



MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: March 10, 2026
To: Social Services Sub-committee
From: Alex Burgess, Manager of Ontario Works
Report Number: SOC26-006
Attachments: None

Title: Ontario Works Division 2025 Year in Review

Objective: To provide the Mayor and Council with an update on the 2025 activities of the Ontario Works Division and future directions for the Division.

Background: As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM) for Stratford, St. Marys, and Perth County, the Ontario Works Division is responsible for the effective and efficient delivery of the Ontario Works (OW) program, including financial assistance, emergency assistance, temporary care assistance, discretionary benefits for OW and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) clients and life stabilization assistance. The program is governed by the Ontario Works Act, 1997 and the associated regulations and directives. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provide the entirety of social assistance payments made to clients and discretionary benefits funding, while administrative costs for the program are cost-shared between the Ministry and the local municipalities.

This report provides an analysis of local data related to these areas of service delivery, and directions for the Division in 2026.

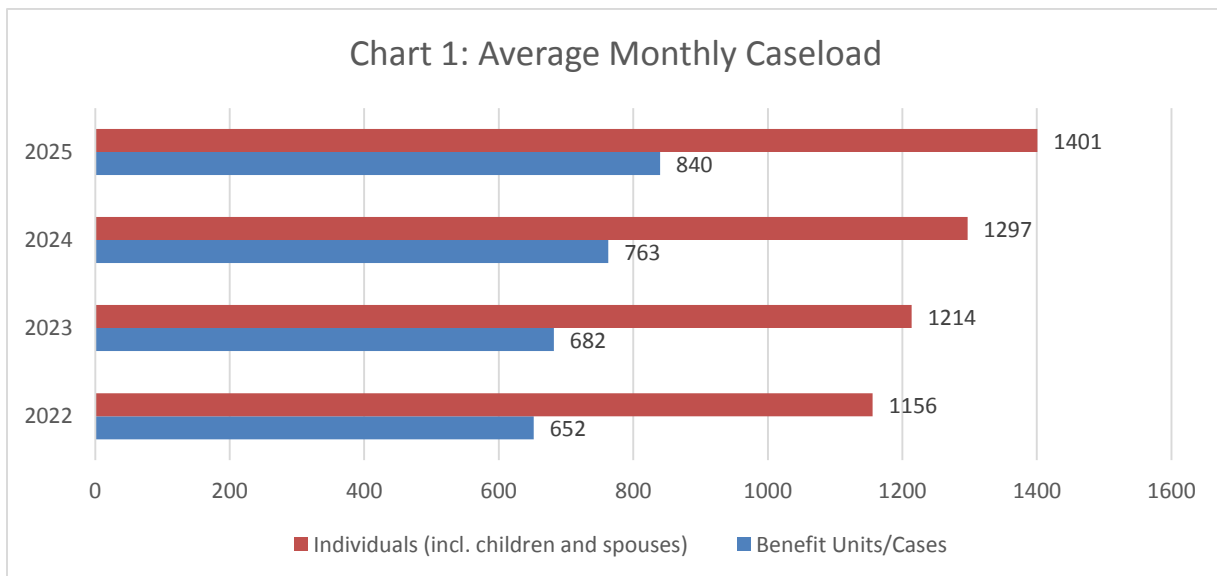
In report SOC25-001, the 2024 Ontario Works Business Plan was provided to Council for review. Within this document was a caseload review, focused on demographics and time on assistance, as well as a review of program operation and efforts being made to achieve the Ministry-set targets. This report will focus on an analysis of the current Ontario Works caseload, achievement against Ministry targets, and the planned focus of the Division in 2026.

Analysis:

