

Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

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Introduction

According to recently released Statistics Canada data, Ontario's poverty growth (17%) has increased the most out of all other regions of Canada since 2007. Since 2007, the proportion of working age adults (18-64 years old) living in poverty increased from 11.2% to 13.4%; a growth rate of 19.6%¹. Poverty and the challenges flowing from disadvantage, such as homelessness, mental health and addiction issues, and unemployment, are of particular concern to the John Howard Society of Ontario.

The John Howard Society of Ontario is an incorporated, charitable non-profit organization which operates under a mandate of creating and encouraging effective, just and humane responses to crime and its causes. The 19 John Howard Society Affiliates throughout the province provide a variety of vital services to Ontarians who have become, or are at risk of becoming, involved with the criminal justice system. Through the Affiliates across the province, we offer services such as crime prevention programming to high risk youth, court diversion programs, institutional services to prisoners, reintegration support to those returning to the community after incarceration, and a range of addictions, mental health, employment, housing and other services to the public. As a result of our 80 years of providing services in Ontario, we have significant expertise and experience with the criminal justice system; we know what works when it comes to crime prevention and intervention.

We know based on the academic research, as well as direct experience working with our clients, that poverty and criminal justice go hand-in-hand. The criminal justice system continues to be used to catch those who fall through the gaps in our social safety net. Social assistance programs – including both Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program – are critical components of this social safety net. We are encouraged that the provincial government is committed to reviewing these programs with the aim to improve and strengthen these support systems. All of the major provincial political parties in Ontario signed the Poverty Reduction Act in 2009. Perhaps in part to this targeted effort to combat child poverty, since 2007, Ontario's child poverty rate has not increased despite a worldwide economic recession. As such, we are confident that coordinated and concerted efforts to improve social policies can have both immediate and long-term positive effects on the health and livelihood of Ontarians. We are pleased to have the opportunity to provide input into this process.

This submission has been prepared in large part by drawing from the valuable insights of JHS Affiliate staff across Ontario, who work daily with clients in need of, or already accessing, social assistance. We submit these recommendations with the hope that they contribute to the improvement of programs that help Ontarians get back on their feet if they fall into poverty, illness or unemployment.

¹ See Statistics Canada (CANSIM table 202-0802) and Poverty Free Ontario's website www.povertyfreeontario.ca for more information

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports To Employment

At the John Howard Society, we recognize that there is a confluence of barriers contributing to our clients' involvement in the criminal justice system. Poverty, addictions, mental health concerns, developmental disabilities such as FASD, educational attainment, unemployment and lack of stable housing all increase an individual's likelihood of conflict with the law. The relationship between employment and criminal activity is one of the most studied risk associations in academic criminological literature.

Employment is a crucial piece in the puzzle of criminogenic factors: the existence, quality and stability of employment appear to be powerful predictors of offending and re-offending behaviour. Meaningful, stable employment provides not only income, but also the opportunity to become valued members of our communities, to develop networks of support, and to build knowledge and self-esteem. The provision of training and support services in the pre- or peri-employment stages of Ontarians' lives, in addition to the financial support offered by social assistance, is of utmost importance. Employment programs that are more likely to have success include a variety of components, such as job readiness, vocational training, educational equivalencies, job placement and case management.

There are improvements that can be made to the present support and expectations offered by social assistance services in the province. These will be described below.

A) Mechanisms that Will Ensure that the Needs of Employers Will Be Met

A problem that employers may face is an inability to dedicate the time and support necessary to supervise the social assistance (SA) client in a work placement. Many SA clients do not have the requisite job skills or experience upon the commencement of a placement, and it is difficult for smaller businesses or non-profit organizations to supervise and train the client with their limited resources. In order to prevent a situation whereby both the SA client and the prospective employer become frustrated and the sustainability of ongoing employment is compromised, it would be helpful to establish mechanisms that allow individuals on social assistance to enhance core competencies and essential skills in order to increase their overall employability, in turn making them more desirable and marketable to employers. These mechanisms and services should be put in place before placing the client with an employer.

