
MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: January 10, 2023
To: Social Services Sub-committee
From: Alex Burgess, Manager of Ontario Works and Kim McElroy, Director of Social Services
Report #: SOC23-004
Attachments: None

Title: 2022 Ontario Works Year in Review

Objective: To provide the Mayor and Council with an update on the Ontario Works Division and the work completed in 2022.

Background: The Ontario Works Division supports individuals and families within the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM) area of Stratford, St Marys and Perth County with basic financial assistance and employment supports, as legislated in the Ontario Works Act, 1997. The provincially funded program is delivered locally with funding provided by the Province of Ontario for social assistance payments, as well as 50% of the administrative costs necessary to deliver the program. The remaining 50% of administrative costs to deliver the Ontario Works program is provided by the local municipalities.

In report SOC21-009, a thorough caseload update and caseload forecast was provided, detailing employment outcomes measured by the province and our level of achievement toward completing those goals, an overview of the caseload and Ministry-forecasted caseload trends that we anticipated over the coming years. This report will provide an update on the employment outcomes, caseload size and current initiatives being undertaken by the local Ontario Works Division.

Analysis:

Caseload

Over the course of 2022¹, the Ontario Works caseload for the CMSM area has averaged 646 benefit units, representing 1146 individuals. The overall caseload numbers were their lowest to begin the year, with 602 benefit units receiving assistance in January

¹ Data accurate as of the October 31; Social Assistance Operations Performance Report, Nov. 10, 2022.

2022. As of October 31, 2022, that number has increased to 674. This is consistent with the rest of the province as we have seen the overall number of persons receiving Ontario Works in all of Ontario increase from 199,899 benefit units in January to 216,075 as of October. Temporary Care Assistance (TCA) files have remained fairly stagnant, averaging 61 benefit units receiving TCA over the course of the year.

The caseload composition², utilizing monthly averages over the course of 2022, is listed below:

Singles without children	410
Singles with children	206
Couples without children	7
Couples with children	20

The average months on assistance has reduced from 35 months in 2021 to 30 months as of 2022, though that does not reflect the complexity of the current caseload. There continues to be a majority of households lead by women, with 58% of the caseload having a female-gendered head of household. The predominant age range for the head of the family has remained in line with current years, with 32% of the overall caseload falling in the age range of 25-34 years old and a further 26% of the caseload representing the 35-44 years old range.

When reviewing the highest level of education completed, almost half, 45%, of the caseload has achieved a secondary school education. Seventeen percent have completed some form of post-secondary education while just over a third, 39%, have not completed high school. Currently, over half of the caseload is participating in employment programming while the remainder are deferred from active participation for a variety of reasons, such as having non-school-aged children or having a medical reason that makes them unable to look for work or participate in employment activities.

Employment Outcomes

Within the current two-year service planning cycle of 2021 and 2022, the City of Stratford's Ontario Works Division is being measured on three targets: the percentage of files which close each month due to employment reasons, the overall percentage of the caseload which exits assistance to employment each month and the percentage of the caseload that is actively employed each month. As of October 31, 2022, the local Ontario Works office is on pace to meet the targets set in all three categories. In 2021, the Division reached 1 of 3 targets but exceeded the target substantially, therefore achieving the appropriate number of points as detailed in the Ministry contract.

The current averages being measured in regard to employment outcomes, for the completed year of 2021 and the current year, as of October 31, 2022, are as follows:

² This data is accurate as of September 30, 2022; OW Caseload At A Glance, 2022.

Year	% of files exiting to employment	Target set by MCCSS	% of overall caseload exiting to employment	Target set by MCCSS
2021	23.85%	31.05%	1.46%	1.65%
2022	25.94%	24.09%	1.52%	1.47%
Year	% of caseload with employment earnings	Target set by MCCSS	Average monthly employment earnings per case	Target set by MCCSS
2021	10.24%	N/A	\$852	\$771
2022	13.58%	10.34%	\$887	N/A

The reasons why the Division did not meet targets in 2021 varies, from the unreasonable targets set by the Ministry as detailed in report SOC20-003 to the local employment context. Further to this, the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recovery greatly impacted recipients of Ontario Works and their ability to find and maintain employment for a variety of reasons. There was no financial penalty imposed by the Province on any of the Ontario Works offices who did not achieve their targets for these reasons. As of October 31, 2022, the local office is exceeding all targets set by the Ministry for 2022. This is due to both the resilience and determination of Ontario Works recipients and the hard work and effort put forth by staff in the Ontario Works Division.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the local office is exceeding provincial averages in all of the measured outcomes in 2022, and exceeded the average in three out of four outcomes in 2021.

