

Systems of Survival, Systems of Support

An Action Plan for Social Assistance
in the City of Toronto



Prepared by: Toronto Social Services
April 2006



“We all have different needs. Why am I on Ontario Works? What do I need as an individual? Don’t treat us all the same”

- Ontario Works client

“We have to ground our services in client experiences”

- Toronto Social Services caseworker

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Introduction

A new reality...

In the past ten years, broad economic and social transformations have increasingly strained the systems of survival and support that make up Canada's social safety net. As a result, an ever greater number of unemployed adults and families have been stranded: by the labour market, by programs such as Employment Insurance (EI), and through the erosion of other government and community-based programs - from adult education to immigration and settlement services to health care.

For more and more people in Toronto, this means:

- work is not paying enough, when it can be found;
- programs provided by other orders of government, such as EI, are often not accessible or adequate; and
- programs meant to be "last resorts" are now the first, last and only resort for a growing number of residents.

Vulnerable people are increasingly turning to social assistance. In Toronto, 350,000 different adults have been on Ontario Works (OW) at some time over the past five years. These are not the type of numbers that describe what is supposed to be a residual program of last resort. For better or worse, that is not what social assistance is anymore.

The demands on OW, and the role it plays in the City's safety net, reflect the new reality of poverty, unemployment and need in Toronto. This reality is where this Action Plan starts, and shapes where it goes.

Keeping with the City of Toronto's longstanding commitment to its vulnerable residents, the objective of this Action Plan is to ensure benefits, services and supports for low income people are accessible, adequate and appropriate. More and more, this is not the case. A major part of this Action Plan involves finding better ways to meet the needs of Toronto residents using existing resources and services that are already in place. But, new services and more capacity are also required.

Large forces at work...



To understand the role that social assistance plays in Toronto today, the large forces at work in our city need to be understood. First, the labour market has fundamentally changed. Good jobs, especially full-time full year jobs, require ever higher levels of education. A high school education is no longer enough, and even a university education provides no guarantee of a good job. Those unable to access opportunities

face increasingly precarious, part-time work providing low wages and few benefits.

Second, population patterns are changing, with certain groups facing more inequality and poverty as a result of changes in the economy and in government programs. An increasing number of families are headed by single parents at a time when the labour market often requires two wage earners for a family to achieve "middle class" status. Opportunities for young people to find decent jobs seem to be diminishing, despite an aging work force. Full-time positions are being replaced with part-time or contract work and education costs are soaring.

Newcomers are finding it more difficult to establish themselves in the face of limited English-language skills, discrimination, foreign skills accreditation issues, and lack of Canadian work experience. And the growing poverty rate of visible minorities over the past 25 years means that income levels in Toronto are increasingly polarized along racial lines.

Toronto's 'poor' visible minority population increased 362% from 1981 to 2001 compared to a 28% decrease for non-visible minorities.¹

Third, the federal and provincial orders of government have changed the way they think about social programs and have withdrawn from some areas altogether. Fewer resources are now available to help the people who need it most. Most tellingly, the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program currently serves 22% of unemployed people in Toronto compared to nearly 80% fifteen years ago. At the same time, many important federal responsibilities for supporting vulnerable groups have been downloaded to the provinces and then to local governments.

A combination of new pressures, increased responsibilities and no more money has had predictable effects at the provincial and local level. A host of changes introduced over the past ten years to education, health and social services has restricted access to these programs and failed to respond to the needs of people who are increasingly at risk. With respect to social assistance programs, benefit levels have been substantially reduced, eligibility tightened and more punitive sanctions introduced. Nonetheless, vulnerable people in Toronto are turning to OW because there is simply no where else to turn.

A Watershed in the History of Canadian Social Policy

Under the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) funding for social services was on a 50/50 basis with the federal government matching dollar for dollar what the provinces invested. This arrangement lasted three decades. In 1995, CAP was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), which combined federal funding for social programs with health care and post-secondary education to create a single "block" grant.

This change had a particularly negative impact on the funding of social services:

- (1) federal funding was cut by \$7 billion and national standards for social assistance programs were removed;
- (2) loss of the 50/50 cost-sharing agreement removed the provincial incentive to invest in programming, multiplying the effect of federal cutbacks; and
- (3) the merging of funding for social services with health and education saw spending on health and education prioritized at the expense of social services.

In April 2004, the CHST was replaced by two new funds: the Canada Health Transfer and the Canada Social Transfer (CST), which combines post-secondary education and social services transfers. According to the Canadian Council on Social Development, spending through CST is now \$2.8 billion less than a decade ago.²

It is now time for the federal government to restore the funding which has been withdrawn.

Large forces—local responses...

There are two fundamental reasons why reinvesting in Toronto's social safety net is critical to the city's future. First, from an economic perspective, a good quality of life (as measured by a city's economic, environmental and social health) has long been one of Toronto's competitive advantages in attracting both businesses and the skilled employees they require. However, growing income polarization, and the social pressures that this generates, is threatening this advantage as more and more residents (and even entire neighbourhoods) are being excluded from the prosperity that others enjoy. Quite simply, the fate of a city's economic success increasingly depends on the degree to which everyone shares in that success.

Second, from a social equity perspective, for a city to inspire and empower its citizens, access to local economic, education, health care and recreation opportunities must be available to all residents regardless of race, gender or income level. And residents must also know that when and if they need them, services and supports will be available to make sure they, and their neighbours, do not face desperation and destitution if they lose a job or have a setback. In the 21st century, this is the hallmark not only of a compassionate and caring city, but also, a very practical city.

Caring versus competitive. Equity versus economy. These concepts are neither opposed, nor incompatible. They are the critical and equally essential ingredients of a Toronto that residents want to live in; a city that values people and neighbourhoods first, and that understands enduring success is built by supporting both.



"A cohesive community benefits everyone, because people who feel part of a larger community have an investment in the public good."

- City of Toronto, Social Development Strategy

More than any other large city in North America, Toronto has used the unique responsibilities it has as a municipal government to create a responsive, locally based human services system aimed at building strong neighbourhoods, fostering social inclusion, and addressing poverty and disadvantage.

Whether by itself, or more often in partnership with others in the community, Toronto delivers a wide array of human services. The City's parks, libraries, and cultural and recreation centres are part of a social infrastructure used by all city residents. And the City has long provided critical services and supports to our most

vulnerable residents. Through its Social Development Strategy, the City has asserted its ongoing commitment to the city's social infrastructure.

With respect to the provision of human services, service delivery, planning, and co-ordination and integration are most effective when the needs of local communities are taken into

account, when the people who are being served can be involved, and when those responsible and accountable for decisions are accessible. In each service area, the City has taken impressive steps to improve access, promote equity, better integrate services and increase effectiveness.

What is perhaps most impressive is the City's tenacity in the face of often shortsighted efforts by other orders of government to reduce their commitments to Toronto's social and community services. The City has consistently demonstrated the truth of the saying that services should be delivered by the order of government closest to the people. At issue is that the resources required to fund and carry out the responsibilities that have been devolved to the City have not materialized.

A Commitment to the People of Toronto

The City of Toronto has a long legacy of developing innovative and progressive responses to the complex social issues facing many local residents. This Action Plan builds on the excellent work done by the City in a broad range of human service sectors. This commitment has been expressed through the following City documents, among others:

- Social Development Strategy
- Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy
- Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force Report
- Housing and Homelessness Report Cards
- Toronto Report Card on Children
- Toronto Child Care Service Plan
- Best Generation Yet (Children's Services)
- On Common Ground (Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division)
- Labour Force Readiness Plan
- Toronto Immigration and Settlement Policy Framework
- Toronto Social Services Living the Vision—Report to the Community
- Toronto Public Health Access and Equity Framework
- Toward a Healthy City: Toronto Public Health Strategic Plan
- Urban Stories: The Next Chapter (Toronto Public Library's Strategic Plan 2004-2007)

Ontario Works in Toronto...

The City of Toronto delivers Ontario Works on behalf of the Province. Through Toronto Social Services, basic income and employment supports are provided to vulnerable city residents.

Distributing over \$600 million in benefits to nearly 240,000 people in 2005, OW can reasonably be seen as the backbone of Toronto's social safety net.

Toronto's OW caseload, while falling considerably since the mid-1990's, remains 90% higher than in 1989, before the last major recession. But current caseload levels certainly cannot be attributed to high benefit rates, lax rules or generous eligibility criteria. In fact, the opposite is true. People receiving OW today in Toronto:

- have no assets to speak of;
- usually do not have employment earnings;
- receive allowances that are nearly 40% lower than they were 10 years ago; and
- face very stringent program rules and restrictions governing ongoing eligibility.

And even though OW caseloads are higher than they were 15 years ago, community agencies and advocates know that a key problem is that many vulnerable people can no longer access the program. Higher demands on the program have had a clear effect, as the TD Bank notes in its September 2005 report:

As a result of the 21.6% reduction of social assistance rates in 1995, Toronto's poorer residents have lost more than \$2.0 billion in income.⁴

*"...Welfare programs have responded to this surfeit of demands on their systems by raising entry barriers, with the result that a growing number of low-income people are at risk of falling through the cracks."*³

It is now time to look at some of the ways in which the systems of survival and systems of support that are critical to city residents can be restored and revitalized. Making changes to OW is an important part of this task. But without many other changes that increase the access social assistance clients have to other social and employment services, vulnerable people in this city who rely on OW will still be shortchanged.

Some facts about Ontario Works in Toronto

- Toronto is Canada's 4th largest social assistance delivery system behind only the provinces of Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia.
- Single people account for 58% of Toronto's OW caseload and families with children represent 35%.
- In an average month, 4,500 people apply for OW and about as many people leave to take jobs or for other reasons.
- Almost 40% of adults on OW have less than a high school education, while nearly 25% have some post-secondary education.
- Every month, more than 50,000 children in Toronto are supported through the OW program.

Restoring the Systems of Survival and Systems of Support...

This Action Plan starts with Ontario Works, which is a core part of what this Plan refers to as **the systems of survival and systems of support** that many Toronto residents rely on. Too often, however, OW is seen as a program that simply provides a cheque to people. While this is a critical part of the program, it is only part of what OW does. In order to respond to people's needs, social assistance must also help clients identify other supports and services they need to stabilize their lives (e.g., child care, housing, health, immigration). It must then serve as a gateway to other services and to provide the supports necessary to get and keep a job.

This is really what social assistance should be - a client-centred service that supports people's efforts to achieve a better life. And while the Province has recently made many positive changes to OW, the program still remains too inflexible. It still favours a one-size-fits-all approach to meeting client needs that limits the ability of Toronto Social Services' staff to help city residents.

But improving OW is only part of the solution. People who receive OW must be able to access services and programs that help them move forward: basic and post-secondary education, longer term training programs, and supports that will help them retain jobs to name but a few. For too many clients, the fact that they qualify for OW means they are not eligible for such services, which just does not make sense. Often, the problem is the services are not available, or the supply is simply too limited.

The Action Plan also identifies and makes recommendations with respect to the types of services and supports OW clients

need to get a better education, improve their language skills, or get a better job.

To begin, this Action Plan sets out a simple, clear vision for what Ontario Works should be in Toronto, including a number of positions that both underpin this vision, and give it substance.

Section 1.0 of the Action Plan proposes a new direction for social assistance, one that would see the creation of a new child benefit program for low income families outside of the social assistance system, a fairer and more focused OW program that would help adults stabilize their lives and take advantage of opportunities to improve their prospects, and a disability program that is accessible to disabled people.

Systems of Survival and Systems of Support

The focus of this Action Plan is on revitalizing the systems of survival and systems of support that comprise social assistance.

Systems of Survival refers to better identifying and providing for the basic needs of social assistance recipients which must be met if they are to live adequately and meet their food, shelter and other basic necessities.

Systems of Support refers to the broader range of tools and resources necessary to assist people who want to work or improve their quality of life and the lives of their children.

Section 2.0 addresses the inadequate state of current OW benefits. A revised rate structure is proposed that recognizes the actual cost of living in specific communities.

Section 3.0 discusses the need for Toronto Social Services, on behalf of the City, to take responsibility for leading the planning, management and delivery of employment services and supports for the city's unemployed and vulnerable residents. This entails looking at ways low income people can gain better access to the education, training, employment and job retention supports they require to obtain and sustain decent jobs.

Section 4.0 speaks to the importance of providing human services that are client-focused, and that are accessible to low income people in need, regardless of the service door they enter.

Finally, *Section 5.0* identifies specific aspects of the current OW service delivery model that require immediate attention.

This Action Plan is the product of consultations with a broad range of stakeholders, including more than 80 Ontario Works clients as well as Toronto Social Services staff, staff in other City divisions, intergovernmental partners and 40 community organization representatives. A full description of the consultation process is provided in Appendix A.

In addition, the Action Plan draws from a detailed review of best of practices that have been introduced in jurisdictions across North America, Europe and Australia. The supplementary report, *“What Next in Welfare Reform?”*, details the results of this review.

Reading this Action Plan...

In each section of the report, a number of recommendations and/or actions are put forward. Samples of the format and intention of each are provided below:

Recommendation:

Recommendations outline specific measures the different orders of government need to take to restore and reinvest in Toronto's social safety net.

Taking Action:

Actions refer to steps Toronto Social Services, together with various partners, is or will be taking to address concerns that are raised.

The plan also describes five initiatives for action. These appear in boxes similar in style to the Taking Action box above, and are identified by the following title: **Taking Action—Initiative.**

A Basis for Action

“The welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all.” - Helen Keller

What is Ontario Works? It is a gateway to jobs and employment supports for tens of thousands of Toronto residents each year. It is the window through which working age adults and their families get the services and programs they require from other orders of government or community agencies. It is the program that supports survivors of domestic abuse, people moving out of shelters and into homes, and people in crisis.

The reality is that Ontario Works in Toronto is not a program of last resort. Nor should it be seen as one. It is the backbone of the city’s safety net, providing benefits and supports to vulnerable people and helping them when they need help most. It is a program that needs to be more to the people who rely on it, not less.

This is the starting point for the Action Plan. It is a profoundly positive starting point, which sees Ontario Works as a program that must include rather than exclude people, support rather than stigmatize residents, and fairly balance this City’s social responsibility to maintain the welfare of all with each individual’s responsibility to be a contributor to that welfare.

On the next page, the principles that guide the City’s efforts to make social assistance work more effectively for people in Toronto are set out. The following positions put forward the main themes in each of the five sections in this Action Plan, and establish a clear direction for making the Ontario Works program, and the City’s delivery system, stronger in Toronto:

- (1) The Province of Ontario and local municipalities continue to reshape the social assistance system and refocus Ontario Works through well-planned reforms. The City of Toronto continue to manage and deliver Ontario Works in Toronto and the Province of Ontario assume responsibility for funding all Ontario Works benefit costs.*
- (2) The Province adjust the Ontario Works rate structure to ensure that eligible Toronto residents receive a level of allowances and benefits that enable them to meet their basic needs and that adequately reflect changes in the cost of living over time.*
- (3) Toronto Social Services, on behalf of the City, take the responsibility for leading the planning, management and delivery of employment services and supports for the City’s unemployed and low income residents.*
- (4) As a core part of its mandate to support vulnerable residents, the City of Toronto pursue strategies within each human service area that effectively integrate service planning and delivery.*
- (5) Recognizing and respecting the role municipalities play in delivering Ontario Works, the Province provide Toronto with the flexibility and resources to develop service delivery models, technologies and best practices that improve program delivery and outcomes for city residents.*

Principles for Action

Social Assistance in Toronto...

The following serve as principles for action to help focus the City's efforts in making social assistance work more effectively for the people of Toronto who need and use this critical service.

Meeting basic needs

Meeting basic needs is the foundation for helping people make sustainable transitions to a better life.

Focusing on the individual and the social

Social assistance in Toronto must support individuals to better their own prospects by helping them make the transition to good jobs, while also focusing on broader solutions to problems of exclusion and poverty.