Recommendations

1.A.I Use labour market analysis to assess the needs of employers and to identify the core skills and competencies employers seek in prospective employees. Develop or expand pre-employment, apprenticeship and on-the-job training opportunities for SA clients that are reflective of the findings of these analyses.

1.A.II Engage a greater number of employers through outreach, public education, and financial incentives and/or subsidies.

B) How to Better Develop the Skills of Social Assistance Recipients to Meet the Needs of Employers

Increasing access to programs that assess individual employment skills (for example, a client's competency in the "nine essential work skills") is vital to ensure that SA clients are assessed accurately and are appropriately placed in apprenticeships or training. Assessing an individual's essential skills on an in-depth individualized basis is an essential component of determining that individual's level of employability. For example, clients who are illiterate or have limited literacy skills, would require a plan completely distinct from clients who simply need to update an expired certification. In addition to traditional work skills, clients should also be assessed and trained in life skills such as punctuality, motivation, personal hygiene, and communication skills, as needed.

English language skills are paramount for many jobs in Canada. Recent immigrants, in particular, often enter the country with advanced and specialized job skills, but often lack the English language skills required for employment in many industries. This disconnect between the basic language skills necessary for immigration purposes and the language skills necessary for employment must be addressed immediately.

Furthermore, we would recommend expanding upon programs and increasing the overall accessibility (funding, space, increased staffing budget) to programs that foster the development of these skills in order to better meet the needs of employers. Investing in these training and skills-based programs will be cost-effective in the long-term, by reducing the demands for social assistance programs in the future.

Recommendations

1.B.I Invest in and increase access to programs that assess employment and life skills on a client-centered basis to ensure appropriate placement in training and apprenticeships.

1.B.II Place greater emphasis on connecting SA recipients with ESL services or providing a full/partial subsidy for language training that extends beyond basic English skills.

C) How to Make Employment Services and Supports More Effective and Accessible

The quality of the relationships SA clients have with their social assistance workers can have a significant impact on their commitment to programming and long-term success. We recognize that social assistance workers have large caseloads and are required to have an in-depth knowledge of a multitude of services available in the community. That said, with the goal of optimizing the effectiveness of SA clients' engagements with their worker, we put forward several suggestions.

SA clients find themselves in their position due to many barriers and challenges that they are presently facing or have faced in the past, including institutionalization (effects of prison subculture), mental health and addiction issues, trauma, physical disability or illness. As noted above, a good working relationship between SA clients and their workers often ensures compliance. If clients sense that they are met with understanding and empathy from the people serving them, they can more easily build a rapport with their workers. Sensitivity and anti-oppression training could make a significant difference in this regard, and should be made available at the beginning of SA workers' employment, if it is not already, and on an ongoing mandatory basis as professional development.

In addition, increasing the awareness and knowledge of social assistance workers around employment-based programming and supports, in an effort to better link clients with appropriate programs and services that already exist within the community, would greatly enhance the client-centered approach proposed in earlier sections. In this way, the definition of success will also be individualized to the specific client – milestones of achievement will differ from client to client based on their initial assessed capacity. Ultimately, increasing the knowledge base of social assistance workers would not only provide them with an in-depth understanding of contemporary employment service models available in the community, but the targeted services would better assist SA clients on the path to self-responsibilization and self-sufficiency.

In addition to training and professional development for social assistance workers, there are several other ways to enhance the accessibility of employment services and supports. One such approach could be to provide better subsidies to employers who hire SA clients, and to engage and educate larger scale employers to encourage their participation. There seems at times to be an emphasis on recruiting small to mid size employers, though large scale employers who will be the major job creators in the future should be the targeted population to help provide SA clients with jobs that are long-term and stable; for example, targeting employers that are creating “green jobs” and other growing industries. Similarly, the government should ensure that liveable wages are provided for during apprenticeship programs or placements (particularly for SA clients that are single parents), and that these opportunities are not “dead-ended”.

