covering the cost of child care when attending medical appointments • Ability to provide financial assistance specific to need rather than access to financial aid being limited to those who are eligible for a broader social assistance program. For example, ability to obtain financial aid for a car repair necessary for maintaining employment without being required to apply for Ontario Works first • Provide special purpose benefits, dental benefits, eye glasses, drug and medical benefits outside of social assistance so that people leaving social assistance may continue to be supported or continue to provide these for a period after a person obtains employment 	<p>Establish an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers and supports people's transition into, and attachment within, the labour market</p> <p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p>

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
<p>Program that is easier to access, navigate and understand, and that is person-focused, based on the needs of the individual rather than on a "one size fits all" approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caseworkers have the training and time (as result of having smaller caseloads) to listen to people and guide them to the most appropriate support or program and not just have to focus on financial aspect of assistance • Comprehensive information about programs and benefits, including special purpose benefits that a person may be eligible to receive provided in user friendly language and in accessible formats • Access to personalized support to help in understanding the program, eligibility, benefit options, and to apply. This includes an ombudsman, peer support program, helpline, and the ability for community members to refer and recommend programs and services, and to help people complete forms as well as to help people who are in crisis to navigate the system(s) • Blend OW and ODSP into one program • Rules that are supportive rather than punitive, supporting choice, and that show respect. For example, people should have the choice of whether or not to set up direct payment to landlords, and should be able to choose whether or not to live with someone without affecting their benefits. They should not have to continuously prove they need a special benefit such as a harm reduction drug. Workers who are older (over age 60), particularly immigrants should not be required to go to school or job search. The income people on social assistance receive from income assistance programs such as CPP and OSAP should be tied to the individual rather than to the family. 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Improve system integration</p> <p>Simplify rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance</p>
<p>Better alignment of programs and rules so that there is better integration with other municipal, provincial and federal programs, policies and legislation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the Federal government to address the current shortfalls and problems with the Employment Insurance program. For example, there is a need to eliminate the 2 week waiting period, benefits that are too low, EI rules shouldn't penalize those without consecutive weeks of employment, who are self-employed, or who are hired as temporary or part-time employees, and research is needed to investigate who is excluded from EI and Employment Ontario in order to find out what is needed 	<p>Define Ontario's position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security for Ontarians.</p> <p>Improve system integration</p>

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better connect income security programs through information sharing. One way to achieve this is with satellite offices that act as information resource and provide a single point of access to income security and social service programs including employment and training and/or staff or service able to connect people to the most appropriate service • OSAP to be part of the financial review. OSAP rules related to the treatment of income to be revisited to ensure that income received from an income support program not be deducted in order that attendance at post-secondary education may continue • Work with the different orders of government responsible for health, addictions, mental health, housing, and child care so that people have access to these necessary supports • Different ministries need to be aware of the rules and activities of different programs and ministries • Interaction between the Ministry of Education, training programs and social assistance so that prevention programs and student support for staying in school programs are in place, and there is access to ongoing training after leaving high school • Work with the Federal government to better understand and address the employment and income security issues experienced by immigrants such as lack of recognition of their training and credentials, and the family and financial support needed while accessing programs and services 	
<p>Supportive, integrated approaches to homelessness, mental illness, addictions, education, employment and child care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies that recognize and support people when they are living with homelessness, mental illness, and addictions • Social assistance staff that have the time (by having smaller caseloads), training and skills to provide personal and one-on-one support in order to be able to work with the people they serve to learn what they need, what they can do, what issues may need to be addressed, and then to be able to link them to the right people and resources 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Define Ontario's position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security.</p>

Attachment 2: Themes Emerging from the Social Services Staff Discussions, August 10, 2011

On August 10, 2011, the Department of Community Services facilitated two staff sessions to gather input from Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program staff. Approximately twenty staff participated in each of the morning and afternoon sessions. The staff input sessions were conducted in a format similar to the community input session. The themed report of these discussions is included below as Emerging from Social Services Staff Discussions.

Recognizing the work being done related to modernizing OW and ODSP business tools and technology, considerable staff and service manager input has been provided in the past few years related to the important linkages between the “tools” and “rules”. The Commission is encouraged to independently seek out this important input which has been provided by service delivery staff across the province, as it too contains relevant policy and program recommendations.

Efforts were made to avoid duplication and to highlight areas where more focused and operational changes are needed.

Given the uniformity of much of the feedback, the themes and outcomes remain consistent with the community document.

Themes Emerging from the Social Services Staff Discussions

(If in addition to or differently presented than those of the prior report)

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
<p>An employment program that understands the needs of employers and job seekers and that more closely connects employers with social assistance recipients so that people, with or without diagnosed disabilities are supported in obtaining the training they need and gaining and maintaining employment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of the worker must focus more closely on the relationship to the participant to support a path to employment that is reflective of an individual's barriers and strengths. • Intensive case management (ICM) supports are needed for an increased number of participants who face complex issues and needs and with multiple barriers but remain employable • The province must more actively promote and encourage through appropriate communications, the recognition of social assistance recipients as being part of our communities and a critical part of our available workforce (reducing public stigma and promoting inclusion) • Inclusion of a phone as a necessary cost for living, especially when in crisis, and for seeking employment • Increase housing with supports to help those most at risk of housing loss to maintain housing. • Increased supports for self employment • Additional supports are required for a growing population of aging workers • Employment (including participation agreements) should not be part of the initial application verification unless a needs assessment determines the applicability. The initial meeting with the participant should focus on stabilizing housing and addressing crises. Employment would be a more focused follow-up discussion. • Increase job coaching supports to those leaving OW with employment to maximize retention. • People leaving social assistance should continue to be supported by their caseworker for a period depending on their needs. • Support for life skill programs • Revise focus on working with social assistance friendly 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Ensuring the long term viability of social assistance</p>