Caseload

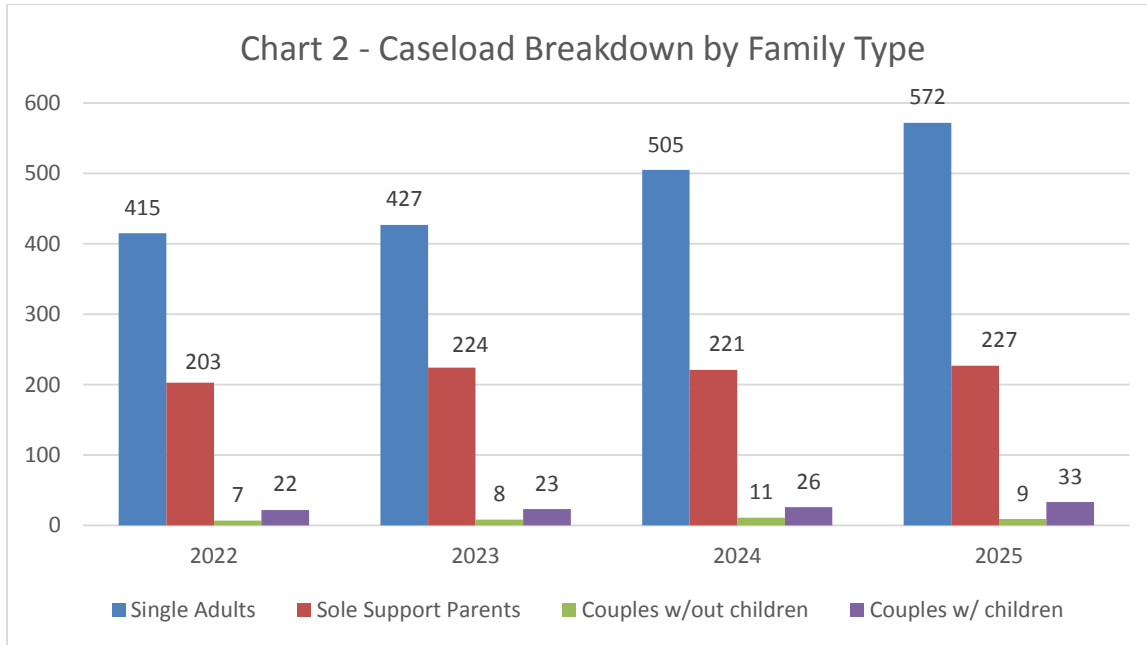
Since 2022, the Ontario Works program has seen a steady increase in caseloads across the province, with the local office experiencing a 28.8% increase over that time in overall cases and a 21.2% increase in individuals on the caseload. The Provincial caseload has risen 37.7% over that time while individuals in receipt has risen by 28.5%. These increases reflect an overall level of concern regarding cost of living within the province and the increasing levels of poverty that are being experienced. It is important to note that there have been no increases in Ontario Works rates over this time period.

Over the course of 2025, the Ontario Works caseload reduced slightly in both total number of ongoing cases and recipients of the program. January 2025 saw a caseload of 852 benefit units representing 1416 individuals, and the year ended with 828 benefit units representing 1373 individuals. The 24-case reduction, albeit not significant, represents a shift in the trends seen throughout 2023 and 2024 whereby the caseload was steadily increasing. It is not known at this time if this is simply a trend within 2025 or if this will be sustained in years to come. January 2026 saw a sharp increase in the caseload as it rose to 865 cases representing 1417 individuals. The average monthly caseload per year is displayed below, highlighting the increases that the local office has seen since 2022.



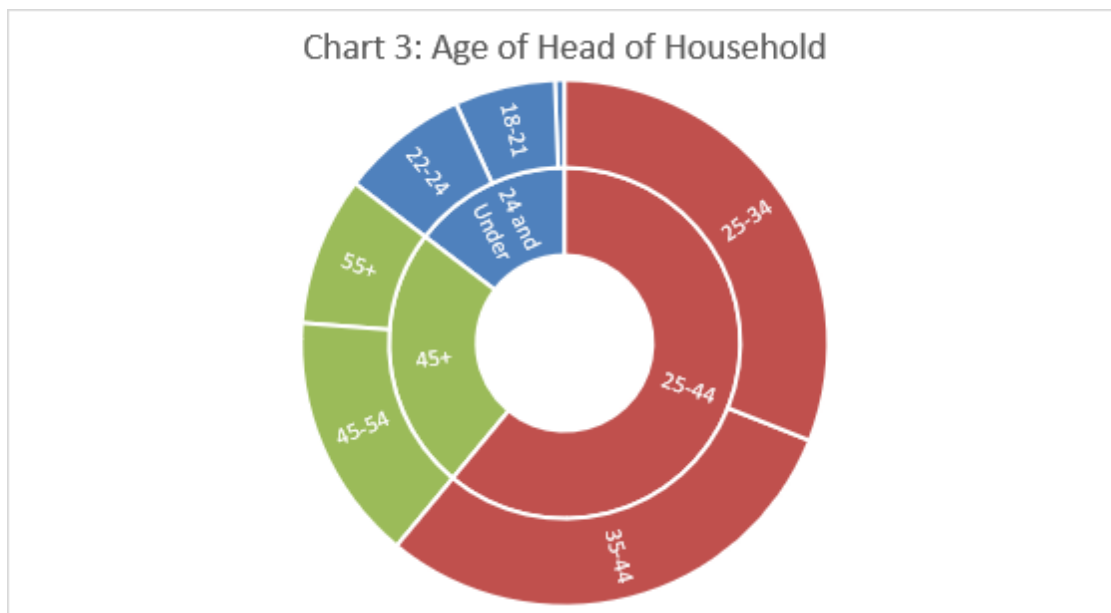
As has been the case over the past several years, the caseload is mostly represented by single adults without children who, as of December 2025, represented 68% of the caseload. This is consistent with previous years data and shows consistency in the type of client accessing services through the local Ontario Works office. The rest of the caseload composition remains consistent with previous years. Sole-support parents represent 27% of the caseload, couples without children represent 1% and couples

with children represent the remaining 4%. The below chart highlights family types over the past 4 years.