Finally, in order to make the transition from SA to employment and self-sufficiency as seamless as possible, we recommend gradually decreasing SA benefits or supports until the client feels confidently able to subsist on their new income. This would likely require a client-centered and individualized approach, rather than hard or standardized rules. For example, transportation funding should be available on an ongoing basis for the SA client to get to and from the social assistance office. In many cases, from the time that clients begin work until the time that they receive their first pay check, they do not have sufficient monies to afford transportation and, in some cases, even food.

Recommendations

1.C.I Provide sensitivity and anti-oppression training and professional development for SA workers on an ongoing basis.

1.C.II Undertake a targeted campaign to engage large-scale employers and tomorrow’s leading industries to allow SA clients to find employment in jobs that are stable, long-term and meaningful.

1.C.III If SA clients secure employment, gradually transition SA clients on an individualized basis off of SA supports to ensure that the withdrawal of support does not cause undue hardship and strain.

D) How to Improve Services to Social Assistance Recipients with Complex Needs

The John Howard Societies across Ontario are all too familiar with the multitude of needs and challenges facing our clients, many of whom are social assistance recipients. The incidence of mental health concerns and addictions, developmental disabilities and delays, post-traumatic stress disorder, and acquired brain injuries, among those involved in the criminal justice system is significant. People with these complex issues who come into conflict with the law often walk through the doors of

community criminal justice organizations (CCJOs) like JHS first. CCJOs have a wealth of expertise with regard to risk management and assessment, and as such, have the specialized skills and experience to overcome the challenges associated with service provision to higher-risk and higher-need individuals. Although CCJOs effectively and professionally serve some of the most challenging clients in the social service system, these same clients often face difficulties when seeking support from outside our sector. Clients who can become easily aggressive and agitated may end up 'banned' at many shelters and traditional services, or have very difficult relationships with their SA workers.

Enhancing referrals to, and expansion of, specialized employment services equipped to deal with a wide variety of issues including mental health, addictions, individuals with childcare concerns, and presence of criminal records would improve the present situation significantly. Furthermore, encouraging the collaboration between SA workers, employment service providers and other community agencies like CCJOs would foster the development and facilitation of a seamless system which would assist in alleviating the strain associated with multiple barriers to employment. The referral to, and provision of, "wrap around" services for high-risk/high-need SA clients would be extremely beneficial given the many challenges that these individuals face.

In addition to improving access to specialized employment and other social services, mandating or enhancing existing training for SA staff that teaches how to effectively deal with high-risk and high-need clients, particularly in light of the passage of Bill 168, is critical. Given the known challenges facing many SA clients, the ability to manage risk and engage effectively with clients with complex needs is essential to ensuring equitable access to SA supports. In a similar vein, many SA clients have criminal records. Criminal records are major barriers to accessing employment, housing and other important services in the community. From a social policy perspective, barriers to employment are the last thing we should seek for low-risk individuals who have had brushes with the law. As highlighted in the introduction, employment and employability is one of the main factors which influences the risk of recidivism, and its absence represents a lost stabilizing and normalizing factor for an individual who is trying to turn his/her life around. In Canada, even individuals who have received non-conviction sentences (e.g. absolute and conditional discharges) or have had their charges withdrawn or stayed retain a criminal record which can be revealed on a criminal record check ordered by employers. In addition, any and all contact with police, such as apprehensions under the Mental Health Act or past victimizations, can be revealed in a vulnerable sector search.

It is important that SA staff recognize the prevalence of criminal and police records among the SA client base, and endeavour to seek out and work with service providers and prospective employers whose service and hiring practices are not exclusionary to individuals who have been in conflict with the law.

Recommendations

1.D.I Provide training for SA staff to ensure the ability to effectively engage with high-risk/high-need clients.