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
	<p>employers (discussion and reference to Mr Jimmerson of Cascade Engineering)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work readiness assessments are highly effective for participants with long standing complex or misunderstood needs. These should be embedded into employment services in all locations 	
<p>Assets levels that don't require participants to completely deplete savings before they may access social assistance and income rules that encourage working</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assets levels should be established as part of a needs based system and should not require an applicant or participant to completely deplete savings before they may access social assistance and income rules that encourage working • Stronger support for self-employment should include an ability for participants to invest a portion of their income toward approved expenditures that are aimed at sustaining and stabilizing the business (and avoiding future reliance on social assistance). 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Simplify income and asset rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance.</p>
<p>A new system that strikes a better balance between simplified rules and appropriate controls.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic document management is required, with options for secure participant interface and modern communications tools such as email or texting or secure and controlled document submission (including submitting of income reporting) • Increase shelter and accommodation rates are required including harmonization of shelter rates between government programs. • There needs to be reduce duplication related to SA recipients and emergency shelters • There is a need to examine DB spending across Ontario for benefits that need to be made mandatory and part of other service systems. Eg. Dental, eye glasses, medical transportation. • Basic needs should be linked to a measure of actual costs of living/surviving eg. Nutritious Food Basket measures. • Transportation benefits should be imbedded into basic needs costs • Simplify earnings rules and amend the eligibility rules to reduce or eliminate deduction in first 3 months for those in need • Controls need to be supported through improved automation and simplified regulation. • Promote education and increase education supports and 	<p>Establish an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers and supports people's transition into, and attachment within, the labour market</p> <p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p>

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
	<p>incentives outside of the social assistance system to promote attendance in education and training for more people – including increased OSAP support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports to obtain pardons, ID (other government programs) 	
<p>Program that is easier to access, navigate and understand, and that is person-focused, based on the needs of the individual rather than on a “one size fits all” approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support the work of caseworkers with appropriately sized caseloads to focus their training and time on building supportive relations with participants and guiding them to the most appropriate support or program • Current systems rely too heavily on caseworkers spending a large part of their time focused on financial assistance and complex rules within manual paper based systems and outdated technology. • Benefits structures need to be more harmonized and simplified. • Assignment and directions between government funded programs should be less complicated 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Improve system integration</p> <p>Simplify rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance</p>
<p>Better alignment of programs and rules so that there is better integration with other municipal, provincial and federal programs, policies and legislation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More integrated shelter rates between ODSP and OW • Harmonize OW and ODSP income and benefit periods with 1st of the month payments and full calendar month income reporting. • Better integration with EI, CPP, and OSAP to avoid impact of government programs that do not intersect and result in overpayments and debts. • ADP funding should be 100% provincial and not rely on additional assistance from discretionary benefits to support a provincially supported program • Intensive case management (ICM) supports are needed for an increased number of participants who face complex issues and needs and with multiple barriers (Eg. The Addiction Services Initiative is cost effective and needs to expand through all CMSMs. This may require partnerships with MOHLTC • There needs to be greater harmonization and simplified application and administration between child care, OW/ODSP, and affordable housing, including appropriate agreements to allow for more integrated service delivery. (Eg. TCB remains complicated for many participants to understand). 	<p>Define Ontario’s position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security for Ontarians.</p> <p>Improve system integration</p> <p>An social assistance system that is more seamlessly navigated and more integrated between the current services of OW, ODSP, and related community and employment support programs</p>

What we'd like to see:	How this could be achieved:	Outcomes this would address:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase supports and harmonized benefits are required for those who are unemployable due to chronic physical or mental health needs to engage in community activities that promote stability and quality of life regardless of whether they would be identified within the current OW or ODSP programs. 	
<p>Supportive, integrated approaches to homelessness, mental illness, addictions, education, employment and child care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreate a mechanism for staff input into the health and needs of a person who may have undiagnosed mental health issues and is not connected to system *(Layman's Medical) including a history of behaviours and barriers • The Disability Adjudication Unit needs to be reviewed for its structure and effectiveness noting many participants find the ODSP application process to be complex, overly administrative, and ...not working effectively. Less intimidating complex streamlined application and adjudication as part of a more integrated system • Increased mental health supports are needed for those not currently attached to services both to assist with ODSP applications but also to help promote stability for individuals with complex and often undiagnosed needs. • OW and ODSP needs to be harmonized within a single legislative program, process, and with an application including assessment tools that helps direct applicants to appropriate services based on their needs (people with permanent disabilities may still be served through a separate delivery system, but these services must include supports available to others • The name of the ODSP program needs to change to remove the focus on the term disability 	<p>Place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to active engagement in the labour market and participation in treatment and rehabilitation</p> <p>Define Ontario's position vis-à-vis the federal and municipal governments as it relates to income security for Ontarians.</p>