



MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: November 13, 2024
To: Social Services Sub-committee
From: Alex Burgess, Manager of Ontario Works
Kim McElroy, Director of Social Services
Report Number: SOC24-013
Attachments: None

Title: Update on the Provincial Centralized Intake Initiative

Objective: To provide Council with an update regarding the Provincial expansion of the Centralized Intake initiative.

Background: On June 21, 2021, the local Ontario Works office was onboarded into the Centralized Intake initiative, which allowed applicants to apply online or over the telephone for Ontario Works services through a new Provincial unit, the Intake and Benefit Administration Unit (IBAU). This information was detailed in report SOC21-006 which was presented to Sub-committee in June 2021. Through this unit, applicants can now receive financial assistance through an automated process which determines eligibility utilizing a risk-based approach. This approach is intended to modernize and allow for a more seamless delivery of social assistance. Clients can now apply online or over the telephone, verify their identity and sign the applicable forms online, allowing them to receive their first month of assistance before they meet with a local Ontario Works caseworker. The Centralized Intake process has been iterated upon since its launch and continues to be studied and reviewed by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) with an aim to have all applications eventually submitted through the IBAU.

Analysis: In September 2024, the local office received a memo from MCCSS informing of their intention to expand the Centralized Intake program. Beginning on October 1, 2024, the Ministry would now be responsible for all initial eligibility decisions for ten select Consolidated Municipal Service Managers. The City of Stratford is not one of the ten sites that have been included in phase one of the roll-out. The ten local Ontario Works offices that are apart of the initial phase of the roll-out would now only process applications for Temporary Care Assistance (TCA), Emergency Assistance (EA) and Under-18 applications. Once an applicant is granted assistance, the local Ontario Works

office would be responsible for ongoing eligibility verification, case management and creating a suitable action plan which helps move the client toward self-sufficiency.

This is a significant shift from the way applications are currently processed within the Ontario Works program. Although the IBAU processes several types of Ontario Works applications currently, applicants still need to apply in the local office, and the local office is currently responsible for all applications requiring an interpreter, a trustee, clients with no fixed address, Under-18, TCA and EA. There is no change to files that are granted by the IBAU as the local office currently completes post-grant activities, ongoing case management and action plan maintenance. With the shift that has been undertaken in the 10 CMSM's that are included in phase one of the roll-out, applicants will no longer have the ability to apply in the local office nor will they be able to meet with a local office caseworker until their application is granted by the IBAU. The CMSM's across the Province have raised concerns regarding the impacts this may have on clients, specifically those without a phone or access to email, those with no fixed address, clients requiring interpreters and those in immediate need of assistance. MCCSS has advised that this process is iterative, and they will modify as needed based on the feedback and learnings from the first ten sites.

The expansion of Centralized Intake will continue to occur across the remainder of the Province by the end of 2025. Although there are no firm dates, the local office is beginning to review processes, provide the means for clients to apply online within the office and train staff on the pending changes. Furthermore, once a date is established, the Ontario Works Division will communicate the changes to community partners who may see an increase in clients needing to access computers to complete their online application.

The last change to highlight because of this expansion is a significant regulatory and legislative change to the Ontario Works Act which designates MCCSS as the delivery agent, and CMSM's as delivery partners. This change is required to allow the Ministry to be responsible for initial eligibility decisions, authorizing initial payments and notifying applicants of their decisions. Furthermore, the Ministry will begin to hear appeals regarding initial eligibility decisions including Internal Reviews and appeals to the Social Benefits Tribunal, both of which are currently completed by the local OW office. With the regulatory change to the Ontario Works Act, the Ministry will now appoint an Ontario Works Administrator at the Provincial level. The City of Stratford will continue to be a delivery agent up until the point that we are onboarded into the Centralized Intake expansion, at which time we will become a delivery partner. The Ministry has also indicated that there are no changes to the cost sharing relationship or funding levels that currently exist because of these amendments.

Financial Implications:

Not applicable:

There are no financial implications identified at this time. If at any point there are financial implications because of these changes, a further report will be provided to Council detailing those impacts.

Alignment with Strategic Priorities:

Not applicable: This report does not align with one of the Strategic Priorities as this report is informational only and relates to changes that are forthcoming within the local office. Currently, there is no impact to service delivery within the City of Stratford nor are there changes which relate to the strategic priorities.

Alignment with One Planet Principles:

Not applicable: There is no environmental impact detailed in this report as the changes highlighted are related to technical processes, regulations, and legislation.

Staff Recommendation: THAT the report titled, "Update on the Provincial Centralized Intake Initiative" (SOC24-013), 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