1.D.II Identify and encourage referrals to social service and employment agencies, such as CCJOs, that have the capacity and expertise to respond to clients with complex needs, including but not limited, to unemployment.

1.D.III Educate and engage with prospective employers and service providers about the importance of stable employment for reintegrating individuals, and ensure that SA clients with criminal or police records are referred to placements or services that are not exclusionary.

E) How ODSP Can Better Connect Recipients to Employment Services and Treatment

The above section outlined the importance of SA workers employing a collaborative approach with community agencies across the social service sector, as well as enhancing the knowledge base of SA workers around employment service providers. Individuals with disabilities can face a myriad of challenges in addition to their disability, and a more individualized assessment and referral process would ensure that ODSP clients are assessed accurately and that they are consequently appropriately referred to programs and services for support.

Recommendations

1.E.I Set realistic goals for SA clients on an individualized basis. Provide more training for staff and employers, using a strength-based model of assessing clients' capacities for employment. Focus on maximizing client involvement and alternative work options.

1.E.II Create more programs that lead to job development for people with disabilities.

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

A) Determining Social Assistance Rates Fairly and Equitably

Social assistance rates must take into account the variation in the costs of living, including housing costs, among different areas in Ontario. For example, the rent allowance should be higher in municipalities where rents are higher than average. In addition to housing costs, social assistance rates should be based on the costs of transportation and affording healthy lifestyles (e.g. nutritious food, recreation, leisure activities, etc.) to recipients, and other necessities. Currently, the amount provided to OW recipients does not adequately allow for these kind of expenditures.

Implementing these changes would effectively address several social policy concerns such as: accessing subsidized shelter/housing services; reducing criminal activity and recidivism; decreasing the strain on the healthcare system; and reducing the need for government- and non-profit-run food distribution programs.

Social assistance rates should be reviewed on a frequent basis (e.g. bi-annually) to ensure that compensation remains congruent with costs of living which will change over time.

Recommendations

2.A.I Calculate social assistance rates according to the costs of living in a particular area in Ontario.

2.A.II Calculate social assistance rates according to costs of transportation.

2.A.III Review the formula for calculating social assistance rates on a frequent basis (e.g. bi-annually) to ensure that compensation remains congruent with changing costs of living.

B) Assisting Individuals With Obtaining And Maintaining Meaningful Employment

Suggesting that people are “better off working” assumes that all people who are on social assistance would actually be better off if they were working, and that they have the life skills and ability to work. The concept of “better off working” needs to be critically examined. For example, a single parent who receives social assistance and is able to stay at home to care for their children, and refrain from paying child support, may be able to save money to build towards their family's future (e.g. paying for their children's tuition). In this case, the individual may not necessarily be “better off” working. People can be seen to be better off working when employment allows them to value themselves and their lives through instilling hope and a sense of pride in the individual, as well as providing enough money for the recipient to afford the necessities of living a safe and healthy life.

The province’s energies should be directed at providing meaningful support and employment to individuals who are, or would be, on social assistance. Part of this strategy is utilizing a model that supports individuals prior to, during, and after the attainment of employment in order to promote the successful integration and long-term attachment to the labour market. This model acknowledges that even after successfully attaining employment, there is still a need to provide some form of financial support (e.g. a reduced monthly cheque for the first three months of employment; 6-12 months of subsidized drug program; sustained support for transportation costs associated with employment).

Recommendations

2.B.I Do not make policy based on the assumption that all social assistance recipients are “better off working.” Policies need to take into account the diversity in skills and abilities among social assistance recipients.

2.B.II Develop and implement strategies to provide meaningful employment to individuals who are on social assistance.

2.B.III Provide supports to individuals prior to, during, and after the attainment of employment in order to promote the successful integration and long-term attachment to the labour market.