Part of the City's collective strength

Toronto's social assistance program will continue to be a core component of an integrated approach to:

- supporting the achievement of the City's social development priorities;
- identifying and addressing the service needs of vulnerable individuals and communities.

Serving as a gateway

Social assistance works best when it is a gateway, ensuring vulnerable residents have the opportunity to access the services they need.

Toronto-centred service delivery

Toronto's social assistance delivery system must be made in Toronto to meet the complex needs of the City's residents and labour market.

Rooted in communities

Toronto's social assistance program works best when it is rooted in communities, and when it reaches out to and draws in the strength of the agencies and organizations that serve the city's vulnerable individuals and communities.

Evidence and experience based

Social assistance reforms must be based on evidence and guided by a combination of research, knowledge and local experience.

Creating capacity

Toronto's social assistance delivery system must have the capacity, including the appropriate funding from other orders of governments, to provide the range, quality and level of benefits, supports and services that unemployed and vulnerable residents need.

Listening and engaging

Toronto's social assistance program must be open: as a human service, it is essential to build positive relationships with the people we help and the people we work with; as a city service, it is essential to seek out and act on client and community perspectives on how to improve what we do and how we do it.

Protecting integrity and people

Toronto's social assistance program must ensure people are eligible for the services they receive. Equally, people must receive the benefits and services to which they are entitled. Protecting integrity should not punish people.

1.0 Remaking Social Assistance

New systems of survival and support...

Over the past 10 years, calls for major reforms of Canada's income security programs have become commonplace. Most recently, there has been much discussion about creating a new social architecture for social policy in the 21st century.

At the same time, as the opening chapter of this Action Plan has shown, the forces and trends that are behind these discussions are profoundly affecting the social assistance system, particularly in Toronto. Broad changes to the country's income security programs, and to the way they are funded, are needed and overdue. Other changes are also needed to respond to the issues faced by the municipalities that deliver social assistance in Ontario.

Based on our experiences at Toronto Social Services, as well as the work of many other researchers and advocates, there are a number of important reasons why changes must be made to the current social assistance system:

- (1) benefit levels are grossly inadequate;
- (2) providing financial benefits intended to support children through the social assistance system is neither effective nor efficient;
- (3) there is widespread support for ending the current practice of clawing back the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS) from families on social assistance (in fact, the Province has allowed families to keep small increases in the NCBS since 2004); and

- (4) too many people are relying on the Ontario Works (OW) program who cannot support themselves through employment (including disabled persons and older workers unable to access the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or the Canadian Pension Plan Disability Program).

This brief section proposes an alternative to the current social assistance system, building on current research and thinking with respect to reshaping social assistance.



The intention here is to state a clear direction, not spell out a step-by-step process for implementation. As with any broader reform, the expectation is that time, and a generous amount of collaboration among the governments and stakeholders who must make the changes, will be required to work out the details, and to work through the issues that will be faced.

Finally, this section will make strong recommendations about how social assistance programs should be funded, now and in the future. New funding arrangements are crucial to municipalities, the order of government most severely affected by the forces that have reshaped social programs in Canada for the past decade.

A common starting point...

Within the income security system in Ontario, OW is unique. With certain exceptions, anyone who has no other means of support qualifies for the program. Given restrictions to programs such as Employment Insurance (EI) and ODSP, Ontario Works has become, for more and more people, the program of first, last and only resort.

One change perhaps overshadows all the others. Increasingly, with the erosion of EI, OW is the core income and employment support program for a larger proportion of unemployed people. This change has introduced a new set of issues that have to be taken into account when trying to reform social assistance.

With OW now serving many more unemployed people than before, and for longer periods, proposing any improvements to social assistance immediately evokes two criticisms:

- (1) making the program better, meaning that it does not wholly impoverish those who receive it, is unfair to those outside the program, notably people who may be defined as the “working poor”; and
- (2) improving the program will increase caseloads, as more people are attracted to it.

This is the dilemma confronting efforts to make social assistance work better for poor people. Not surprisingly, there is a deep frustration among clients, communities and advocates about the obstacles that seem to block meaningful program reforms. It seems nothing can be done because either it costs too much, because clients’ incentive to work will be reduced (even though it is recognized that many jobs do not pay

enough to live on), or because some other fundamental change is required (e.g., EI must be strengthened, minimum wages must be increased, programs must be put in place to make work pay).

There is no doubt each of these issues is important, and new ideas and investments are needed to shore up Canada’s frayed safety net. The following proposal acknowledges that these concerns matter, but it also rejects the position that nothing can or should be done. What is sought here is a starting point for making changes that are within the provincial government’s control, and that will make a difference to the people we provide services to every day.

1.1 Focusing Social Assistance

Recommendation:

- 1.1a The Province commit to developing a refocused social assistance system, the main components of which are:*
- (i) a child benefit, funded 100% by the provincial and federal governments, that builds on the current National Child Benefit Supplement and that provides adequate benefits to all children in low income families, outside the social assistance system;*
 - (ii) a simplified Ontario Works program that provides financial benefits, services and supports to adults to help them stabilize their lives and move out of poverty; and*
 - (iii) a program that is accessible to disabled persons and those who will not be able to support themselves through employment over the longer term.*
- 1.1b As a first step towards making these changes, the Province should:*
- (i) establish a concrete timetable for creating a new provincial child benefit;*
 - (ii) create an advisory panel made up of members from policy and advocacy groups, municipal delivery agents and interested citizens to support the development of the new social assistance program design; and*
 - (iii) develop a range of options for review by the panel prior to finalizing any program re-design.*

The high level vision for a child benefit is not new, nor radical. In 2003, Toronto Social Services (TSS) briefly described this basic vision to City Council, drawing on a proposal endorsed by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO).⁵ More detailed analyses have also been undertaken which examine possible designs for a new child benefit and an adult-based Ontario Works (OW) program.

In many ways, a new child benefit is the pivotal part of this proposal for focusing social assistance. It provides an alternate means of supporting low income families, whether or not they are eligible for social assistance. It also provides a more publicly acceptable way to raise the incomes of poor families, including those on social assistance.

For families, a benefit at least equivalent to the child component of the current OW/Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) budget would be provided through 100% provincial funding. The proposal assumes that the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS), which is currently clawed back from those on social assistance, will be retained by families, thereby increasing their income. Ongoing increases to the federally funded NCBS can either replace provincial funding that would have been used to support benefits to children on social assistance (freeing up such funding to support more effective employment services and supports for OW clients), or these funds can be directed to clients, increasing child benefit levels.

We believe that the creation of this child benefit should be the Province's first priority. At least half of all Canadian provinces have now restructured their social assistance systems, using the

NCBS to create a provincial child benefit. These concrete experiences can inform options for proceeding.

The reforms proposed here are necessarily interrelated. Moreover, there are many complex design and technical issues that have to be resolved. The point here is not to provide a detailed roadmap for a new social assistance system. This work will require significant co-ordination between the Province, municipalities and concerned stakeholders.

To be meaningful from the perspective of social assistance clients, and to make a difference in our communities, the changes recommended will require the reinvestment of funds into programs for poor families and individuals—a reinvestment that begins to address the significant cuts that have been made to social programs affecting Toronto’s vulnerable residents since the mid-1990’s.

Key decisions will need to be made and different options looked at for designing a children’s benefit, each of which have different financial implications.

But, at the end of the reform process, the new system of benefits and supports for low income children and adults should accomplish the following:

(1) provide low income families with children a secure, reasonable and sustainable source of income outside of the social assistance system through a child benefit that builds

on the current NCBS, and that sees this supplement retained by families;

(2) create a smaller and more focused program that provides an adequate benefit to all adults who can work, that provides support to people to take part in a broader range of training and educational opportunities than are currently available through OW, and that provides necessary supports to help people transition to employment; and

(3) increase access to ODSP by simplifying the application process, expanding the definition of disability, and including populations that have very limited prospects for obtaining sustainable employment.

With respect to ODSP, there are two critical issues: access to the program, and the way the program is now funded. The first issue will be discussed in Section 4.0, while the latter issue will be discussed in the next part of this section.



1.2 Funding Social Assistance

Recommendation:

- 1.2a City Council adopt the following positions with respect to the funding of social assistance programs:*
- (i) the Province assume responsibility for funding 100% of the total costs of the Ontario Disability Support Program, including benefit and administration costs;*
 - (ii) the Province assume responsibility for funding 100% of the benefit costs for the Ontario Works program; and*
 - (iii) the City of Toronto continue to deliver the Ontario Works program in Toronto.*
- 1.2b The Province remove the cap on rents for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program clients residing in social housing so that such clients are eligible to receive the maximum shelter benefit provided to clients living in private rental units (and subject to any increase in benefit rates).*
- 1.2c City Council advocate to the Premier of Ontario, the Minister of Community and Social Services, and the Minister of Finance that these changes be effected as soon as possible.*

Municipalities face grave financial pressures related to the funding of income redistribution programs, and notably social assistance. Any serious reform of social assistance must change the way these programs are funded and must return the responsibility for funding income redistribution programs to the order(s) of government which have access to appropriate revenue sources (e.g., income tax).

From a funding perspective, in reality, there is only one social assistance program. That is, the City is mandated to cost share (with the Province) both the costs of Ontario Works (OW), which it manages and delivers, and the costs of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which is managed and delivered provincially with no municipal role.

Funding the Ontario Disability Support Program

ODSP is a provincial program over which the City has no control or say. The current funding arrangement for ODSP violates two basic principles of public administration: the “pay say” principle, which holds that any government cost-sharing a program or service should have a say in its operation. It simply makes no sense for the City to be funding a provincially delivered income support program. The Province must assume responsibility for fully funding ODSP.

Funding Ontario Works Benefit Costs

According to the most basic public administration principles, which have repeatedly been articulated by municipal organizations and public policy experts, it is unwise and untenable to support the cost of benefits paid through income redistribution programs on a property tax base. Currently, the

City is responsible for funding 20% of all OW benefit costs. It is imperative that the Province take on these funding responsibilities.

Delivering Ontario Works in Toronto

Although the City of Toronto has long believed that property taxes are not an appropriate source of funding for social assistance costs, it continues to recognize the importance of social assistance delivery at the local level. Experience and history dictate that the City should still deliver social assistance to unemployed people for a number of compelling reasons:

- (1) to effectively respond to the diverse and distinctive needs of Toronto's communities;
- (2) to ensure equity and consistently high delivery standards across the city;
- (3) to take advantage of the City's legacy of innovation and efficiency as a service provider;
- (4) to effectively integrate services by capitalizing on the City's long history of contributing to, and working with, Toronto's extensive community-based social infrastructure; and
- (5) to ensure Toronto's low income residents and other stakeholders have access to locally accountable decision-makers and elected representatives to voice their opinions on the social assistance system.

There is a final pressing reason for a city-scale and City-run social assistance delivery system. More than ever, the Toronto region is being forced to compete in a global economy with other

regions that are dedicating formidable amounts of resources to becoming highly efficient producers of goods and services. A highly trained, highly skilled workforce is critical if this region is to prosper. Investment is needed in one of the most important assets we have as a community: the people who live here. The kind of social assistance system Toronto is developing must become integral to this city's overall efforts to make sure that all our residents can participate in this challenging new economy and benefit from the changes occurring around us.

Toronto's Comparative Advantage

The question is not which government should do what, but what is the "comparative advantage" of each order of government in solving urgent problems in cities. Neil Bradford explains:

*"On the front lines, municipalities are best able to 'convene the community' – engaging citizens and stakeholders in dialogue and action for local priorities. They can also ensure that land use planning and community services build more inclusive and compact cities. To this end, they may partner with other local organizations – school boards, band councils, social service agencies, business or non-profit networks – on joint projects. For their part, provincial and federal governments are both far better equipped than municipalities to flow the necessary resources to the local partners who know best how and where to invest in physical and social infrastructures. Upper level governments also can facilitate inter-regional sharing of problem-solving experiences by sponsoring the scaling-up of community demonstration projects and transferring lessons from one city to another."*⁶

What clearly needs to be negotiated is the context within which municipal delivery should occur, including the legislative, policy and, most importantly, funding frameworks that will enable the City to deliver social assistance without truly adverse fiscal implications.

Ensuring the Province Pays its Fair Share of Social Housing Costs

Since implementation of the Local Service Realignment (LSR) in 1998, municipalities have been subsidizing provincial social assistance benefits for OW and ODSP clients living in social housing. Currently, the provincially set rent levels, having been capped for decades, are several hundred dollars lower than the rents people would pay for comparable apartments in the private market. For example, a single parent with one child on OW renting an apartment in the private market would receive up to \$527 for rent, while the rent payment for the same person living in a social housing unit is capped at \$191.

The difference, which could be up to \$336 in this example, is now paid by the City using 100% municipal funds. If the cap were removed, and the City allowed to raise rental amounts in social housing units to the level allowed under OW and ODSP, this sum would be paid through social assistance, which is cost shared 80% by the province and 20% by municipalities. It is important to note that the increased rents would not negatively impact clients.

In effect, the cap on social housing rents for OW and ODSP clients amounts to a hidden downloading of provincial costs to the City. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) estimates that municipalities are subsidizing the Province's

social assistance benefit costs by approximately \$175 million a year. These costs are continuing to rise on a yearly basis due to inflation, while the Province's social housing rent cap has remained unchanged for more than 20 years.

To address this discrepancy, the Province must remove the cap on rents for OW and ODSP clients living in social housing units so that these clients are eligible for the same maximum shelter benefit as clients residing in private market accommodations. Doing so will ensure that the Province pays its full share of the shelter costs for social assistance clients renting subsidized units.

The City of Toronto, with approximately 17,500 social assistance clients in social housing each month, would potentially realize significant net savings annually through the removal of the cap on social housing rents for OW and ODSP clients.



2.0 Restoring the Balance

Improving benefit rates and other key supports...

Could you survive on less than \$5.00 a day? How would you get enough to eat? How would you travel to work or school? How would you get your children the quality child care they need? For too many of the 130,000 people a month on social assistance in Toronto, this is the reality they face. After paying rent in the country's most expensive housing market, many individuals and families are left with less than \$5.00 a day to meet all other basic requirements of life such as food, clothing and transportation. \$5.00 a day demands impossible decisions be made. \$5.00 a day buys you little hope. How did it come to this?

While we fundamentally believe that a full scale reform of Ontario's social assistance system is needed, at Toronto Social Services (TSS) we also realize that the vision described in Section 1.1 is a long-term strategy that will take time to design and implement. In the meantime, people on social assistance in Toronto are facing severe hardship as they struggle to survive on limited budgets, putting the health and safety of themselves and their children at risk.

For ten years, TSS has been advocating to the Province that Ontario Works (OW) benefit rates are simply not enough for individuals and families to live on in an expensive city such as Toronto. The 21.6% rate reduction introduced by the Province in 1995, together with ten years of inflationary erosion, have reduced the purchasing power of social assistance benefits by nearly 40%. In fact, the purchasing power of existing OW rates

is at its lowest level in two decades, roughly equivalent to social assistance benefits paid in 1985.

The inadequacy of social assistance rates not only in Ontario, but across the country, has become widely recognized as a primary contributor to the declining standard of living of low income persons in Canada. Numerous reports and sources have documented the rapid decline in the value of social assistance benefits over the past decade. In 2004, the National Council on Welfare reported that social assistance benefits had reached "modern day lows".⁷

"I only get \$900 for three children. It's very hard. I can't afford diapers. I can't explain to my kids why I can't take them anywhere."

- Ontario Works client

While the introduction of the National Child Benefit by the federal government has provided some relief, its impact continues to be muted in Ontario by the dollar for dollar deduction of most of the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS) portion from monthly OW benefit payments .

In response to widespread criticism that the previous Ontario government had abandoned low income citizens, the newly-elected Ontario government increased social assistance rates by 3% in 2005 – the first increase in a decade. The Province also determined that families on OW receiving the NCBS could keep the 2004 increase introduced by the federal government (worth an estimated \$4.00 per child per month).