Updates on Ministry-led Initiatives impacting local recipients

Centralized Intake

As detailed in report SOC21-006, the Ontario Works Division went live with Centralized Intake in June of 2021. With this change, applicants for Ontario Works assistance would be instructed to contact the Intake and Benefits Administration Unit (IBAU) to complete an online or telephone application. The automated, risk-based application process was a key initiative in the social assistance renewal plan. As of this time, all 47 Ontario Works offices across the province are enrolled in Centralized Intake. The program has not been without hiccups and continues to be a direct point of stress for the local office due to the delayed response time for clients, the elongated application timeline, and the additional work required by local office staff when receiving some applications from the Provincial unit. The local office has worked very hard to streamline processes and support clients through this transition period, with varied success. This process continues to be a focus of the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) advocacy and the challenges are frequently highlighted by the Director of Social Services at Provincial tables. The local office continues to see a high volume of applications, though the provincial unit handles approximately 60% of the local office

applications in any given month. The work continues to improve the user experience, in conjunction with our municipal and provincial counterparts, with an aim to ensure users must tell their story only once and files are granted in a timely and efficient manner.

Electronic document management (EDM)

As detailed in report SOC21-008, the Ontario Works Division went live with electronic document management (EDM) in November 2021. Since that time, active master files in the local office have been digitized, and the office has been actively scanning documents into the Social Assistance Management Software (SAMS). The move to EDM has been very beneficial for the Division and continues to improve efficiencies, improve file retention strategies, and allows staff to spend less time searching for documents.

Employment Services Transformation

As detailed in report COU21-107, the Ontario Works Division is undergoing a significant change to the structure of the program, due to the transformation of employment services. In April 2022, it was announced that the local Ontario Works office was a successful proponent to become the Service System Manager (SSM) for employment services across the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula. This was achieved as a member of a four-county consortium, including Bruce, Huron, and Grey County. Bruce County is the lead proponent and is effectively acting as the SSM with participation from the local office on the executive steering committee, the implementation committee, and the regional advisory committee. A further report is being provided to detail the consortium's progress toward a successful roll-out of the new SSM within the current Employment Ontario model.

Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal

As detailed in report SOC21-001, the Ministry announced a new vision for the Ontario Works program and began the arduous task of redesigning, in consultation with municipal partners, social assistance programming. The recovery and renewal project continued to move ahead until early 2022 when the project was put on hold due to the Provincial election. At this time, there have been no further announcements made about the status of Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal.

Financial Implications

Financial impact to current year operating budget:

There is no impact on the current year operating budget as a result of this report.

Financial impact on future year operating budget:

There may be an impact to future budgets and added stressors on future budget cycles due to an increased caseload and/or workload as a result of increased community need for the Ontario Works program. The Province estimates the caseload to continue rising, and a pending recession will only further the depth of economic need in our community.

Please note, there will be no municipal impact to the Ontario Works budget due to an increase or decrease of social assistance benefit payments, as benefit payments are fully covered by the Province of Ontario and fluctuate according to actual benefit payments made.

Currently, provincial budget allocations are frozen at 2018 actuals, and there is a further reduction in the 2023 budget of \$263,133 due to Employment Services Transformation. Increased pressure on the office may result in a need for increased provincial funding, municipal funding, or a re-allocation of staffing within the Ontario Works Division to meet the increased demands and maintain service level standards. Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal carries with it unknown budgetary impacts, though they are unexpected to have an impact on 2023, 2024 budgets may be further impacted by provincial initiatives in either a positive or negative direction.

Alignment with Strategic Priorities:

Strengthening our Plans, Strategies and Partnerships

Partnering with the community to make plans for our collective priorities in arts, culture, heritage and more. Communicating clearly with the public around our plans and activities.

Widening our Economic Opportunities

Strengthening Stratford's economy by developing, attracting and retaining a diversity of businesses and talent.

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.

Culture and Community

Nurturing local identity and heritage, empowering communities and promoting a culture of sustainable living.

Local and Sustainable Food

Promoting sustainable humane farming and healthy diets high in local, seasonal organic food and vegetable protein.

Travel and Transport

Reducing the need to travel, encouraging walking, cycling and low carbon transport.

Staff Recommendation: THAT the report titled, "2022 Ontario Works Year in Review" (SOC23-004), be received for information.

Prepared by: Alex Burgess, Manager of Ontario Works
Recommended by: Kim McElroy, Director of Social Services
Joan Thomson, Chief Administrative Officer