C) Providing Benefits To All Low-Income Individuals And Families

There are several types of benefits which can be provided to all low-income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance. These include, but are not limited to:

- Steady employment;
- Subsidized drug program;
- Increased access and space for subsidized housing programs;
- Universal childcare program;
- Dental, eye care, and additional prescription coverage;
- Monthly bus pass;

- Access to recreational services throughout the city;
- Additional funding for emergencies;

Any new costs associated with new or extended benefits for all low-income earners should be mitigated through increased taxation of the highest tax bracket.

Research conducted by the John Howard Society of Toronto and the University of Toronto identified several promising practices related to reducing homelessness for prisoners, many of whom are social assistance recipients. One of these was the Housing Benefit; a supplement program in the United Kingdom available to all inmates in remand custody for a set period of time. The purpose of the benefit is to ensure that the inmate's rent continues to be paid for a limited time in order to avoid the loss of housing during short terms of incarceration.² It is recommended that the feasibility of this option be investigated within a Canadian context. Saving an OW recipient's housing while they are in custody increases community safety, as stable housing is related to reduced recidivism. It also mitigates exorbitant expenditures associated with accessing crisis measures such as local shelter systems and other emergency services including EMS and often police.

Recommendations

2.C.I Provide benefits to all low-income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance, including, but not limited to: steady employment; subsidized drug program, increased access/space for subsidized housing programs; universal childcare program; dental, eye care, and additional prescription coverage; monthly bus pass; access to recreational services throughout the city; and additional funding for emergencies.

2.C.II Mitigate any new costs associated with new or extended benefits for all low-income earners through increased taxation of the highest tax bracket.

2.C.III Investigate the feasibility of the Housing Benefit offered in the United Kingdom within a Canadian context.

D) Changes to Asset Limits and Exemptions to Improve the Social Assistance System

Asset limits and exemptions should be changed to improve the social assistance system. For example, when one of two wage earners loses their job – particularly when it is the main earner – families are not necessarily eligible for any additional assistance. This should be changed so that assistance is provided for in such emergencies.

In addition, asset limits should be higher. A recipient should not have to purge most of their assets (e.g. vehicle or house) in order to receive social assistance. This is counterintuitive to building a sense of home and dignity, as well as working towards ending poverty. Individuals may need a car to obtain and/or travel to and from a job, and having a stable home is a cornerstone for working towards goals such as finding employment. Saving for such things as emergencies or old age should

² Novac S, Hermer J, Paradis E and Kellen A. (2006). Justice and Injustice. Homelessness, Crime, Victimization, and the Criminal Justice System. Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto. pp.163, 110.

be seen as a reasonable allowance and be permitted. By keeping people in a place where they cannot “get ahead”, the system fosters both an underground economy and a motivation for deceit.

Recommendations

2.D.I Recipients should be eligible for additional assistance in emergency situations, such as when one of two wage earners loses their job.

2.D.II Asset limits should be raised so that recipients are able to save, for example, for emergencies, and do not have to lose assets such as a vehicle or home.

E) Designing And Delivering Benefits For People With Disabilities

In a general context, the ODSP program needs to acknowledge and embrace the diverse population that falls within the ODSP guidelines of what is considered a ‘disabled person’. Ultimately, a system needs to be implemented that honours the diversity within the community, and does not assume all individuals on ODSP are unable or not motivated to attain employment. Therefore, the benefits should be initially standardized based on an individual’s propensity to gain employment; however, there is a distinct need to consider the wide variety of individual factors that either increase or decrease the person’s specific needs for subsidized accommodations.

Recommendations

2.E.I Policy decisions regarding the structure and rules pertaining to social assistance should take into consideration the diversity among its clients, for example, in terms of their abilities.

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

A) Are The Rules Meeting Their Objectives? Are There Rules That Are Not Working?

One of the primary objectives associated with the social assistance program is to take into account the individual needs and circumstances of individuals and their families. The contemporary social assistance program clearly does not take individual circumstances into account as it utilizes a standardized chart which only assesses the number of adults and dependants living within a home.