In 2006, the Province announced an additional 2% increase to OW benefits and extended the clawback exemption for increases in the NCBS (amounting to approximately \$40.00 per

child per month for increases from 2004 through 2006). For a single parent with two children the additional income amounts to an increase of 8.5% since 2004.

This increase is much needed to be sure, although it should be noted that half of the increase is attributable to annual increases in the NCBS previously announced by the federal government. Provincial commitments to improve social assistance rates have barely kept pace with inflation over the past two years, and have not significantly addressed the 40% drop in benefit value since 1995.

Relative to the general population, the deteriorating standard of living of Toronto's poorest families is very evident. Current annual incomes for single parents on social assistance have fallen more than 20 percentage points from nearly 70% of Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) prior to the 1995 rate cut, to less than 50% today. Two parent families have faced similar hardship, with yearly benefits dropping to 41% of the LICO from 60%. Annual benefits for single persons on social assistance have fallen even further to one third of the LICO line.

To this end, immediate and significant action is needed with respect to social assistance benefit rates in Ontario. Rates must be increased to ensure that social assistance is a true "system of survival". All Torontonians, and indeed all Ontarians, should be able to live in safe and stable housing, be able to purchase healthy food, and be able to actively participate in everyday community life.



2.1 A Livable Ontario Works Benefit Structure

Recommendation:

- 2.1 *In response to the continuing erosion of social assistance benefit rates, the Province adjust the Ontario Works benefit rate structure in accordance with the following:*
- (i) the shelter component maximum for Ontario Works clients equal 85% of the median market rent for each local housing market, based on annual surveys conducted by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation; and*
 - (ii) the basic needs component maximum for Ontario Works be increased by 21.6% and thereafter adjusted annually to reflect the findings of yearly nutritious food basket surveys conducted by local Boards of Health based on protocols established by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.*

Building a livable Ontario Works (OW) benefit rate structure means providing benefits that both pay a reasonable amount based on current living standards, and that recognize the cost of living in specific municipalities. This is particularly important for low income residents of a large, expensive city such as Toronto who regularly face higher costs than residents of other Ontario municipalities.

Recent policy changes introduced by the Province with respect to employment earnings have made the need for rate

increases even more urgent. Under previous rules, a base amount of earnings was exempt from any deduction in OW benefits based on family size (e.g., \$143.00 for a single person, \$275.00 for a single parent with one child). The new policy, however, requires that for every dollar of earnings a client makes, 50 cents is deducted from his or her monthly OW allowance. This change has left the many clients earning small amounts of employment income with less money at the end of the month.

To address all of these concerns, changes to the shelter and basic needs components of the OW rate structure are recommended that recognize local differences in the cost of living and the adverse impacts of inflation.

Shelter Allowance

Housing expenses remain the largest cost facing people on OW, as Toronto's rental housing market continues to be the country's most expensive. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Toronto in 2004 was \$1,052.00, 84% higher than the maximum monthly shelter allowance of \$571.00 for which a single parent with two young children is eligible, and equivalent to 94% of the family's total monthly OW allowance of \$1,119.00.

While vacancy rates have risen over the past two years, there is ongoing concern with respect to affordability among the least expensive rental units. An analysis by CMHC of the rental housing market in the Greater Toronto Area revealed that rents for apartments in the lowest quintile (the bottom 20% of rental units in terms of cost) increased an average of 1.9% in

2003 despite vacancy rates that rose from 2.3% in 2002 to 4.7% in 2003. In comparison, rental rates for units in the highest quintile (the top 20% in terms of cost) decreased by 1.9%.⁸ These findings suggest that Toronto's most vulnerable residents are not benefiting from the increasing rental affordability that rising vacancy rates typically generate, as units at the lower end of the rental market continue to be in great demand in the city.

At present, more than 80% of OW clients continue to reside in private rental units fully exposed to rental market pressures, and 71% are paying rents in excess of the maximum shelter allowance. Consistent with previous positions taken by the City, including the Mayor's Homelessness Task Force Action Plan⁹, it is recommended that the maximum shelter allowance be set at 85% of the median market rent for each local housing market based on annual surveys completed by CMHC.

This approach to the shelter component of the OW allowance is appropriate for two reasons:

- (1) it recognizes the higher costs of housing in specific jurisdictions in the Province, such as Toronto, that many people on OW are facing; and
- (2) it adjusts shelter rates annually based on rent increases in the local housing market, ensuring that people on OW in Toronto receive adequate assistance with shelter costs.



Basic Needs Allowance

The basic needs component of the OW allowance is intended to provide people on OW with funds to cover the cost of food, clothing, transportation, and other essential supplies such as cleaning products and personal grooming items. However, the inability of shelter rates to meet rental costs means that many must use significant portions of their basic needs allowance to cover housing-related expenses. Further, rising food, transportation and other everyday costs over the past decade mean that the purchasing power of the basic needs allowance has significantly eroded.

As a result, nutritious eating is simply not affordable for many people on social assistance in Toronto, making it difficult, particularly for children, to meet the energy and nutrient needs that are basic requirements of health. Too many people in Toronto must make impossible decisions on whether to pay the rent or feed their families.

In September 2005, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health reported that average weekly food costs for a family of four in Toronto rose to \$124.62 per week (\$539.60 per month), an increase of 3% over food costs in 2004 and more than 16% since 1999.¹⁰ Such cost increases illustrate the affordability crisis facing families on OW. In particular, larger families with two or more children often have insufficient funds left after

rent is paid to cover the cost of nutritious food, let alone other basic items.

Aside from food, the costs of other basic necessities have all increased at varying rates since 1995, requiring people on OW to stretch their limited budgets further and further. Such costs include public transit, clothing, personal hygiene products, hydro and natural gas service, telephone service, and basic household supplies.

In response, it is recommended that the Province reinstate the 21.6% rate reduction implemented in 1995 to the basic needs portion of the OW allowance. Thereafter, the basic needs allowance should be adjusted annually based on the results of yearly nutritious food basket surveys conducted by local Boards of Health. This approach will ensure that the basic needs component keeps pace with inflation, and is consistent with previous positions on OW rate increases adopted by Toronto City Council.¹¹



2.2 Allowable Asset Limits

Recommendation:

2.2 The Province increase allowable asset levels under the Ontario Works Act to at least three times the maximum Ontario Works assistance rate, in accordance with the new rate structure recommended in Section 2.1.

As with the shelter and basic needs benefits, limits on current allowable asset levels in the Ontario Works (OW) program are too low. The existing asset levels do not support OW clients to make a successful and permanent transition from social assistance to independence. Since 1995, like OW rates, allowable asset levels have seen only a 3% increase.

A September 2005 report by the TD Bank Financial Group describes current asset limits as “indefensibly low”. It points out the ways in which changes in other parts of the OW program, notably the amount of money clients with earnings can now retain due to the introduction of new earnings exemption policies, are undermined by rules governing assets.¹²

Currently, for example, a single parent with one child who has a job and remains eligible for OW is allowed to save less than \$1,500.00. As a result, the family would be unable to accumulate enough savings to cover the first and last month’s rent required to move into better housing, or to pay any unexpected costs that may arise (particularly important given rising and increasingly volatile energy prices).

With single parents now remaining on OW for an average of two years in Toronto, this situation is simply counterproductive, preventing individuals and families from building any financial base for the future. At the same time, unreasonably low asset limits mean that people must be destitute before they can apply for OW.

Consistent with policy changes introduced by the Province in August 2005 to make OW a more employment oriented program, allowable asset limits must be increased. Enabling OW clients to save, at minimum, an amount equal to three times their OW benefit rate, in accordance with the new rate structure recommended in this report, will allow for a modest level of savings.

“I need to be able to save more money to have an emergency fund – high hydro bill or additional grocery costs or school trip costs. I could afford it if I could save.”

- Ontario Works client

2.3 Transportation

Recommendation:

2.3 The City of Toronto, together with the Province, explore options for making subsidized or reduced cost transit passes available for all Toronto residents (including children) in the Ontario Works program.

For more and more low income families in Toronto, public transit represents much more than just a job-related support. For many, it is their only link to the key pillars of life in a big city: work, school, community services, recreation and health care, among others. Increasing difficulty in accessing this basic need is placing individuals, families and entire communities at risk of deepening poverty, exclusion and disengagement from city affairs.

In Toronto Social Services' (TSS') 2003 survey of single parents on Ontario Works (OW), 80% identified public transit as their primary means of transportation.¹³ A 2004 report by Statistics Canada reported that recent immigrants are 75% more likely to use public transit in Toronto than Canadian-born residents.¹⁴ At the same time, rising public transit costs, and schedules that are incompatible with non-standard work hours and family obligations, are restricting the mobility of low income people. Over the past ten years, the cost of a monthly adult MetroPass has risen 47% from \$67.00 in 1995 to \$98.50 today. Single ride prices have seen a similar increase.

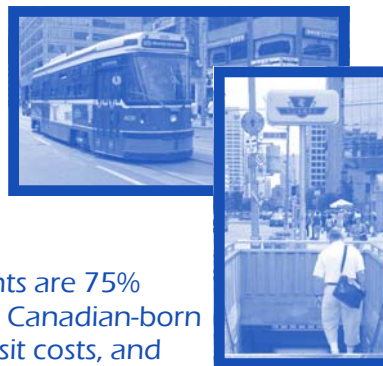
During client consultations, transportation-related issues were identified repeatedly not only as an obstacle to sustaining

employment, but also to simply going about daily life. Many parents expressed frustration that they could receive transportation support through OW for employment-related activities, but that there was no assistance with transportation for children who need to be dropped off and picked up at day care or school. Similarly, there is no support available for older children who need to travel to school by transit.

This lack of mobility can exclude low income people, and their children, from social and economic opportunities available to others. Job searches, for instance, may be restricted by transportation constraints. Consequently, many may be reluctant to pursue work opportunities outside of their local area, thereby reducing the number who find jobs.

Furthermore, the lack of community services in certain neighbourhoods means there is a need for low income residents to travel greater distances just to access the services and supports they require. Additional frustration has been expressed by clients who need to travel by transit to a TSS office to pick up TTC tickets so they can attend a job interview.

These issues illustrate the social and economic importance of public transit to low income residents. The cities of Calgary and Edmonton, with the cooperation of the Alberta government, have made low income monthly transit passes available to residents receiving provincial disability subsidies. The City of Calgary will be expanding this initiative to all low income residents in 2006.¹⁵ The City of Toronto, together with the Province, should explore options for making transit passes available for all Toronto residents (including children) who are on OW.



2.4 Dental Benefits

Recommendation:

2.4a The Province fund at 100% all costs associated with the delivery of dental services currently covered through Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program.

2.4b The Province support and fund the provision of improved basic dental services for adults on Ontario Works.

Oral health and general health and well-being are inseparable. A person's quality of life, as measured by the ability to function, work and be self confident, is directly related to oral health. Recent research has also shown an association between oral infections, chronic diseases and poor birth outcomes.¹⁶

As one of a range of basic health services that everyone relies on to lead a healthy life, there is a clear need to ensure that the city's most vulnerable residents have access to basic dental care. Simply put, being healthy requires good dental health.

In the past, dental benefits covered through social assistance included basic services such as regular check-ups, cleanings and root canals. However, cuts to the adult dental program have dramatically reduced the level of services available. Throughout the consultations there was widespread distress over the existing level of dental benefits available to adults on Ontario Works (OW). Both clients and Toronto Social Services

staff noted the inadequacy of the current emergency-based program, which covers only limited services, notably extraction, in the most extreme circumstances. Currently, the cost per adult for dental services provided through OW equals only \$42.00 per year.

As one client noted: "Pulling teeth is not good dental care." It is also not good social policy. Again and again, clients indicated that dental problems and bad teeth caused not only personal discomfort, but were also a significant obstacle to employment.

Consistent with the position that all social assistance benefits should be 100% provincially funded, the cost of implementing a basic dental care program for adults on OW should be fully covered by the Province. The dental program could then potentially be delivered via local community clinics.

"Do you have to wait until your teeth fall out before someone helps you?"

- Ontario Works client

It should be noted that adults on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) have access to a far superior set of dental services than OW clients. However, under current cost sharing, the City funds 20% of the benefit costs

for this program, plus 50% of the administration costs. While there is no doubt that ODSP clients, by virtue of their length of stay on the program, and in certain cases the nature of their disabilities, clearly require these services, these costs should be covered by the Province. This would then free resources that the City could use to support better programs for other vulnerable residents of Toronto.

2.5 Back to School and Winter Clothing Allowances

Recommendation:

2.5a The Province increase the Back to School Allowance available under the Ontario Works program to provide families with children on Ontario Works with the following benefits:

(i) \$50.00 per month per child under 12 years of age to be issued during the 10 month school year, for a total of \$500.00 per dependent per year; and

(ii) \$75.00 per month per child between 12 and 18 years to be issued during the 10 month school year, for a total of \$750.00 per dependent per year.

2.5b The Province extend eligibility for the Back to School Allowance to all Ontario Works participants in Toronto who are completing high school or involved in high school equivalency programs. Each participant would be eligible to receive a total of \$75.00 per month for the 10 month school year, or \$750.00 per year.

2.5c Recognizing that everyone is affected by winter weather, the Province extend eligibility for the Winter Clothing Allowance available under the Ontario Works program to all clients (adults and children), consistent with existing eligibility criteria and issuing guidelines (e.g., \$105.00 per person per year payable between September and December).

Aside from the significant erosion of the relative value of shelter and basic needs benefits since 1995, other key mandatory benefits available under Ontario Works (OW) have not been increased since 1992-1993. For example, the Back to School and Winter Clothing allowances have stagnated at early 1990's levels. Currently, families with school age children under 12 receive \$69.00 once per year per child, while families with children between 12 and 18 years receive \$128.00. Over a 10 month school year, this provides families with \$0.35 to \$0.65 per school day per child. All children under the age of 18 also receive \$105.00 once per year for the purchase of winter clothing.

Taking inflation into account, both benefits have lost nearly 25% of their value since 1993. They have also clearly fallen far behind the costs involved in preparing for school or dressing for winter.

Accordingly, the Back to School Allowance should be increased by the Province to a total of \$500.00 per year per child under the age of 12 and to \$750.00 per year per child aged 12 to 18 years. Further, the increased benefits would have a greater impact if issued monthly during the 10 month school year (\$50.00 and \$75.00 per month respectively) so that parents regularly have funds available to cover school-related expenses such as clothing or uniforms, field trips and school supplies, among others.

“\$70.00 for Back to School Allowance is not enough to replace outgrown clothes.”

- Ontario Works client

Families should not have to constantly make impossible choices about children's clothing or school trips and paying the rent and meeting other basic needs. We firmly believe that no child should be excluded from taking part in school activities due to cost.

Similarly, every person on OW who is struggling to complete high school, regardless of whether they are 18 years of age or older, should have their school expenses acknowledged and should be supported to stay in school.

With respect to the Winter Clothing allowance, it is recommended that the Province recognize that everyone is affected by the extreme winter weather that Ontario regularly experiences, and extend the annual Winter Clothing Allowance of \$105.00 per year per child to everyone who is receiving OW.



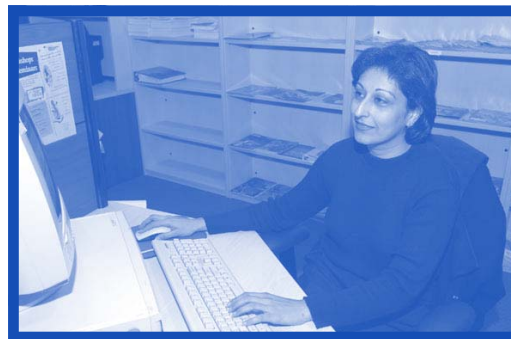
3.0 Transitioning to Employment

Supporting people to become independent...