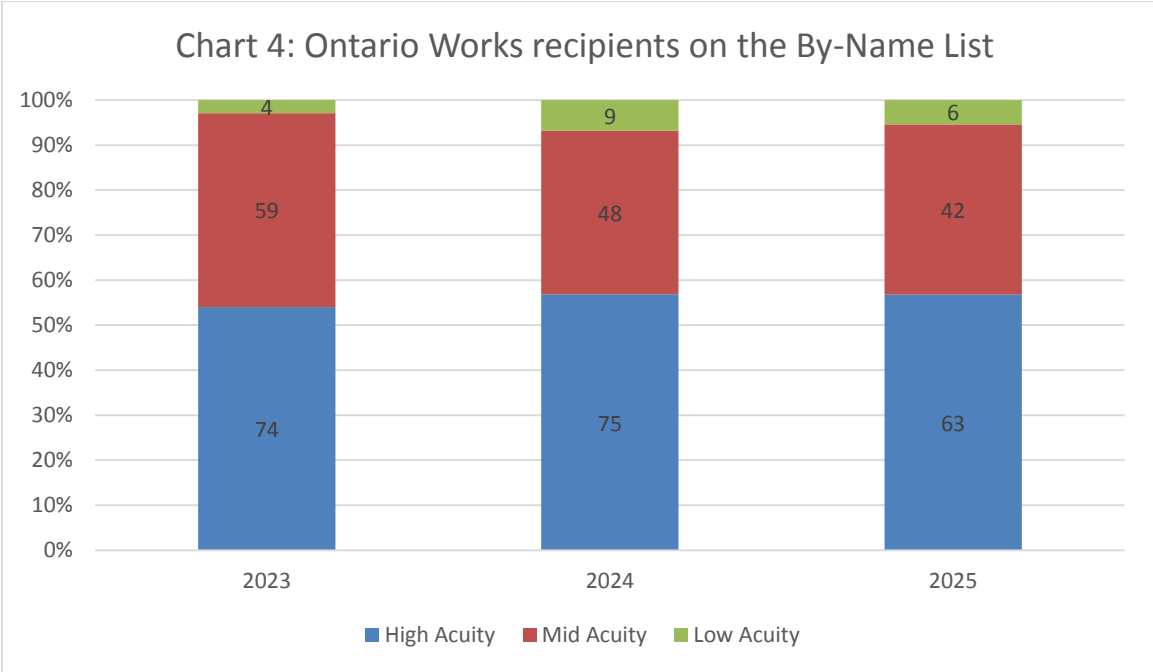
The average months on assistance continues to decline, hitting a year-over-year low of 28 months in 2025. The local office has seen a higher volume of first-time applicants for Ontario Works, while still seeing a large number remain on the program for over 12 months. As of December 2025, 56% of the caseload had been on assistance for 12+ months and 36% for 24+ months.

Chart 3 below outlines the average age of the head of household in receipt of assistance.



Newcomers to Canada continue to increase in the local service manager area. We have seen an increase of 111% since 2023 in total cases although this represents a significant increase in individuals in receipt. In 2022, we dedicated a caseworker who has previous experience and expertise in immigration matters to supporting Newcomers within the service manager area. This allows for more streamlined and comprehensive services, ensuring that community partners are involved and that settlement plans are reflecting the Ontario Works action plans, and that participants are moving towards self-sufficiency with the appropriate wrap-around supports.

To highlight the complexity of the Ontario Works caseload locally, a detailed analysis was completed of the local homelessness By-Name list (BNL). While this is not a comprehensive review of all clients experiencing housing instability, it paints a clear picture of the depth of need for the local Ontario Works caseload. The chart below details the number of unique individuals on the BNL each year who were in receipt of Ontario Works, alongside the reported acuity. These statistics reflect the depth of need and the experiences of Ontario Works recipients in the service manager area. The Maytree Foundation recently released a report that showed a 72% increase in people experiencing homelessness while in receipt of Social Assistance benefits between 2019 and 2025.¹ Alongside the increasing complexities of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, the systemic failures of the social assistance system continue to drive deeper inequities and increased poverty rates making it much more difficult for individuals who enter the Ontario Works system to leave it.



Furthermore, it is important to note that of the 40 households identified on the BNL as currently living un-sheltered, 22 are in receipt of Ontario Works. This further reinforces the concerns raised across the Province regarding Ontario Works rates and high shelter

costs. There has not been a rate increase to the Ontario Works program since October of 2018.