Furthermore, while SA is effective in terms of being used as a last resort, it ultimately prevents or inhibits people from enhancing their current status and their ability to terminate their use of the program. This makes it exceptionally difficult for individuals to plan for their future/retirement given that there is little to no money at the end of the month for the purposes of savings or unexpected emergency costs. Given these circumstances, individuals accessing the various SA programs are more likely to be forced to utilize funds set aside for programs such as the Canadian Pension Plan, and to access the health care system more frequently. It is essential that individuals are allowed to maintain some assets while accessing the program in order to support themselves in the future after terminating their involvement with the SA program.

Additionally, the program needs to better account for and accommodate individuals based on their unique circumstances. One example of this is how OW recipients experience unnecessary clawbacks in benefits due to the funding rules around housing expenditures. Rules around monthly expenditures should be eliminated or relaxed, thus providing an incentive for recipients to find more affordable housing while allowing recipients to use saved funds on other necessities (e.g. food, clothing, transportation, emergencies).

With regard to ODSP specifically, the eligibility requirements and the application process should be carefully examined because there appears to be a great number of individuals in need of this support service who are denied or who cannot navigate the system.

Recommendations

3.A.I Allow individuals to accrue some assets while accessing SA programs in order to support themselves in the future after terminating their involvement with the SA programs.

3.A.II Relax rules around monthly expenditures so that clients have more flexibility in how they use their allocated benefits without having to fear the scaling back of their funds.

3.A.III Build more flexibility into the eligibility requirements for ODSP to recognize a broader range of illness. Improve public education and outreach to make qualifications and the application process more clear and straight-forward.

B) How Can Special-Purpose Benefits Be Delivered More Efficiently And Equitably? Should Some Be Delivered Outside Of The Social Assistance System?

Special-purpose benefits, such as the special diet allowance, are extremely difficult to qualify for. This is problematic considering the fact that these benefits have the potential to assist a wide range of clients to promote a healthier lifestyle. For example, it has been extremely difficult for individuals diagnosed with Hepatitis C who are currently on SA to access the special diet allowance. Providing these individuals with increased funding for a healthy diet through the special diet allowance would promote a healthier lifestyle and increase the likelihood of combating the illness. Medical professionals, for example, could be responsible for providing support to SA workers distributing funds associated with the special diet allowance, since they have the formal medical training and knowledge not possessed by SA workers. The model discussed above can be applied to the dissemination of all special purpose benefits associated with social assistance programs. If professionals within relevant fields can provide rationale or justification as to why a particular SA client requires these additional benefits, these reasons should be considered salient and heeded.

In addition, given that the majority of individuals on social assistance are unaware and uninformed about special purpose benefits, it is essential that social assistance workers are informing all potentially eligible clients of these additional benefits. Due to the extensive reporting that the client is responsible for, it is imperative that there is a shared responsibility for information sharing placed on both the client and the worker.

Recommendations

3.B.I Increase the special-purpose benefits and consider making them more accessible to all low income earners, as well as social assistance recipients.

3.B.II Provide more outreach and education about these options to ensure eligible Ontarians are aware of their options. SA workers should notify clients when there is a chance that they may be eligible for a special-purpose benefit and assist them in applying.

Issue 4: Ensuring Viability of the Social Assistance System Over the Long-Term

A) What Should The Expected Outcomes Be Of Social Assistance?

It is difficult to discuss the practical implications or outcomes of the social assistance program due to the vastly diverse nature of individuals accessing the program. However, it is important to keep in mind that the social assistance program should be geared towards attaining some sustainable and tangible outcome. For example, if a client is interested in pursuing and attaining employment, then the ultimate goal should be supporting the individual to secure such employment. From a more general perspective, the goal of social assistance programs should be to support individuals in their pursuit of economic stability and, ultimately, the attainment of additional life skills.