Historically, the provision of employment training and supports has been the primary responsibility of the federal and provincial governments. However, the presence of the federal and provincial governments as employment training and service providers has greatly diminished over the past decade. As already noted, the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program now provides employment services to a mere 22% of unemployed Torontonians compared with nearly 80% in the early 1990's, while provincial programs provide highly targeted training supports to specific population groups.

The net result is that the City of Toronto, through TSS, has become the primary service manager for employment services and supports to Toronto's most vulnerable unemployed residents. Building on its long history of delivering employment programming, TSS has the experience and community-based partnerships necessary to respond to local labour market demands and diverse client needs.

Often, as research has shown¹⁷, the people who need TSS' services are facing multiple and complex barriers to employment, and are particularly vulnerable to persistent poverty. They include single parents, single persons aged 45 and over, recent immigrants, and those with long term physical or mental challenges (overall, these groups account for approximately 75% of Toronto's OW caseload).



The provincial and federal governments must recognize this new reality, and provide the requisite funding and flexibility to address the range of programming needs that Toronto's diverse population requires. Currently, TSS is funded by the provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services as a deliverer of social assistance. But OW was always intended to be an employment program first, and a financial support second.

In order for TSS to fulfill its mandate for delivering employment supports to the vulnerable residents of Toronto, several steps are needed, including:

- increased investment by the federal and provincial governments in services for low income Toronto residents;
- better coordination of existing resources among the community, City and many provincial ministries and federal departments currently involved in providing training, education and employment services;
- establishing better connections to jobs in the private sector;
- determining and outlining the employment training and education needs of low income Toronto residents;
- quantifying existing capacity among service providers and identifying unmet client needs;
- setting targets and performance indicators for addressing service gaps; and
- developing guidelines for measuring outcomes.

This section begins with a broad discussion of two ways in which the City can lead by example. In the remainder of the section, recommendations are set out for immediate action in three broad areas where the needs of OW clients are greatest. These include:

- (1) education and training (i.e., job training, post-secondary education, adult education);
- (2) jobs and job retention (i.e., workplace-based experience, Employment Resource Centres as a “front door”, job retention supports, reaching out and responding to employers); and
- (3) services for newcomers.



3.1 Leading By Example

Recommendation:

3.1a The City of Toronto establish a recruitment policy that places priority on increasing access to employment opportunities within the Toronto Public Service for individuals in vulnerable communities by:

- (i) providing timely and relevant information about City jobs, and particularly entry level jobs, to people in vulnerable communities;*
- (ii) engaging vulnerable communities through outreach activities that describe the City's recruitment processes and that prepare people to apply for jobs; and*
- (iii) providing ongoing supports to new hires in entry level positions to build their skills and help them progress within the Toronto Public Service.*

3.1b In collaboration with community-based organizations, City divisions and intergovernmental partners, Toronto Social Services, on behalf of the City, take responsibility for leading the planning, management and delivery of employment services and supports for the City's unemployed and low income residents.

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will take a lead role in preparing an employment services plan for low income Toronto residents.

Regardless of the varied routes that lead there, the stresses and uncertainties of unemployment are in many ways the same. What differs is the access people have to supports and services they need to get back into the workforce. Although individual paths to a job will vary, for many people the best way to successfully enter, re-enter, and remain in the labour market is through access to employment supports, services and training. From Toronto Social Services' (TSS') own experience, we know that the best results are realized when these supports include direct links to employers.

The City itself can provide leadership by ensuring its recruitment processes, and by extension job opportunities, are as open as possible to people in vulnerable communities and to unemployed workers. Doing so will mean taking proactive steps to get information about City jobs to people in vulnerable communities, and helping them to apply for jobs and prepare for the job interview process.

In addition, simple steps such as using TSS' Employment Resource Centres and community-based job placement delivery agencies as part of the City's recruitment process would improve the ability of OW clients to access City jobs. Information sessions on career opportunities at the City could also be given for clients by individual departments.

With respect to labour market programming and employment services delivery, the recent announcement of a Labour Market Development Agreement and a Labour Market Partnership Agreement for Ontario indicates there is a willingness to transfer greater responsibilities to orders of government that are closest and most responsive to the issues. The City of

Toronto is well-positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that are afforded by these agreements.

As the service manager for employment services in the city, TSS will take the lead responsibility in developing an employment services plan for Toronto. The primary goal of this plan will be to ensure there is an adequate allocation of employment training and education resources in the city to ensure access for low income Toronto residents to the supports they need to get jobs.

The employment services plan will recognize the important role that the City of Toronto and TSS have played and must continue to play in addressing employment needs in the city.

In preparing the plan, TSS will collaborate with other City divisions, intergovernmental partners, the community-based sector, and other key stakeholders. The success of this plan will be determined by the degree to which stakeholders are accountable for the services they are mandated to provide in Toronto.

The plan will be guided by the following considerations:

- (1) the planning, development and management of employment services and supports should be a public sector responsibility;

- (2) consistent with the City's traditional approach to service delivery, a strong community-based sector is essential to meeting the diverse range of client needs in Toronto;
- (3) every effort should be made to "scale up" what currently works; and
- (4) new approaches and investments are needed to meet the needs of certain vulnerable groups and communities.



Given the size and complexity of Toronto, the development and implementation of this plan will take time. However, the plan represents a critical first step towards improving access to, and the provision of, crucial employment services for low income Toronto residents. It also provides a framework for ensuring the right services get to the right people.

3.2 Adult Education

Recommendation:

3.2a The Province reinvest in adult education and ensure sufficient capacity exists to serve Ontario Works clients in Toronto.

3.2b The Province extend eligibility for the financial supports and bursary available through the Learning, Earning and Parenting program to all families with parents under the age of 30 on Ontario Works.

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will collaborate with the Toronto school boards and other adult education deliverers across the city to identify where additional capacity is needed and to improve access to adult education for low income residents.

Toronto Social Services will identify those on the Ontario Works caseload without a high school education and ensure that the attainment of that qualification is recognized as a priority within individual employment plans.

Although a lack of education is a significant barrier to employment for many people on social assistance (with up to 40% of the caseload having less than a high school education), many social assistance recipients are unable to access adult education in Toronto.

In part, this reflects general cutbacks in Ontario's adult education system over the past ten years. In recognition that a high school education is a basic need from both an employment and social inclusion perspective, the Province must reinvest in adult education to ensure sufficient capacity exists to serve Toronto's Ontario Works (OW) clients.

Reduced access is also the result of specific OW policies that create additional barriers for social assistance recipients seeking to participate in adult education. As noted in Section 2.0, increases to the transportation and Back to School allowances provided to OW clients will address some of these barriers.

Beyond these solutions, there is a need to ensure that educational activities are tailored to both individual needs and goals. A recent review of adult education by the provincial government made a number of recommendations in this regard, including:

- improved access to assessment and referral services;
- improved access to varied opportunities and options for completion of secondary school credits;
- better recognition and promotion of the range of credentials that provide access to further education, training and employment;
- clearer articulation among such programs as literacy and basic skills programs, English and French as a second language credit and non-credit programs, and apprenticeship training and post secondary programs; and
- improved linkages with the workplace through co-operative and supportive work placements.¹⁸

In support of this approach, Toronto Social Services (TSS), working with the Toronto school boards, and other adult education deliverers (e.g., providers of a General Education Diploma), will identify where additional capacity is required and to determine what changes are needed so that our clients can more readily access adult education programs.

Approximately 80% of jobs now require some form of post secondary or management training.¹⁹ And research has shown that a child's educational outcomes are strongly determined by parents' educational achievements.²⁰ It is therefore recommended that the financial supports and bursary currently available to young parents on social assistance through the Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) program be extended to all families with parents under 30 years of age. This will help OW clients to obtain the level of education they need.

In particular, the LEAP bursary will act as a vital stepping stone to support OW clients through and beyond a high school education.



Learning, Earning and Parenting

The Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) Program, introduced in March 1999, is a targeted strategy of the Ontario Works (OW) Employment Assistance Program. The focus of LEAP is to provide young parents between the ages of 16 and 21, in receipt of social assistance, with a range of supports that allows them to meet their educational, employment and parenting objectives.

The program has three primary objectives:

- to encourage young parents to complete high school;
- to assist young parents in improving their basic parenting skills; and
- to provide young parents with the resources necessary to become financially independent by securing employment.

Specifically, LEAP participants are required to complete an educational program leading to a high school diploma. Once participants have completed high school, along with 35 hours of parenting programming, they are then eligible to receive a \$500.00 bursary to go towards post secondary education.

3.3 Post Secondary Education

Recommendation:

- 3.3 To better assist unemployed low income residents compete for jobs that pay a decent wage, the Province must:*
- (i) extend eligibility for Ontario Student Assistance Program grants to mature low income students;*
 - (ii) expand eligibility for Ontario Student Assistance Program part-time financial grants to mature low income students not currently considered “high needs”; and*
 - (iii) review the Ontario Student Assistance Program loan forgiveness and default policies to ensure low income students are not adversely affected.*

A skilled workforce is integral to a city’s economic health and development. Restricting access to education and training can ultimately restrict economic growth itself, as the pool of available skilled labour shrinks.

Over the past two decades, however, rising tuitions have increased the costs associated with post secondary education for the population at large. For those on social assistance, policy changes under Ontario Works (OW) mean that many recipients are no longer eligible for assistance while receiving a student loan (in fact, persons found to be receiving social assistance and a student loan risk prosecution for fraud).

For too many people on OW, post secondary education is out of reach. Increasingly, a high school education is simply not enough to get a job that pays a decent wage. Increased access to post secondary education was seen to be critical by clients, City staff and the community during Action Plan consultations.

Policy changes are needed at the provincial level to provide greater access for low income residents to financial assistance to attend post secondary institutions, and to limit the debt burden they are forced to incur. Recent changes announced by the Province are a promising first step; however, they have not sufficiently addressed the obstacles facing mature students.²¹

To provide OW clients with the opportunities they need, current funding levels and eligibility criteria for relevant programs need to be reconsidered by the federal and provincial orders of government. Specifically, a combination of grants, student loans and eligibility for OW should be available as options for supporting low income people to pursue post secondary education.



3.4 Job Training

Recommendation:

- 3.4a The federal and provincial governments ensure that the job skills training programs they manage are accessible and have sufficient capacity to meet the needs of low income Toronto residents.*
- 3.4b To reflect Toronto Social Services' current role as a deliverer of services to unemployed city residents, many of whom have complex and varied needs:*
- (i) the federal and provincial governments provide Toronto Social Services with adequate funding for job training programs; and*
 - (ii) the Province provide Toronto Social Services with the authority and flexibility necessary to design and deliver the range of job training now required.*

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services, together with Service Canada, will implement the "Making Employment Insurance Services Available to Eligible Ontario Works Clients" project, as described in Taking Action—Initiative 1 (p. 43).

Through the Ontario Works (OW) program, Toronto Social Services (TSS) manages and delivers job skills training for thousands of low income and unemployed Toronto residents each year. However, a much greater volume of vulnerable residents could benefit from skills training if the programs offered by other orders of government were more accessible to people on OW.

Currently, as noted earlier, close to 80% of unemployed people in Toronto do not qualify for supports through the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program. At the same time, the provincial government primarily uses the college system as a vehicle for delivering much of its training, requiring prospective students to secure loans in order to cover tuition costs. While the Province has taken the promising step of making pre-apprenticeship programs available at no cost, the capacity of these programs is extremely limited.

Clearly, there is a need to ensure that employment services and supports provided by other orders of government are available and accessible to those who qualify for them. For the provincial and federal governments, this means:

- increasing public awareness of available training opportunities;
- increasing capacity to ensure sufficient programming is available;
- waiving fees for all training programs accessed by low income and unemployed residents; and
- responding in a timely fashion to training requests by eligible persons so that they can gain access to the desired program as quickly as possible.

Currently, 15% of TSS clients are eligible for training funded by Employment Insurance (EI). To ensure that these clients are served through EI, TSS is working with Service Canada to implement an integrated service delivery model which will provide employment counselling and job readiness services, as well as direct access to training and placement services funded by Service Canada. A detailed description of the service model is provided in Taking Action—Initiative 1 (p. 43).

Of course, for many people (and particularly for many who turn to OW for help), getting access to just any job training is not the answer. TSS offers a diverse range of employment training programs to address the differing needs of its large and complex caseload. Through purchase of service agreements with community-based organizations, programs that integrate pre-employment preparation, job skills training and workplace-based experience are made available.²²

For many, this range of services is clearly valuable, leading to employment. However, there remains a strong need for additional capacity. Indeed, short-term skills training provided by TSS is currently three-times over-subscribed. Many who could benefit from such initiatives, therefore, are unable to use them due to a lack of capacity. Currently, less than 5% of the 140,000 OW cases served each year in Toronto include clients who can access these training initiatives.

As a result, TSS must be adequately funded by other orders of government to meet the critical employment training and skill building needs of the city's most vulnerable unemployed residents. Similarly, TSS must have the authority and flexibility necessary to design and deliver the range of training programs

required to meet the needs of both low income residents and local employers.



Taking Action—Initiatives

1) Making Employment Insurance Services Available to Eligible Ontario Works Clients

Substantial numbers of Ontario Works (OW) clients, who previously qualified for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits, are entitled to receive specific services and supports from the federal government through Service Canada (formerly known as Human Resource Skills Development Canada) to prepare them for their return to work.

The aim of this initiative is to significantly increase the number of EI-eligible OW clients who access Service Canada-funded services and supports, which are often more extensive and varied than those available through OW.

Toronto Social Services (TSS) and Service Canada are jointly sponsoring this initiative in partnership with Jewish Vocational Services (JVS), who will provide employment counselling and job readiness services, as well as direct access to training and placement services funded by Service Canada.

JVS staff are located on-site at two TSS offices, offering an integrated approach to service delivery which will be seamless to clients.

The initiative's sponsors and partners bring their own unique expertise. TSS is identifying and referring eligible clients from two TSS offices (North York East and Scarborough North), and will ensure they receive all the OW benefits to which they are entitled. TSS provides the necessary infrastructure to support

the project. JVS is offering employment counselling supports on-site at these two offices, while Service Canada is providing financial supports to purchase employment programs and supports, and pay JVS staff salaries .

The initiative began in October 2005 and will operate until June 2006. A minimum of 300 OW clients will participate in this project. Since these clients are accessing federally-funded employment programs, a comparable number of OW clients will then have the opportunity to participate in training opportunities that TSS would have otherwise been unable to provide.

A program evaluation will be conducted to determine if the initiative's goals and objectives are met. As well, the evaluation will review outcomes, and feedback, from staff and clients which will inform the partners as to how the program can be expanded.

TSS' intention, building on the initial phase, is to expand the project as quickly as possible, and to bring Service Canada funded staff into each TSS office to facilitate the referral of EI-eligible clients to Service Canada's employment supports.

3.5 Workplace-Based Experience

Recommendation:

3.5 The City of Toronto introduce a policy whereby each division within the Toronto Public Service identify opportunities for Ontario Works participants to gain experience through internships, mentoring and work placements.

Taking Action:

The City of Toronto work with the Canadian Union of Public Employees to establish a work experience program for Ontario Works clients that builds on the success of the models used by the Ontario Public Service.

An extended gap in work history and a lack of current employment references are major obstacles for unemployed people to overcome as they search for a job. This was heard time and again from clients and community representatives throughout the Action Plan consultations. Such obstacles highlight the importance of building capacity and access to practical, on-the-job training opportunities (like internships) for the city's unemployed residents.

As one of the largest employers in the city, there is much that the City of Toronto can do. In addition to continuing to provide paid internships (such as those offered to skilled immigrants through Career Bridge and mentoring programs), the City can also offer a diverse range of on-the-job experiences

through voluntary work placements and through subsidized jobs in the community.

One step the City could take to demonstrate leadership would be to give priority to Ontario Works (OW) clients for City internships and work placements. By working with the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the City can explore innovative ways to increase workplace-based opportunities available for vulnerable residents.