¹ Laidley, Jennefer, and Tania Oliveira. Welfare in Canada, 2024. Toronto: Maytree, July 2025. https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Welfare_in_Canada_2024.pdf. (maytree.com)

Employment, Targets and Outcomes

We have seen a slight increase in the number of Ontario Works clients who are employed while in receipt of assistance. In 2024, the average number of earners each month was 91 with average earnings of \$945. In 2025, the average number of earners was 103 with average earnings of \$883. As we see an increase in earners, it is accompanied by a decrease in the average earnings. Due to economic uncertainty in 2025, driven by tariffs and increased unemployment in our region, the reduced earnings may be a result of more transitional work or lower-paid work within the community.

The Ministry sets 4 primary targets each year; they are listed below alongside the local achievement:

Ministry Target	2025 Targeted Outcome	2025 Achieved Outcome
Percentage of Ontario Works adults and ODSP non-disabled adults with participation requirements that have a proper Action Plan created	100%	91.4%
Percentage of Ontario Works adults and ODSP non-disabled adults with participation requirements who are referred to Employment Ontario (EO)	39%	16.8%
Percentage of Ontario Works cases (individual or family units) that exited to employment	14%	12%
Percentage of Ontario Works cases (individual or family units) who exited the program for any reason and return within one year	37%	41.9%

The achievements noted above are a cumulative total for the year and represent the total achievement for the year as opposed to a singular month. For example, the first target regarding Action Plan completion requires that all new applicants have an action plan completed within 30 days and that all applicants have a proper action plan on file. For the entirety of 2025, there were 1390 members with participation requirements that

required an action plan, and the local office completed these for 1271 members. This does not mean that all members do not have an action plan but rather they did not have it completed within 30 days or they may not have ever shown up to have an appointment completed before their file was closed.

The low volume of Employment Ontario referrals is reflective of a few issues within the system, as well as concerns related to the targets that were set. The 39% is an arbitrary number that the Ministry utilized in multiple service managers within our geographic region. For context, this number would require the referral of 465 individuals from the caseload – a number that was not achieved. Part of the issue is that the clients we are supporting are not able to move toward employment and that clients who were not referred in years prior may still not be ready for a referral due to life circumstances. With that in mind, it is important to note that 38% of the current OW caseload is active with Employment Ontario. A further 12% of the caseload is deferred from participation and a significant number are working toward life stability goals such as supporting their physical and mental health, seeking childcare, pursuing ODSP and improving their housing situation. Furthermore, due to circumstances beyond the control of this office, the Employment Ontario network had undergone significant changes in 2025 which impacted the ability for referrals to be made. With that in mind, the current network is in a very strong position, with four providers available throughout the community. We expect to see not only an increase in referrals but in the quality of the work being completed by the Employment Ontario partners as we work closely to ensure our services are aligned and meeting the needs of shared clients.

Moving into 2026

As we look ahead to 2026, there are key themes that underscore the work that is being done by the local Ontario Works office, and they are as follows:

- 1) Reducing Administrative Burden
 - This work is focused on how we can improve processes, support automation of administrative tasks and create a more positive environment for client-focused time.
- 2) Improving Client Service
 - The work in this area focuses on co-design with the clients in receipt of Ontario Works and ensuring that the program is meeting the needs of the clients accessing services locally. We are increasing our presence in the County and the community at large, creating better pathways for clients to access benefits and advertising services to clients in a more comprehensive manner. Currently we have a presence in North Perth and St. Marys on a regular basis. We are working to expand our presence in other communities within the area while also positioning Ontario Works caseworkers within key community spaces such as the Connections Centre, Perth and Stratford Housing Corporation buildings and

Employment Ontario offices. We also plan to complete a client survey and co-design more targeted benefit programs in partnership with those in receipt of assistance. Utilizing 2026 as a baseline, we will be able to measure and monitor sustained improvements to program operations as we plan for future years of service delivery.

3) Improving Targeted Achievements

- The local team is working through strategies in consultation with other service managers in the area and creating processes that better align with the targets the Ministry has set, while ensuring that the human at the centre of the program is not forgotten.

Financial Implications:

Not applicable:

There are no financial implications to be reported as a result of this report. This report is for information only to provide detailed statistics regarding the Ontario Works caseload.

Alignment with Strategic Priorities:

Work Together For Greater Impact

This report aligns with this priority as the Ontario Works Division works closely with community partners and internal departments to ensure that the clients in receipt of assistance are supported across the community.

Alignment with One Planet Principles:

Health and Happiness

Encouraging active, social, meaningful lives to promote good health and wellbeing.

Equity and Local Economy

Creating safe, equitable places to live and work which support local prosperity and international fair trade.

Staff Recommendation: THAT the report titled, "Ontario Works Division 2025 Year in Review" (SOC26-006), be received for information.

Prepared by: Alex Burgess, Manager of Ontario Works
Recommended by: Kim McElroy, Director of Social Services
André Morin, CPA, Chief Administrative Officer