Providing people with supports, shelter and financial assistance is needed in order for individuals to find adequate employment and move to a place of increased independence. However, if people are forced to spend all of their resources on rent, then they cannot focus on work, upgrade their education or acquire job skills. Instead, they are forced to live in “survival mode.” That being said, the following recommendations should be considered:

- Rent allowance should be realistic and allow for the client to live in a positive and safe environment.
- Food allowances should permit social assistance recipients to eat healthy and have three square meals and snacks every day.
- Personal allowances should permit social assistance recipients to purchase personal hygiene products, have occasional haircuts, participate in some recreational and leisure activities, buy seasonally appropriate clothing etc.
- Social assistance should work to provide client-centered supports that are realistic and based on an individual’s capacity. For example, a client who is illiterate and who has not graduated high-school should be working towards upgrading their education before being expected to obtain and maintain employment.

It should be kept in mind that the markers of success discussed here may be transitional and vary across cultural boundaries and geographic regions. Ultimately, the citizens of Ontario need to be treated with respect and given access to a program that can allow them to attain and maintain a

decent standard of living. It is extremely unfair to operate a program that places individuals at risk; in an essentially impoverished state that does not allow or encourage them to reintegrate back into being a productive member of society.

Recommendations

4.A.I An expected outcome of social assistance should be that recipients are supported in their pursuit of economic stability, which entails that social assistance should provide the recipient with the opportunity to live in safe, stable housing, eat healthy and sufficient meals, purchase hygiene products, upgrade educational and/or vocational skills, etc.

4.A.II When developing outcomes of the social assistance system, the diverse nature and abilities of recipients should be taken into account – i.e. it may not be possible to apply a single outcome to all recipients.

B) What Additional Data Should Be Collected To Assess The Effectiveness Of Social Assistance Benefits And Services?

Some suggestions on what kind of data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of the social assistance system include, but are not limited to:

- Which barriers in the community (i.e. not individual barriers) prevent a recipient from gaining meaningful employment. For example, these barriers might include criminal record checks, unwillingness of employers to train employees, etc.
- Positive changes in health and quality of life measures over the long-term for social assistance recipients to determine whether or not interventions and benefits have resulted in true life changes.

Demographic information on recipients should be collected alongside this other data in order to identify specific barriers, challenges and needs faced by specific populations.

Participatory research should be conducted with those who have lived experience (i.e. social assistance recipients) through focus groups (qualitative) and surveys/questionnaires (quantitative) and be representative of the diversity of cultures, languages, types of disabilities, etc. across recipients. Combining these two data collection methods would provide service providers as well as the government with the most encompassing and holistic perspective of the program as well as contemporary challenges.

Recommendations

4.B.I Through conducting focus groups or interviews and surveys/questionnaires with social assistant recipients, collect data such as demographic information of recipients, barriers in the community that prevent the obtainment of meaningful employment, changes in health over long-term use of the social assistance program, etc.

C) What Can The Provincial Government And Municipalities Do To Better Integrate Services?

In order to better integrate services, the provincial government and municipalities should work towards ending service silos that exist both within and across departments, as well as between various levels of government. One way of facilitating this may be taking a cue from large-scale service organizations, such as payroll service companies, in which one person is able to respond to all of a customer's questions about a particular topic, rather than referring or transferring a client to multiple offices or contact persons.

Given that social assistance recipients have the best knowledge of how the program operates and the prospective changes that could be beneficial in the regional /municipal offices, having local offices gather information from social assistance recipients on the barriers to integrated services, etc., would increase the knowledge and potential for the Province to integrate changes and rectify any issues associated with the social assistance system.

John Stapleton's paper "Why is it so tough to get ahead?: How our tangled social programs pathologize the transition to self-reliance" (November 2007) offers additional and concrete solutions on this issue. This document can be accessed through this link:
http://www.openpolicyontario.com/Publications/Metcalf_final-for_Dec5-07.pdf.