Currently, the Ontario Public Service (OPS) provides OW clients with volunteer workplace experience opportunities. Over the past several years, more than 1,100 social assistance clients in Toronto have been placed in positions in various provincial ministries. Through these placements, OW clients have been able to gain access to a range of technical, administrative, financial and service delivery work experience opportunities. While in placements, clients continue to receive OW benefits as well as additional financial supports to enable them to be successful. As a result, hundreds of social assistance clients have gone on to secure full-time jobs in the OPS or the private sector. Drawing on this model, the City of Toronto could offer similar placements within the Toronto Public Service.

As the research in the supplementary report "What Next in Welfare Reform?" demonstrates, workplace-based approaches provide a particularly promising way of meeting the needs of those with multiple barriers. Such approaches provide temporary waged employment for the least job-ready in realistic work environments with continuous support to assist and sustain the transition into work.

Research suggests that if well-targeted, well-designed and time-limited, paid work experience programs can generate additional net employment and earnings, and produce significant benefits in low-income communities.

The most successful programs:

- target the most disadvantaged;
- provide training and work experience that is employment-focused;
- offer local flexibility to provide ongoing support; and
- generate additional benefits in the form of neighborhood renewal.

Consistent with these best practices, Toronto Social Services is working to implement a neighbourhood-based project that will increase opportunities for low income residents to gain workplace-based experience in their own communities. This project is described in further detail in Section 4.4.



3.6 Employment Resource Centres—A “Front Door”

Recommendation:

3.6 The Province provide adequate and distinct funding to Toronto Social Services for Employment Resource Centres in recognition of the important role they play in delivering employment services to people on Ontario Works and other low income residents.

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will take the lead role in effectively planning and managing the further development of Employment Resource Centre services across the city by bringing Employment Resource Centres together to:

- (i) more effectively co-ordinate services among different Employment Resource Centres in local communities;
- (ii) develop more effective partnerships with employers and other employment and educational service providers; and
- (iii) improve service standards for Employment Resource Centres across the city to ensure clients receive a similar and consistent quality of service.

As a vital “front door” to services and supports, Employment Resource Centres (ERCs) are an effective gateway to key job search and retention supports, and play a critical role supporting the rapid re-employment of recently unemployed residents. Increasingly, ERCs are also becoming career development centres, providing information not only on how to find a job but how to develop a sustainable career path.

In Toronto, a network of ERCs exists, consisting of community-based centres, federally and provincially funded sites, and those operated by each of Toronto Social Services’ (TSS’) 14 local offices. Two of these ERCs are co-located with Service Canada, plus TSS delivers services through another co-located site with Service Canada at Dufferin Mall.

TSS’ ERC staff are trained and skilled in providing access to employment information, career self-management guidance, effective job search counselling, individualized support, and other re-employment assistance.

Low income and unemployed people are facing increasing difficulties in accessing federal and provincial support programs. As a result, a much greater proportion of the city’s vulnerable residents, including non-OW clients, are accessing employment supports through TSS’ ERCs.

TSS has responded to this increased need by expanding the role of ERCs to help people both find and retain work. For example, early intervention and rapid response approaches help job-seekers increase their chances of finding new jobs or supports quickly. Through such approaches, ERCs can reduce the likelihood of former OW clients returning to the program, and can prevent others from ever having to apply to OW.

Moving forward, TSS will implement job retention and career advancement services for people in precarious employment situations as discussed in Section 3.7. To support these efforts, all ERC staff have been trained through the Career Employment and Information Specialist course endorsed by the Forum of Labour Market Ministers. Currently, the City of Toronto is the only jurisdiction in Canada to have ERCs staffed exclusively by individuals with these qualifications.

The expanding role ERCs play in Toronto needs to be recognized by the Province. Specifically, adequate and distinct provincial funding must be provided for ERCs so that TSS can appropriately respond to the increasing demand for these types of services.



3.7 Job Retention Supports

Recommendation:

3.7 *The Province 100% fund the expansion of job retention supports, provided through Ontario Works, that help low income residents leaving social assistance make and sustain the transition to employment.*

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will implement the “Integrated Job Retention Services” project for Ontario Works clients who find employment, as described in Taking Action—Initiative 2 (p. 49).

Vital job retention supports such as child care, transportation, prescription drug coverage and job coaching are important for two reasons:

- (1) fostering long term attachments to the labour market among Ontario Works (OW) clients; and
- (2) reducing the likelihood of people losing their jobs and returning to social assistance.

Toronto Social Services’ (TSS’) research has shown that the loss of benefits associated with exiting social assistance is a key obstacle to working.²³ For instance, single parents exiting OW for employment are often confronted with child care, transportation and other employment-related expenses that may have been previously covered while on social assistance.

Job retention strategies provide benefits to both employers, in the form of reduced turnover and costs, and workers, through wage gains and advancement opportunities. Research suggests that retention supports provide an important bridge between starting and sustaining work. The loss of key supports such as child care or transportation can put employment at risk, and make a return to social assistance more likely.

TSS is exploring innovative options for responding to this service gap. Building on the best practices identified in the supplementary report “What Next in Welfare Reform?”, TSS will implement the “Integrated Job Retention Services Project” described in Taking Action—Initiative 2 (p.49). In addition, TSS, with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and with Service Canada, will investigate ways to increase skill levels of low wage earners.

The Province has recently introduced transitional prescription drug coverage and other benefits for OW clients exiting to employment.

However, overall, there remains a lack of extensive job retention

services in the city (e.g., job coaching, mentoring). In the continued absence of funding necessary to support adequate job retention services in Toronto, TSS does not have the capacity to meet the post-employment needs of all of those who would benefit from such services.

“When you start working, expenses like transportation and child care increase . I had to give up the job because I can’t afford to live when working.”

- Ontario Works client

Taking Action—Initiative

2) Integrated Job Retention Services

Job retention services and supports are a proven way of helping those entering the labour market to find and keep jobs. This is particularly true for former social assistance clients who are working, but find themselves in situations that could lead to the loss of their job. Toronto Social Services (TSS) will sponsor a project providing job retention supports, such as job counselling, personal coaching, and financial management advice, to former social assistance clients during their first six months of paid employment.

Successful job retention services share several common characteristics including:

- help for people adjusting to working;
- information and assistance prior to getting a job (e.g., child care, help with legal or criminal issues, transportation and other personal issues);
- quick responses to try to avert job loss;
- advanced services to help clients reach sustainable wages; and
- provision of ongoing support through personal coaching.

This project will investigate the scope of retention services unemployed people need to succeed in the workplace. Best

practices and successful delivery models in other jurisdictions will be reviewed as part of this project.

Partnerships will be sought with community agencies to provide compatible services and supports. TSS will explore existing funding opportunities within the City and seek one-time demonstration project funding available through other orders of government.

Potentially, savings will result from reduced reliance by clients on Ontario Works (OW) and longer-term savings if clients do not become unemployed and return to OW. Project success will also ensure that TSS will meet provincial employment assistance performance targets.

An evaluation will be conducted, including a review of project outcomes and feedback from staff and clients. Based on the results, further expansion and/or refinement of the project may be undertaken. This may involve the introduction of additional supports such as a mentoring program, a job retention hotline and off-hour supports to accommodate participant work schedules.

3.8 Reaching Out to Employers

Recommendation:

3.8 The provincially mandated program design and funding formula for the Ontario Works Employment Placement program be adjusted to recognize the true cost for agencies to deliver placement and extended job retention supports.

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will increase efforts to raise awareness among employers of the programs offered through Ontario Works.

Toronto Social Services will establish relationships with business associations and sector leaders to provide advice on ways of improving access to jobs or work placements for low income Toronto residents.

To assist people on Ontario Works (OW) to find employment, Toronto Social Services (TSS), through service agreements with community-based agencies, provides job placement services to clients. Employment Resource Centres are also a key support helping connect low income residents to job opportunities.

To better inform employers of these services, TSS will work with the Economic Development Division, business associations and other stakeholders to develop and implement strategies aimed at increasing knowledge of, and access to, employers with respect to job placements, skill development and retention programs offered through OW, including:

- refining existing print material;
- increasing the profile of the 397-JOBS hotline;
- prominently positioning information for employers on the City's website; and
- identifying which of the many employers, sectors and business associations to target.

Critical to this approach will be the relationship between local Economic Development staff and TSS staff. By collaborating with community organizations and by expanding outreach to employers, TSS and Economic Development will identify opportunities to develop local demand-led projects. As part of its realignment of employment services, TSS will introduce a Local Initiatives component in 2006. The aim is two-fold:

- (1) to work with individual local employers who require workers with specific job skills; and
- (2) to provide OW clients with specific skill training and upgrading to fill these vacancies.

It is also crucial that a strong community foundation is appropriately supported to deliver job placement services. To achieve this, the Province should adjust OW's Employment Placement program design and funding formula to recognize the true costs incurred by community-based agencies in delivering job placements and associated job retention supports.



3.9 Services for Newcomers

Recommendation:

3.9 The federal government cover 100% of all social assistance costs incurred by the City of Toronto for newcomers during their first five years in Canada.

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services' employment services plan for low income residents respond to the unique challenges being faced by newcomers to Canada.

Given the importance of workplace-based experience to newcomers, the City work with the Canadian Union of Public Employees to expand the internship opportunities available through the Career Bridge program.

The Greater Toronto Area is the primary destination for newcomers to Canada, accounting for 40% of all arrivals. At the same time, integration, accreditation and settlement services have not kept pace with local needs in Toronto, hindering a growing proportion of newcomers from joining the economic mainstream. As a result, many turn to Ontario Works (OW) for assistance in establishing themselves in their new community. On average, approximately 25% of OW clients are newcomers who have been in Canada under five years.

In recent decades, the source countries for immigrants to Canada have shifted from primarily European nations to countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. As a result, today's newcomers, in addition to facing the integration and settlement adjustments that all immigrants face, are also confronting issues of racism, discrimination and acculturation into a society often quite different from the one they left.

Despite having higher levels of education than previous generations of immigrants (and the Canadian average), those arriving in Canada in 1990 earned significantly less ten years later, relative to the average earnings of Canadian-born citizens, than did immigrants who arrived in 1970 (79.8% of the average earnings of Canadian-born citizens versus 100.4% respectively).

Newcomers to Canada, while experiencing many similar needs to those of other vulnerable populations, also face a number of unique challenges, including:

- problems with accreditation/recognition of foreign skills and education;
- a lack of information about Canadian labour market needs and recruitment practices;
- a lack of Canadian work experience; and
- a lack of labour market language training and bridging programs.

Current language training primarily takes a settlement focus, with classes designed around finding housing and using public transit. But there is also a need for language training services focusing on workplace-based language skills. Recognizing this need, the federal government has recently announced

investment in labour-market focused language training, a promising development that should be widely encouraged.

Language training located in workplaces is also a key way to meet both client needs for improved English language skills and employer needs for skilled workers who can move up in their organization.

The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council's (TRIEC's) efforts to assist skilled immigrants in finding work have been recognized as a best of practice. The initiatives launched by TRIEC include the Career Bridge internship program, mentoring and marketing to engage the private sector. The City of Toronto is an active participant in the Career Bridge and mentoring initiatives. By working with the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the City can expand the range of internship opportunities available through the program.

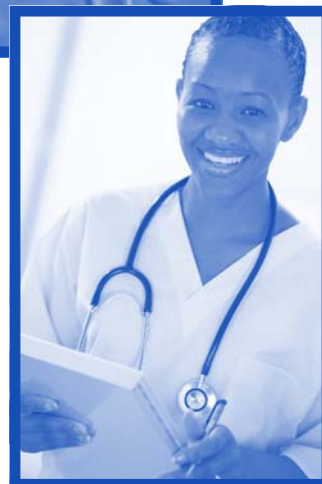
While these steps, and others being taken in the broader community, are promising, there continues to be a substantial lack of capacity in Toronto to respond to the need for settlement services. The majority of highly skilled immigrants are simply not gaining access to the employment opportunities they need to become established. The situation is worse still for those newcomers with lower skill and education levels.

The City of Toronto has developed an Immigration and Settlement Policy Framework that provides the basis for actions

taken to address newcomer issues in Toronto.²⁴ Consistent with this framework, Toronto Social Services, in preparing the employment services plan discussed in Section 3.1, will consider the unique challenges facing newcomers in Toronto.

The employment services plan will also consider opportunities available through the November 2005 Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement. The agreement provides a framework for investing additional resources for settlement and labour market integration. It also recognizes the important role to be played by municipalities.

Given the inability of federal training and integration services for newcomers to keep pace with local demands, local municipalities are increasingly filling the gap. Accordingly, the federal government should fund at 100% all social assistance costs incurred by the City for newcomers during their first five years in Canada.





4.0 Better Gateways to Service

Working together to better serve Toronto residents...

Imagine you are poor in this city. You may need and be eligible for Ontario Works (OW), child care, subsidized housing. Or you may have to move into a shelter to escape domestic violence, or because you have lost your apartment, or your job or both. Perhaps you have a drug or alcohol dependency, or you simply need help finding a job. Perhaps more than one of the above applies to you, and you also want to access recreation or library programs for your children.

Every day in Toronto people in crisis situations contact or come into the offices of different city services. Often, they might not come in the right door the first time, or they may need several services provided by different divisions, or by community agencies or other orders of government.

The consultations we have held with clients and the community, and the experience of our workers and other service providers, suggest that clients often:

- cannot access services;
- do not know what services exist for them;
- feel stigmatized or ashamed about asking for help;
- face language and cultural barriers;
- are not appropriately matched to the service, or the service did not “fit” because of bureaucratic restrictions; and/or
- feel defeated.

Meanwhile, front-line staff struggle to connect their clients with the wide range of services and supports clients often need, and which are frequently beyond the mandate of staff to address.

This section discusses two related approaches to better service integration. First, basic administrative and operational improvements are proposed that will improve service integration and delivery. The focus is on nuts and bolts issues: integrated application processes and joint service planning for mutual clients.

Second, a series of specific action steps are proposed to make service integration a reality for certain highly vulnerable groups or communities, for whom getting access to the range of services needed is a necessity, not an option.



“Service integration is about more than making a few procedural changes. It is about institutional change to create a more coherent – a holistic – human service system.”

- Mark Ragan in “Building Better Human Services: Integrated Services for Income Support and Related Programs”

Integrating City services...

In a service system that is as big and diverse as Toronto's, people will not necessarily come in the right door. Often, there is no right door. There are simply gateways to services.

In the language of service providers, services need to be better integrated. But what does integration mean? Simplified, streamlined, coherent, coordinated. These are key words used to talk about integrated service delivery.

The best and logical place to start to develop integrated service delivery strategies is at the local level, where clients interact with service providers, and where service providers work with each other. Mark Ragan, in an excellent overview of service integration challenges, points out that integration is best understood as a combination of strategies, both administrative and operational.²⁵ Administrative strategies refer to actions like better collaboration in managing and planning service and integrated information systems, while operational strategies refer to more integrated intake and assessment and more effective case management.

These are the concrete strategies that make phrases such as "no wrong door" or "single window" entry meaningful. Ultimately, service integration requires a new mindset, and a strong commitment to look at the service system through the eyes of the people who use it.

Much has been, and is being, done by the City to better integrate services. The 311 Customer Service Strategy has been approved and will be implemented in phases over the next several years. Through 311, the public will be able to get timely, consistent and accurate information about, and access to, City services.

Through the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, integrated service responses are being developed in Toronto's thirteen priority communities to focus and co-ordinate the delivery of services among City divisions and agencies, as well as the boards of education.



Within City divisions, steps are being taken to improve access to services and create more effective linkages among service providers.

These are important actions, and provide a basis for further improvements in service co-ordination and integration. However, from a resident's perspective, services are currently easiest to access when a person has one clear need, when they have at least some familiarity with how to access a service, and when they can get to the service. But in the more likely event that a person has a need for more than one service, is not familiar with who provides what service, and has limited mobility, problems often quickly emerge:

- (1) each service, whether child care, Ontario Works (OW), shelters or subsidized housing, has its own separate application form and process, usually very involved and often asking for the same information; and
- (2) if a person is eligible for, or receiving, more than one service, there is currently no process in place for deciding who is ultimately accountable for ensuring clients can get access to the other services and supports they need.

These problems demonstrate the need for additional strategies that will better integrate service planning and case management among the City divisions that provide human services.

The Larger Question

On what basis should human services be structured and organized? A paper about the integration of income support programs in the United States clearly spells out the issues:

"Should the federal preference for narrowly targeted programs organized around specific service technologies, problem areas or target populations determine how services are structured and financed? Or should social assistance and related opportunities be organized through more integrated, locally shaped systems.... in which community circumstances and individual needs play a larger role?"²⁷

Since the City is a primary provider of services, and is unique in scale and in the range of needs it addresses as a local government, service integration must be accomplished locally, and local delivery solutions should inform the design of provincial and federal programs.

4.1 Ensuring Access to City Services

Recommendation:

4.1 As per the City's Social Development Strategy, Toronto City Council ensure that decisions made with respect to the design, funding and policies governing human service programs delivered by the City make fair and equitable access by low income individuals and families a core priority.

Historically, the services that the City directly delivers, as well as the services that the City supports in neighbourhoods across Toronto, have been community focused and community centred. From the City's perspective, the human services delivered by Toronto (whether child care, recreation, public health or library services) provide an essential and effective way to combat social exclusion and to promote inclusion. In fact, one of the core principles of the City's Social Development Strategy is "fair and equitable access to all services, so that no one falls below minimum standards that include adequate income, sufficient nutritious food, adequate and affordable housing, and sufficient clothing."²⁸

The City must continue to ensure that low income residents can access the services they need. Increasingly, there are pressures, whether related to funding constraints or the need to make services pay for themselves, that jeopardize access for Toronto's most vulnerable residents. Indeed the starting point for any discussion about better service integration is access to services in the first place.

From a social development and social justice perspective therefore, decisions made about key human services should make access for low income people a critical priority. In every case, the consequences of decisions should be examined to assess the impacts for access by the city's most vulnerable residents. At minimum, such decisions should not decrease access.

If ensuring services are truly available is the cornerstone of a service system that meets the needs of low income people, then improving access through greater service integration is the next logical step. The following discussion focuses on basic administrative and operational changes that can be made to improve service integration and service delivery.

4.2 Integrated Service Strategies

Recommendation:

4.2 City divisions in the human services cluster:

- (i) investigate opportunities for providing integrated application processes for income redistribution programs and services; and*
- (ii) develop common service strategies for mutual clients.*

Taking Action:

The City's human services divisions co-ordinate service plans for mutual clients, focusing specifically on the most vulnerable client groups.

At the most basic level, people have to be able to access the services they need, regardless of what service door they enter, and there needs to be someone who takes responsibility for helping residents to navigate the service system.

Integrated Application Processes

The promise of integrated application processes for subsidized human services seems always just out of reach. New technologies however are providing opportunities to collect information once, and to potentially share it across several service systems.

In conjunction with the 311 Customer Service Strategy, Toronto Social Services (TSS) and its partners in the City's Human Services Cluster, will explore emerging opportunities to create single points of access for clients within service areas, to better co-ordinate and harmonize current application processes, and to use new technologies to ensure there is no wrong door for people seeking City services.

Currently, TSS' Application Centre serves as a first point of contact for 85% of Ontario Works applicants, and provides an efficient means of capturing information necessary to determine program eligibility. Using an enhanced call centre model, the Centre incorporates skilled staff and built-in processes to assure the provision of quality services. Web enabled applications and initial steps to look at self service options for clients are now being explored.

Based on the work that has been done to date, the Application Centre provides a platform and potential model for:

- more efficient entry points for a range of human services provided by the City;
- the development of web-enabled services that will provide clients with increased options for applying for City services; and
- integrated application processes that simplify the collection of common information across City human services programs.



Integrated Service Planning

People receiving more than one service from City divisions, whether child care, Ontario Works, social housing, recreation or public health services, are more likely to be the rule than the exception. Therefore, regardless of the door people enter to access services, and regardless of the services they initially need, there should be a consistent approach to basic service management.

A holistic approach to service delivery demands that it is not only the person's immediate need that is addressed, but that efforts are made to assess the need for related services and to link people to the appropriate provider. Currently, various City divisions, including Toronto Social Services (TSS), are working together to more effectively assist specific groups, such as homeless people, who have multiple needs and may use more than one City service. This is an essential first step.

TSS is committed to developing service strategies for shared clients. This means developing strategies with each of the service areas in the City's human services cluster that co-ordinate services to mutual clients, focusing specifically on the most vulnerable groups of clients. These strategies will form a core part of TSS' overall strategic plan for service delivery. The outcome of these strategies will be more effective ways of helping people get the services they need, as well as more effective co-ordination and usage of current services.

Beyond these steps, clients will benefit from a clearer understanding of who their primary service planner is. It is proposed that a lead service planner be identified for every person or family served through the City's human services divisions. Primary responsibility would reside with the division that provides initial services, or has an ongoing relationship with the client. For example, TSS would assume the primary service manager role for all social assistance clients.

As the lead service planner, the division or area would assume responsibility for being the primary contact point with the client and for linking the client to other services in the City and community. This lead planner would become the gateway, and window, to the broader human service system for clients they serve. Such an approach vests appropriate responsibility for client service, service access and ultimately better service co-ordination among City divisions. It represents an important part of any longer term strategy to create an integrated, holistic service delivery system.

4.3 Cross Training City Staff

Taking Action:

The City of Toronto develop an interdivisional orientation and training module for all staff in the human services cluster to ensure a basic level of familiarity and understanding of City services delivered to shared clients.

The City of Toronto's human services, not to mention those available in the community, are complex. Even City staff have a difficult time navigating service systems on behalf of clients. Staff in various consultations indicated that they often do not have, and have not been given the opportunity to obtain, a workable knowledge of the core human services that the City provides.

A simple and low cost way to ensure City staff delivering human services have more knowledge of services and supports available through other City divisions, is to develop an interdivisional training module for staff. Using such a module will also provide an opportunity for divisions to engage staff in discussions about ways to creatively improve service integration across city services.

Various media, tools and approaches can be used to provide divisions with a user friendly source of information that will benefit front-line providers and managers. Written materials (whether in print or electronically available) that staff can use on a daily basis should also be developed.



4.4 Building Strong Neighbourhoods

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will continue to support the development of integrated, place-based solutions to address priority neighbourhood issues by:

- (i) implementing the “Investing in Neighbourhoods” project, as described in Taking Action—Initiative 3 (p. 62); and
- (ii) developing a local service plan for each district that will align the local office resources within broader planning and response efforts targeting priority neighbourhoods.

The report of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force has identified a number of priority neighbourhoods located across Toronto experiencing a combination of social pressures, including limited access to community services and infrastructure.²⁹ In adopting its Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, the City recognized that strengthening Toronto’s neighbourhoods requires the willingness of service providers from across all orders of government and the community-based sector to work together to co-ordinate the planning and delivery of services.³⁰ It is this ethos that motivates and underpins the directions and actions that are discussed in this section and those to follow.

Historically, Toronto Social Services (TSS) has played an important role with respect to building capacity in local communities. Through the Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, we will continue to identify and develop targeted and

integrated solutions to priority neighbourhood concerns. A promising example of this type of innovative, place-based response is the Neighbourhood Investment Program described in Taking Action—Initiative 3 (see p. 62).

Ensuring clients have ready access to the income and employment assistance they need in their local community is crucial. Through our local offices, TSS serves as a key gateway for clients to other community-based and government service providers and employers in the community. Through our offices we have also established strong service delivery relationships with a wide range of community and intergovernmental partners.

To support ongoing efforts to address issues in the city’s priority neighbourhoods, each TSS district will develop a local service plan identifying key resources and linkages that can be utilized at the community level.

“Our vision for strong neighbourhoods includes well-designed income support programs that provide all residents with quality of life and personal dignity.”

- Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force

Taking Action—Initiative

3) Investing in Neighbourhoods

Toronto Social Services' (TSS') Investing in Neighbourhoods project directly addresses issues related to unemployment in 13 distinct neighbourhoods identified in the City of Toronto's Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy.

These neighbourhoods are deemed to be at risk due to a number of factors: unemployment; a chronic shortage of programming for children, youth and parents; a lack of supports for education and training; violence; and concentrations of poor people living in subsidized housing. These conditions are contributing to the exclusion of large numbers of low income individuals from the mainstream of community life.

This program proposes to improve the employability of people on Ontario Works (OW) in these communities by directly funding jobs with local non-profit agencies. The intention is to create up to 200 full-time jobs in non-profit community-based agencies located in these neighbourhoods. Wages earned by participants will be comparable to the wages earned by staff currently employed with participating agencies. As a result, participants will significantly increase their income, potentially enabling them to exit OW.

This approach provides an effective and well-tested means of addressing exclusion and building capacity in local

neighbourhoods. In addition to creating employment opportunities for OW clients, this program will increase the service delivery capacity of participating community agencies, and potentially create role models and community leaders.

Participating clients will gain valuable work experience, become more self reliant, and develop good work habits. It is expected that they will make the transition off OW to full employment. Participants may also be eligible to receive Employment Insurance benefits (should they suffer job loss) by gaining the requisite number of hours of insured employment. The intention is to provide clients with appropriate job retention supports, and to make every effort to ensure clients will be able to retain the job they have, or transition to another job at the end of this program.

An evaluation will be conducted to determine if the program's goals and objectives have been met. As well, the evaluation will review outcomes, and solicit feedback from clients, staff and other community stakeholders to determine the overall effectiveness of the program. Based on the program's success, TSS will seek additional funders and community partners to support expansion.

4.5 Helping Survivors of Domestic Violence

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services continue to seek better ways to help survivors of domestic violence by:

- (i) providing web-based resources for all staff where information related to helping persons experiencing domestic violence can be easily and quickly accessed, such as program supports and Ontario Works resources available to survivors; and
- (ii) ensuring staff expertise and resources are available in each local office to assist office staff and to liaise with community agencies and organizations working with Toronto Social Services to support domestic violence survivors.

Integrated approaches to service delivery make sense. In many cases, the improvements in access, co-ordination and effectiveness are beneficial to the clients who need service. Sometimes, however, the stakes are higher, and the issues are about life and death. This is the case with respect to services for domestic abuse survivors.

Social assistance providers are often uniquely positioned to support women who are taking the steps necessary to make safe and healthy choices for themselves and their children. In Toronto and elsewhere, women who leave abusive situations and require financial and other supports frequently access Ontario Works (OW).

In October 1994, Toronto Social Services (TSS) introduced its first protocol for working with clients who are experiencing domestic violence. The principles and guidelines in this protocol, updated regularly since 1994, have enabled us to provide a clear, consistent and compassionate approach to helping clients experiencing domestic violence.

Recently, in response to the February 2002 Coroner's inquest into the death of Gillian Hadley, the Province introduced an extensive *Domestic Violence Training* initiative. TSS, which has provided a range of training to staff on domestic violence issues, is modifying provincial materials for use in our offices. Through this training staff are:

- being trained to respond to the needs of abused persons;
- receiving tools and targeted training to promote best practices and enhanced service; and
- being provided with necessary information/links to resources.

Finally, it is essential that the tremendous strength and valuable role of the city's community-based services for domestic violence survivors be recognized and built on. In its ongoing efforts to assist women who are experiencing domestic violence, TSS continues to look at ways of improving the supports and resources caseworkers can access to help this group, including providing easy access to information about services in the community. Specifically, a website is being developed, detailing information on the full range of supports available to assist survivors of domestic violence. TSS will designate a staff resource in each office to provide on-site expertise and a critical liaison to community-based supports for survivors of domestic violence.

4.6 Supporting Single Parents

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services implement the “Investing in Families” project, as described in Taking Action—Initiative 4 (p. 66).

Toronto Social Services and Toronto Children’s Services will improve their joint service planning processes with the goal of providing the most appropriate service for the whole family.

Being a single parent in Toronto can be daunting. Single parent families are four times more likely to be poor than other families, account for approximately one third of all Ontario Works (OW) cases, and remain on assistance an average of more than two years. Persistent poverty, when experienced by single parent families, can have long term impacts for both parents and their children. As the 2003 report “Social Assistance and Single Parents: Findings from Toronto Social Services’ Survey of Single Parents” vividly described, single parents are being “excluded” in a variety of ways - economically, socially, emotionally, and geographically.

Among the findings of the survey were four key themes:

- (1) Child care remains a formidable obstacle restricting the participation of single parents in the labour market and/or educational and training opportunities.
- (2) The general inadequacy of OW rates exerts a particular stress on single parent households - especially in a city as expensive as Toronto – where low wage work is simply not enough to meet the cost of basic necessities. Indeed,

research suggests that the fear of jeopardizing their children’s well-being can act as a deterrent to entering the labour force (particularly given the propensity for health issues among single parents on OW and their children).

- (3) Children from single parent families are often unable to participate in common youth activities - due to cost - like playing sports or attending school field trips. This issue was echoed during recent consultations with OW clients in preparing this Action Plan.
- (4) Perhaps, more than anything else, the survey findings graphically underlined the interrelated nature of the issues single parents face.

In response to these challenges, the diverse needs of single parents demand longer-term, comprehensive and integrated strategies to break the cycle of poverty that they, and their children, face. The recommendations made in this Action Plan are intended to provide an integrated set of key supports needed to make this happen, including adequate social assistance benefits; better access to training, post secondary education and job retention supports; and more flexibility to respond to local service needs.

In addition, based on the innovative work that has been done investigating models for integrated service delivery³¹, Toronto Social Services (TSS) will implement an integrated approach for delivering services to single parents including health, social, employment and recreational programming. Additional information on the “Integrated Service Supports for Single Parents” project is provided in Taking Action—Initiative 4 (p.66).

For single parents on OW, quality child care is particularly critical to their ability to get work, go to school, be trained, or participate in pre-employment activities through Ontario Works. Confidence in the safety and quality of care that their children are receiving is integral to helping single parents focus on their employment goals. Unfortunately, not nearly enough single parents on OW in Toronto are able to access quality, affordable child care.

At present, TSS and Children's Services have approximately 8,000 mutual clients. Both divisions will continue to explore how best to respond to the needs of families for child care arrangements that support parents' employment and education efforts while ensuring children receive high quality care. This may involve looking at options for expanding the range of quality child care services available to families, including weekend and overnight care, as well as for home- and workplace-based care.

"I would like things for kids to do... For their future, their mind, for society."

- Single parent on Ontario Works



"Most of us are parents and we understand that you have to support parents in order to support children."

- Toronto Social Services caseworker

Taking Action—Initiative

4) “Investing in Families”—Comprehensive Service Planning for Families

Research has clearly demonstrated the value of providing a range of integrated services to single parents and their children in receipt of social assistance. The Integrated Service Supports for Single Parents initiative is designed to proactively offer an integrated mix of health, social, employment and recreation services to single parents with children who are currently receiving Ontario Works (OW).

The goal is to increase the well-being of adults and children in the program, with anticipated outcomes such as: improved health and self-sufficiency of parents; enhanced employment-retention; increased socio-economic status; improved life management skills (e.g., grocery shopping, appropriate childcare); more appropriate use of the health care system; and improved abilities to function in more healthy ways (e.g., nutrition counselling).

The first phase of this project will establish the research and service delivery design including the specific population, sample size, protocols and service delivery model. It is proposed that the project start with 275 single parent families with children under the age of six, located in the City’s northwest quadrant.

Project management lies with Toronto Social Services. Integrated services will be provided to this client group by Toronto Public Health and by the City’s Children’s Services

and Parks, Forestry and Recreation divisions. Additional partners may be considered at a future date (e.g., Drop in Centres, Kids Clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Hockey Associations, and Soccer Clubs).