Recommendations

4.C.I The provincial government and municipalities should develop and execute strategies that work to end service silos within and across departments, as well as between various levels of government, with the end goal of better integrating social assistance services.

4.C.II Local offices should conduct research on social assistance recipients regarding what recipients see as barriers to integrated services, in order to inform governmental policy on how to better integrate social assistance services.

Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

A) What Should Ontario Do To Address The Short-Term Income Support And Training Needs Of People Who Are Not Eligible For EI?

The Ontario government needs to establish or expand upon income support programs that would specifically assist individuals who have been working part time, had temporary employment or recently migrated, that do not qualify to collect EI benefits. For example, the government could create a fund that subsidizes the cost of professional accreditation for recent immigrants, so they can have their professional credentials assessed. Having this assessment and any additional accreditation to meet Canadian standards would assist these individuals in participating in the labour market sooner. A program like this would significantly decrease the number of qualified professionals accessing social assistance.

The nature of employment is changing – more and more individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, have to accept temporary or precarious employment positions in order to make ends meet. Adopting the approach discussed above would encourage the development of

specialized income support programs, tailored to the individual needs of specified populations that do not qualify for EI. This model would in turn reduce the number of individuals accessing the social assistance program who are currently in a transitional employment phase in life. Additionally, enhancing access and funding for employment-based services would also be beneficial in terms of providing advocacy support for those individuals who do not qualify for EI benefits.

Recommendations

5.A.I Develop and implement income support programs for individuals who do not qualify for employment insurance under the traditional parameters.

B) What Should The Interaction Be Between Income-Tested Benefits, Such As WITB And Child Benefits, And The Social Assistance System?

There should be more flexibility built into SA, allowing individuals to access other programs without the clawing back of their benefits. For example, OW recipients should be able to have the opportunity to apply for OSAP and not be penalized for trying to improve their education. Education is a way to build skills and knowledge that enhance employability, and should be encouraged rather than penalized. The long-term cost savings that would be recouped if more SA clients felt they could pursue higher learning would offset the short-term expenditures.

The WITB is a great idea that requires expansion. Many low-income individuals or people working on social assistance cannot afford to live in urban areas that have very high costs of living. There should also be more protection for people in temporary or part-time positions. These individuals should also be able to access EI supplements and other benefits.

Recommendations

5.B.I The government of Ontario should take provincial leadership calling on national enhancements to federal benefits.

5.B.II Ensure that other provincial benefits like OSAP are supplementary to SA benefits, rather than creating a zero-sum game for low-income Ontarians, which is often the case presently.

C) Do You Have Suggestions On Other Areas Of Federal-Provincial Interaction Related To Social Assistance?

Immigration is a good example of a federal responsibility which has significant implications at the provincial level. As mentioned above, the gap between the English language skills needed to enter Canada (e.g. very basic) and the language skills needed for employment (e.g. often very advanced) needs to be closed. This requires the coordination of several federal departments (e.g. CIC, HRSDC), the provincial government and SA programs. Employment is a critical part to the integration of immigrants into Canadian society, and lack of proficiency in English should not become a barrier to finding work for often highly skilled newcomers.

There are many additional ways OW and ODSP workers can further assist their clients in navigating the many services they are required to access and avail themselves to. For example, difficulties or

misunderstandings often arise when SA clients attempt to complete and follow up with Social Housing application forms on their own. If SA workers were to assist SA clients with this process, it could speed up the wait time for clients and ensure that errors are avoided. Oftentimes SA clients lose opportunities to securing social housing due to clerical or administrative issues such as include unsigned paper work.

Recommendations

5.C.I Consider expanding the role SA workers play in supporting SA clients in their efforts to navigate and access the multiple services they need.

5.C.II Encourage the provincial government to engage with its federal counterpart to develop innovative and more inclusive programs for individuals who do not qualify for EI.