It is also anticipated that there will be broader community benefits including an increase in participation in informal and formal community programs and services; an increase in the number, and sustained participation, of children and youth in recreation programs; and an increase in the well-being of the children in the family. Among service providers, improved relationships and interdisciplinary collaboration will lead to more effective service delivery models, a more effective use of resources, and an increased ability to work collaboratively across sectors.

The most appropriate way of providing health, recreational and social services to single parents who are experiencing financial hardship and associated issues, including social exclusion, has not been extensively studied in Toronto. An outcomes framework for evaluating the efficacy of the comprehensive support to families will be designed and implemented.

Initial funding for the project will be provided by the City, with additional funding being sought from participating delivery partners.

4.7 Assisting Homeless People

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services quickly link homeless individuals living on the street who are applying for, or in receipt of, Ontario Works with Streets to Homes outreach workers, who will help them to obtain stable housing.

Toronto Social Services will establish a protocol and process for serving homeless Ontario Works clients that uses a holistic case management approach to addressing client needs.

For the majority of people on Ontario Works (OW) in Toronto, housing represents the single largest expense they face, accounting for a disproportionate share of their monthly budget. In Section 2.1 we recognize the need for action in this regard and have called on the Province to adjust the shelter allowance to acknowledge differences in rental costs across Ontario municipalities.

Many others on OW, however, cannot access shelter allowances as they have “no fixed address”. In responding to this situation, Toronto Social Services recognizes that the causes of, and solutions to, Toronto’s homelessness crisis are complex and require the concerted and co-ordinated efforts of all orders of government.

At the same time, we realize the urgent health and safety threat that living on the street poses. We know that a stable housing situation must be in place before caseworkers

and clients can begin to seriously consider longer term issues such as finding a sustainable job.

Collaborating with the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division, the Affordable Housing Office and staff from other housing sectors (e.g., Toronto Community Housing Corporation), TSS will seek to maximize opportunities for homeless OW clients to access various housing options, including rent supplement programs, subsidized housing and other supportive housing alternatives.

TSS and the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division have worked for many years to co-ordinate the delivery of OW supports to eligible clients in shelters, putting in place the systems that will assist clients in relocating to the community.

More recently, TSS and the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division are working to more effectively connect homeless persons who come into TSS offices with outreach workers from the Streets to Homes program. The intention is to ensure homeless persons receive immediate assistance to locate and obtain stable housing.

To support these efforts, TSS is developing a standard protocol and process to optimize the provision of its services to homeless clients. The aim will be to identify gaps in service, avoid duplication of resources among different



divisions, and provide clients with the most appropriate services.

More broadly, in a number of areas, opportunities are emerging to directly address affordable housing issues and to provide the means for more effectively planning for and coordinating housing related services in Toronto. Prominent among these changes are:

- the recent allocation of funds to the City through the Canada–Ontario Affordable Housing Program;
- the federal government’s commitment in its 2005 budget to provide additional federal funding for affordable housing; and
- the City’s creation of an Affordable Housing Committee and Affordable Housing Office.

It is crucial that the shelter issues facing OW clients, most of whom cannot cover their housing costs with the amount of money they receive for shelter through the program, be a key consideration in the City’s plans to increase access to affordable housing for vulnerable groups. Single parent families with children, who rely on OW for longer periods, are clearly one group that should be targeted with respect to making more affordable housing options available. This emphasis will be even more important if shelter allowances provided through OW are not increased, as recommended earlier in Section 2.1.



“Staff from a shelter I know say that it is very hard for people in a shelter to walk through a Social Services office front door. It is intimidating to come in.”

- Toronto Social Services caseworker

4.8 Supporting People with Disabilities

Recommendation:

4.8 *The Ministry of Community and Social Services establish a multi-sectoral task force to undertake a review of the current Ontario Disability Support Program.*

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services and the Ministry of Community and Social Services work together to improve the Ontario Disability Support Program application granting process for clients receiving Ontario Works in Toronto.

Toronto Social Services secure agreement from the Province to implement the “Ontario Disability Support Program Application Assistance” project described in Taking Action—Initiative 5 (p. 72).

It is time to rethink and review the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which is a critical survival system for people who are disabled, seriously disadvantaged, and destitute. In many cases, people who would have previously been eligible for disability benefits under the Family Benefits program, which ODSP replaced in 1997, cannot access ODSP. They are then forced to rely on Ontario Works (OW), a program that does not meet their needs, or are cut-off from income supports altogether.

The OW program is a primary access point to ODSP. However, the process by which OW clients apply for ODSP is complicated, time consuming and onerous. At the end of 2005, over 7,500 of the most vulnerable people served by OW, were in the process of completing applications to ODSP.

There is widespread agreement about the fundamental problems with the current ODSP delivery system:

- (1) The program is extremely hard to access, and not client-friendly. The application process itself may take up to one year, and is impenetrable to many applicants, who may be mentally ill, intellectually disabled or have language barriers. The onus to gather the large amounts of complex information required to apply is placed on the individual. As a result, few people can make an application without considerable support. Currently, sizable proportions of people applying for ODSP either do not complete the application or are not initially successful.
- (2) The definition of disability under current ODSP rules is very restrictive. Many people who do not meet the current definition of disability will likely never work due to multiple health issues.
- (3) Case planning and case management supports provided to ODSP clients are often not adequate. ODSP clients have frequently noted that getting timely help is difficult and that access to program staff is limited.³²
- (4) ODSP clients must still rely on the OW program for certain key health and dental benefits. This complicated service delivery arrangement, which requires OW staff to organize

access to these services for ODSP clients, needs to be rationalized and streamlined. Currently, over 4,000 ODSP clients or dependents are supported through Toronto's OW delivery system. ODSP clients should be able to access necessary services through ODSP.

One evident outcome of limited access to ODSP is the number of people who apply for Ontario Works who are not employable, and who have multiple barriers or health problems, including serious addictions and mental health issues. The City has consistently maintained that it is not realistic to assume that these individuals be expected to participate in an employment-focused program like OW.

On OW, disabled people also face extreme hardship, given the very low benefit levels and the frequent need to provide information verifying their eligibility. One result, as the recent Toronto Drug Strategy report suggests, is increasing levels of homelessness among highly vulnerable groups, such as those with mental health issues or drug and alcohol dependencies.

A review of ODSP is overdue. It is essential that the Province begin such a review as soon as possible, and include all appropriate stakeholders, including disabled clients, advocates and municipal OW delivery agents. The primary aims of the review should be to:

- simplify the application process and provide supports to people who need them to successfully complete an application;
- alter the definition of disability, including allowing for more realistic medical assessment by a broader group of health

care professionals and reinstating addiction as a valid disability for determining eligibility;

- reduce the time the Disability Adjudication Unit takes to reach decisions regarding client eligibility;
- explore new program alternatives for unemployable individuals on OW who cannot reasonably be expected to work; and
- provide appropriate services and case management supports for ODSP clients through the ODSP delivery system.

In order to provide a more supportive and streamlined process for helping disabled people on OW to access ODSP, TSS and the Province are preparing to introduce changes that will reduce the time and effort required to complete an application by both OW staff and by clients. To this end, TSS, upon reaching an agreement with the Province, will implement the "Ontario Disability Support Program Application Assistance" project described in Taking Action—Initiative 5 (p. 72).

A System of Survival?

In Toronto, fewer applicants can access the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) than in other parts of the province. Over the past year, the provincial ODSP caseload grew by 2.7%. However, during the same period, Toronto's ODSP caseload increased only 0.6% (or 263 cases) to 46,907.

“When you set up a system that has at least four steps in it, in which the person who has the least ability - the person with disabilities - has to collect all the information and run around and make sure doctors and ministries and tax departments send in all these papers, is it any wonder why so many people give up before a decision is even made.”

- Participant at Access to ODSP held by the ODSP Action coalition, 2005



Denial by Design?

Some have argued that the current Ontario Disability Support Program design is intended to deny access:

“...thousands of people who should be receiving ODSP supports are struggling to survive on meager welfare benefits or no income at all. Their health, housing and overall well-being are being jeopardized because of a process seemingly designed to ensure failure. Of those who succeed in accessing ODSP, many must do so through the appeal process, an additional layer of complexity and delays. The cost to individuals of the complicated and unfair ODSP application process is huge. The cost to the community, in terms of resources devoted to assisting applicants and appealing poor decisions to deny benefits, is equally enormous.”

- Income Security Advocacy Centre³³

Taking Action—Initiative

5) Ontario Disability Support Program Application Assistance

Currently the process by which Ontario Works (OW) clients apply for the provincially run Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is complicated, time consuming and lengthy. This client group also tends to be one of the most vulnerable served by OW, and often experience significant difficulty attempting to access ODSP. This project seeks to improve co-ordination between Toronto Social Services (TSS) and ODSP staff in order to streamline the ODSP application granting process for OW clients.

TSS and the Province will together reassess and refocus their respective case management processes, policies and procedures to respond to the needs of people with disabilities. Alternate methods and practices will be developed to ensure a more seamless transition of clients from OW to ODSP. Initially, TSS staff will work with one ODSP office to introduce new practices.

By working with the Province to resolve ODSP application problems ranging from technological inadequacies and administrative difficulties, to incompatible policies and procedures, significant improvements for disabled clients will result, reducing the time and effort required to complete an application by both OW staff and clients.

Potentially, all of the more than 7,500 OW clients who are applying for ODSP will be positively affected by the outcomes of this project. The project will be evaluated to determine which practices and processes provide the most benefit to OW clients and reduce unnecessary administration.

This project will begin pending provincial agreement.



5.0 Delivering a Human Service

From experience to strength...

In our consultations, one message came through loud and clear: Ontario Works (OW) is not a client friendly program. It is hard to access, hard to get information about, hard to navigate, and overly punitive. Yet, it is supposed to provide critical income and employment supports to many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our City. It provides, albeit inadequately, for basic needs - paying rent, buying food, getting life-saving medicine.

There is no shortage of papers, reports and studies pointing out the limitations of what is, in essence, the backbone of the city's social safety net. Toronto Social Services (TSS) has for the past five years informed City Council about its concerns. Deb Matthews, the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Community and Social Services, had strong and clear opinions about what needs to change in her report to the Minister of Community and Social Services on improving OW.³⁴

One person we talked to nicely summed up the core of the issue: the OW program's administrative requirements are in the driver's seat. The rules are ruling, and too often the client's needs are secondary.

This is not how it should be. At TSS, we do not think so, clients and the community certainly do not, and neither does the Province.

This section initially focuses on actions TSS has been taking to redesign the City's OW delivery system from the ground up. Subsequently, the section identifies the key changes the Province needs to make to policies, rules and technologies that will enable TSS to build a delivery system that people in need can access, that helps people in meaningful ways, and that produces positive outcomes for clients.



5.1 A Toronto-Centred Delivery Model

Recommendation:

5.1 Within the Ontario Works legislative and regulatory framework, the Province provide Toronto with the flexibility and resources to develop service delivery models, technologies and best practices that improve program delivery and outcomes for city residents.

From a municipal perspective, Ontario Works (OW) introduced an unprecedented level of provincial micro-management of service delivery. Rules became rigid, embedded in technology. The ability to make discretionary decisions was almost eliminated with respect to the delivery of financial assistance.

Toronto Social Services (TSS) has consistently identified major issues with the prescriptiveness of the OW program, the Province's mandatory technology, and its reliance on a one-size-fits-all service delivery model. Ultimately, these issues need to be addressed by the Province to ensure:

- clients get the help they need quickly and effectively;
- municipalities have the flexibility and resources needed to deliver programs that work in their communities; and
- the Province invests in locally delivered and responsive programs that get results.

In her report, Deb Matthews noted that "There is an enormous willingness from everyone I spoke to to tackle the problems in the current social assistance framework, along with an absolute certainty that we must improve the well being of individuals requiring assistance."³⁵ At TSS, we have been tackling the problems for several years.

Toronto's OW program is the fourth largest social assistance delivery system in Canada, serving more clients a year than most provincial programs. It is now the main source of employment services and supports for the city's unemployed residents who can no longer access Employment Insurance.

Canadian and international research on effective income and employment services are clear on one thing: programs need to be designed to fit the local context. Toronto is not Barrie, nor Belleville, nor even Ottawa. The labour market is different in each community, as are the people needing services. Issues of poverty, how they affect our residents and the impact on our communities are also different.

TSS has found that its efforts to shape, manage and deliver OW are often hindered by unnecessary rules, complex policies, cumbersome technologies, rigid funding models, and a one-size-fits-all approach to program delivery. Building on its strengths as a service provider, TSS has set about remaking its service delivery system so that it works for city residents.

The starting point for this comprehensive end-to-end redesign of the City's OW delivery system was client need. The steps TSS has taken, and is taking, anticipate that the Province will support our efforts to streamline all aspects of OW, and reduce program complexity. Rather than wait, we have proceeded.

First Contact—Applying for Help...

A delivery system starts at the front door, from the first contact with clients. However, because of provincial rules and policies the first contact in OW has traditionally focused too much on the detailed and cumbersome process of figuring out whether a person is eligible or not, and focused very little on what the client needs.

Making sure clients are eligible is still critical. Through TSS' Application Centre, clients provide all the core information required to establish eligibility over the phone. Information is also collected to ensure certain client groups, such as people who are highly job ready, can be immediately directed to appropriate services (e.g., Employment Resource Centres).

Over 85% of people applying for OW in Toronto use the Application Centre. Those who cannot (people with language issues or those in crisis) are immediately referred to the local office nearest them, where they are seen on a priority basis.

For most clients, the first in-person interview can now focus on service needs rather than financial eligibility. Front line workers now have more time to talk to clients about the issues they are facing, to figure out a realistic plan to prepare for finding work, and to



identify the supports they need. The financial component, which is crucial to clients, is now simpler and much less time consuming.

Toronto has also pioneered an employment screening tool, which is used at the first in-person interview to gather critical job readiness information and identify the most appropriate employment programming options for clients.

Central to the redesign of the front end of the delivery system are the following changes to how front-line workers help clients:

- (1) *Every client will work with one worker* who, from the very first interview, is responsible for helping them with financial and employment supports.
- (2) *Distinct service paths* are being developed for clients with different needs. For instance, clients who are most job ready will be fast tracked, and will be served through Employment Resource Centres.
- (3) *A clear set of service standards and expectations* have been introduced, to ensure people using OW receive consistent services.

Effective Employment Strategies...

Over the past three years, TSS has introduced new ways of delivering employment services and supports to unemployed city residents. Section 3.0 has already looked at some of the larger issues at stake in this area. In this section, the emphasis is on concrete actions we have taken as a service provider to

implement a renewed purchase of employment services framework.

The framework is comprised of three components through which employment programs are purchased by TSS from community-based agencies and delivered to clients.

(1) Divisional Employment Services

Divisional Employment Services are the core employment programs, services and placements delivered through community-based providers address the diverse needs of OW clients across the city. They include:

- Pre-Employment Development (PED) - Clients are assisted to develop comprehensive action plans to improve their employability (e.g., life skills workshops, job search skills) and receive supports tailored to their specific needs.
- Skill Training Directly Linked to Employment - Clients are assisted through a mix of job specific skills training and practical work experience. Partnerships with employers provide job placements. Once placed, clients can receive up to six months of job retention support.
- Employment Placement - Clients are assisted with job search techniques and to identify placement opportunities. Job retention supports are available. A financial incentive is available to employers who place less job ready participants into employment.

(2) Local Initiatives

Local Initiatives consist of a mix of pre-employment, job skills training, work-placed experience, placement and retention supports. Initiatives address the needs of employers and clients within a specific geographic area.

(3) Individualized Services and Supports

Clients, with their caseworker, can choose the type of training and provider that best meet their own skill development needs.

Case Management

Case management is the core of all human service delivery systems. Often there are a series of connected reasons why people need help from OW, and therefore a range of responses is required beyond simply providing a cheque. For those facing issues such as addiction, violence and mental illness - which can prevent successful transitions to employment - the relationship between the client and caseworker can be particularly important to providing a clearer understanding of the complex issues that the client is facing.

TSS views the primary case management task to be identifying and developing service paths that reflect the specific needs of individuals based on the type and intensity of services they require and then truly *linking*, not simply referring, clients to the services they need. Case management also includes identification and co-ordination of appropriate support services from multiple agencies (e.g., child care, financial support for emergencies, mental health services for clients).

Effective case management also requires building supportive relationships with community agencies and employers to help clients over the longer term. TSS is currently developing new tools to underpin the sophisticated case management processes that must be in place to support the OW program, and to assist clients in reaching their employment goals.

“An individualized, client-centred approach to the administration of all aspects of social assistance delivery is a model that should be implemented.”

- Income Security Advocacy Centre³⁶

Key Elements of Case Management

Case Management has been defined as *“the activities undertaken by a service provider on behalf of an individual or family... facilitating their movement through the service delivery process”*.³⁷

Elements of case management include:

- outreach
- entry/screening
- assessment
- planning
- direct service
- service co-ordination
- advocacy
- monitoring and review
- exit planning.
- evaluation

5.2 A Simpler, Fairer Ontario Works Program

Recommendation:

5.2a The Province establish a task force to simplify administration and eliminate unnecessary Ontario Works rules, including proposing a fundamentally simplified application process.

5.2b The scope of this task force include reviewing and removing program policies and procedures in Ontario Works that:

- (i) limit access to the program; and*
- (ii) restrict municipal efforts to help clients prepare for, find and keep jobs.*

5.2c This task force be mandated to prepare a public report for the Minister of Community and Social Services, and to include members from municipalities and key community-based organizations.

This section responds to a number of simple questions: What is not working and who needs to change it? What else needs to be done and who needs to do it?

Deb Matthews, in her report to the Minister of Community and Social Services on improving Ontario Works (OW)³⁸, had strong and clear opinions about what needs to change, including:

- (1) “moving from the current punitive approach to establishing a supportive, client-centred approach to social assistance that addresses the real issues standing in the way of clients securing employment”; and*

- (2) “moving from a system so mired in rules around financial eligibility, to a system where the rules are simple, clear, well communicated and focused on helping people improve their circumstances and opportunities for success”.*

At Toronto Social Services (TSS), we agree with Ms. Matthews. But standing in our way, and hers, is what one policy expert has called the “managerial orientation of welfare and labour market program development in most provinces and territories.”³⁹ This refers to the tendency for other orders of government to over manage and over prescribe every aspect of program design and delivery. The result is a centralized approach that is destined to fail, something the Matthews report also acknowledged: “there is no one-size fits-all approach to helping people move from social assistance to employment.”

Simplifying Program Rules and Eliminating Restrictive Policies and Procedures

Community advocates, municipalities, the provincial auditor and Deb Matthews in her report, have expressed significant concerns with the complexity, prescriptiveness and sheer volume of the policies and rules governing the program. Two issues are obvious:

- (1) people needing assistance face unnecessary and unfair barriers including onerous requirements for information, cumbersome and complicated application processes and confusing procedures and language; and

- (2) staff time is overwhelmingly consumed by the effort it takes to comply with the incredibly numerous and detailed rules that govern almost every aspect of this program.

Vulnerable Toronto residents face as many barriers to accessing OW as they face barriers to work. It is time to remove the hundreds of unnecessary rules that govern almost every activity front line workers carry out and restrict the ability of people to get the services and supports they need.

The Matthews report has identified many areas where streamlining and simplification are needed. However, most of these have yet to be acted upon. For example, it is essential that the OW application process itself be radically simplified, such that the intent is to confirm people's circumstances and not to deter people who are eligible from applying.

But, streamlining is not enough. Rules that unreasonably restrict access must also be eliminated. (e.g., unreasonably low asset levels that force people to deplete almost all their resources before being eligible). Examples of the types of rules and policies that Toronto Social Services, and many others, have identified as adversely affecting OW clients are listed in Appendix B.

In fact, TSS has embarked on a wholesale redesign of the OW delivery model for Toronto. The Province, listening to clients, delivery agents, and communities, has also begun to rethink the kind of program OW should be, and to start the process of simplifying and streamlining the rules that govern the program. The work of the task force recommended here will be critical to supporting both the City's and Province's efforts to make OW work more effectively for low income residents of the province.

No Cause for Cheer

The TD Bank in its September 2005 report on OW recognized the impact of program entry limitations. Referring to the large decline in caseloads that has now ended, the report suggested that if people are being denied access, this is hardly a *"cause for cheer. Rather it raises the spectre of one group of individuals being sheltered from the worst aspects of poverty, at the price of the growing exclusion and isolation of another."*⁴⁰

5.3 Effective Technologies and Systems

Taking Action:

The City of Toronto is working with the Province to determine how the “bolt-on” technical solutions for managing key Ontario Works business functions developed by the City can be used to improve the technology environment in which Ontario Works is delivered.

City of Toronto staff are working with the Province to facilitate the automated exchange of information between the City’s and Province’s systems so the City can fully realize the benefits of its automated solutions.

City of Toronto staff will continue to take a lead role in developing technical solutions to support the delivery of the Ontario Works program, and explore appropriate ways in which the Province can support this work.

In 2001, the Province introduced the Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT) to support the delivery and management of the Ontario Works (OW) program throughout the province. The intent was to leverage technology to free up caseworker time for client service. Unfortunately, this has not been the result. Rather than improving the administration of OW, SDMT has significant limitations, which have been discussed in detail elsewhere.⁴¹

Nonetheless, SDMT will continue to be the technological platform for the delivery of OW well into the future. The question is: What can be done to make it work better in Toronto?

SDMT is a provincially controlled technology, with limited input from municipalities. Ensuring future changes effectively support the delivery of OW, the Province needs to view delivery agents, and particularly Toronto, as full partners in the development and implementation of changes to SDMT. While the Province continues to make improvements to SDMT, significant issues remain.

Since the launch of SDMT in 2001, Toronto Social Services (TSS) has aggressively identified and developed sophisticated technical systems and solutions that have been essential to the division’s ability to manage Toronto’s OW delivery system.

These “made-in-TSS” systems provide technical solutions that could potentially “bolt-on” to SDMT. These include: a comprehensive management information system; case management solutions related to family support, fraud investigations and employment assistance; and administrative support systems such as schedulers and tracking tools. Many of these solutions have the potential for wider application across the Province.

While it is critical that the Province continue to improve SDMT, it is also essential that the systems developed by TSS are supported by the Province. This will require that the Province recognize the cost of the resources TSS is deploying and work in partnership with TSS to support its ongoing efforts to develop systems that complement and strengthen SDMT.

5.4 Increasing Access to Ontario Works

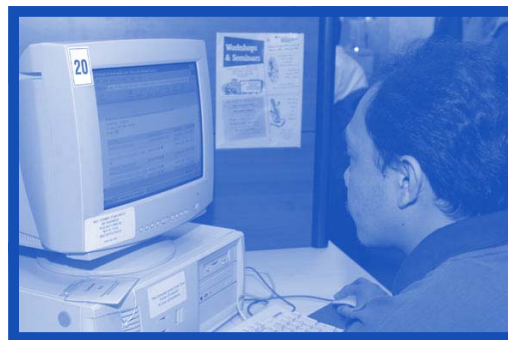
Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will continue to explore the use of new technologies and new approaches to improve access to the Ontario Works program.

Toronto Social Services' (TSS') Application Centre provides a basis for exploring how new mainstream technologies, such as web-based application taking, can be used to provide clients with more access points to apply for Ontario Works (OW) and to obtain information and services.

However, TSS needs to go further in providing access choices driven by client needs rather than the demands of the program, choices that include:

- (1) **Client initiated and directed applications** - People are telling us that they want to be able to apply electronically for assistance as well as self-select the supports and services they need.
- (2) **Community applications** - For many of our clients navigating the maze of government programs is impossible without the support of community agencies. Whether it is because of language, culture differences, or physical or mental health related issues, clients turn to these agencies for support.



TSS will explore how secure web portals can be used to support new ways of gaining entry to OW and to getting information and services. Such an approach is consistent with the City's E-government strategy, as well as the City's 311 initiative. Potentially, access can be provided to critical program information, an on-line application, automated information, and in some instances direct access to key programs and supports - including linking to other government income and employment programs such as Employment Insurance.

Increasing client access does not mean off-loading our delivery responsibilities on to clients or community service providers.

The approach discussed here is intended to improve client access and support caseworkers in more efficiently and effectively delivering services to people in their own communities, while retaining TSS' stewardship role as an important program management priority.

5.5 Engaging Communities

Taking Action:

As part of the ongoing evolution of the City's social assistance delivery system, Toronto Social Services will:

- (i) bring together community leaders, advocates and organizations working with Ontario Works clients to determine the most effective ways in which communities can inform and help to shape the delivery of Ontario Works in Toronto; and
- (ii) continue to seek input from people who use OW on ways to make the Ontario Works program work better through focus groups, community forums, user surveys, and local advisory committees.

Relationships with clients, service deliverers, advocates and communities are critical to the success of any locally based service delivery system. People who access Ontario Works (OW), agencies that work with clients, advocates, and broader communities need to be heard, listened to and engaged in the delivery of a vital service such as OW.

This Action Plan was informed and enriched by consultations with a broad range of stakeholders: OW clients, representatives of community organizations, Toronto Social Services (TSS) staff, staff in other City divisions, and intergovernmental partners.

To ensure our services are effective, accessible and accountable, it is critical that TSS meaningfully engage policy and program advocates and social planning organizations

whose mandates are to work for a better, fairer and more responsive social safety net.

Renewing Relationships

In the broader community, and among agencies and organizations advocating on behalf of vulnerable people, social assistance systems evoke strong reactions. Policies and practices are carefully scrutinized as to their impacts on clients, as well as to their fairness and adequacy. Often, both are found wanting, and on both fronts.

TSS is itself a delivery agent. While it does not establish, and cannot change, OW regulations or policies or benefit rates, it is the face of social assistance in Toronto. At the same time, TSS is also an advocate. In both cases, TSS has a responsibility to the whole community, and is accountable as a City delivered service.

The implementation of OW and the program's focus has strained TSS' relationship with many in the community. But this Action Plan, and TSS' ongoing advocacy around rates and polices, represent a clear commitment to changes in OW and employment services that will benefit the city.

Renewed efforts are required by TSS to rebuild relationships with those who work with, and on behalf of, vulnerable people and communities in this city. As a first step, TSS will bring together community leaders, advocates and organizations working with Ontario Works clients to determine the most effective ways in which communities can inform and help to shape the delivery of Ontario Works in Toronto. The aim will be to make sure that communities have regular access to TSS,

and can have input into decisions and practices that affect service delivery.

Further, TSS is committed to an implementation strategy for this Action Plan that is inclusive and that involves many community sectors. The final section of this report outlines the approach being proposed. In fact, the success of this Plan relies on a concerted, collaborative effort by all of those who work on behalf of OW clients.

Engaging Clients

OW clients who we talked to through the Action Plan consultations told us how important it was to have the opportunity to be heard. People said we need to:

“continue to have opportunities like these consultations to voice opinions”

“provide environments for support groups where clients can share ideas and information, network, get ideas, and decrease their sense of isolation”

They also clarified what needed to be done to improve OW and told us they want to be part of any effort to re-shape social assistance in Toronto.

Since 2000, TSS has conducted many focus groups and surveys aimed at getting client opinions about service quality and program effectiveness. In 2005, client advisory groups were introduced in TSS districts or offices to help improve local service delivery.

TSS will continue to use focus groups, community forums and local advisory committees to engage clients in the delivery of OW in Toronto. At the same time, the Province must recognize the importance of client consultations and support TSS’ efforts to include clients in the actions we are taking to improve service delivery at the local level.

“A powerful tool by which to challenge stereotyping of recipients is to meaningfully involve them in decisions regarding the design and delivery of the programs that directly impact on them.”

- Income Security Advocacy Centre⁴²

Collaborating with Our Delivery Partners

TSS is also working with our community-based delivery partners to ensure that the services they provide on our behalf are effective, that the agencies we work with are clear about TSS program mandates and required outcomes, and that the division’s program development and design efforts are informed by their experiences and feedback.

Through 2004 and 2005, TSS consulted with over 180 community agency representatives as part of our redesign of employment programs. On an ongoing basis, TSS staff work closely with our direct delivery partners and staff from other orders of government to both serve individual clients and to develop and plan better service strategies and practices. TSS will continue to seek input from, and exchange information with, the agencies who work with us to make sure programs delivered to clients achieve the results we mutually seek.

5.6 Program Stewardship—A Balanced Approach

Taking Action:

Toronto Social Services will work with the Province to develop effective and cost efficient client financial review processes that protect Ontario Works program integrity and fit with the Ontario Works program's broader mandate to support people to become independent.

Through the Provincial legislation, regulations and policies that govern Ontario Works (OW), a high priority has been placed on protecting program integrity. From the first contact with clients, many of the activities and steps taken by front line staff involve verifying client information and confirming eligibility. And thereafter, client contacts often involve monitoring eligibility and ensuring benefits levels are correct.

But the same contacts also fulfill other important purposes: determining needs, providing information and services, and helping clients to find, get and keep jobs. This is really the everyday business of serving clients, and involves multiple tasks such as tracking people's employment earnings, recording changes in living circumstances (new address and/or rental amounts), and helping clients to acquire other sources of income (e.g., child support).

In fact, the magnitude and scope of these tasks has increased considerably under OW, compounded by program rules and technological systems that are complex and time consuming. It is in this context that issues related to program stewardship and program integrity must be understood.

Toronto Social Services (TSS) has always taken its program stewardship responsibilities seriously by making certain that it has in place effective measures to ensure that people who receive benefits are, and remain, eligible for them. But given the context noted above, the division is increasingly concerned about the need to maintain an appropriate balance between ensuring people remain eligible for the benefits they receive and the compelling need to assist people to stabilize their lives and move forward.

One area where improvements are possible is the Province's current policies governing annual financial reviews. Conducting regular financial eligibility reviews with clients is necessary in any social assistance program, and has long been a priority in many municipalities, including Toronto. However in 1999, the Province introduced the Consolidated Verification Process (CVP), which mandates that every client on OW for more than a year must undergo an annual financial review, in essence re-qualifying for benefits.

There are a number of important issues with respect to CVP, which are briefly discussed in the box on p. 86. In summary, CVP requires meeting with clients when there is limited benefit to do so from a service or program integrity point of view. Our community partners have also told us that the process causes unnecessary anxiety for clients with respect to maintaining their benefits in an already restrictive program. And it requires municipalities to invest significant resources to qualify for a separate level of program funding that is inadequate to cover costs.

At this point in OW's evolution, it is time to re-examine the Province's approach to annual client financial reviews. These

reviews need to be based on criteria that yield results in Toronto, that are cost effective and that make sure all client contacts make sense, and have a useful purpose. The issue is not the frequency with which reviews are undertaken, but their effectiveness. Targeted funding in this area should be eliminated, and the true costs of maintaining program integrity should be recognized through core funding for program administration.

Finally, there must be an appropriate balance between ensuring program integrity and actively assisting clients to get access to the services and supports they need to become independent. Therefore, how and when clients' financial situations are reviewed must be looked at in the context of the OW program's broader mandate.

TSS' View on the Consolidated Verification Process (CVP)

CVP uses a formula based on risk factors to determine which clients will be interviewed and how frequently. Toronto Social Services' experience is that these factors are questionably effective in Toronto as they do not reflect local conditions (e.g., high rent is a risk factor but nearly all OW clients in Toronto have high rent in comparison to OW shelter rates). Thus, reviews of thousands of OW cases each year result in very limited changes to eligibility or entitlement for the vast majority.

Second, the Province ties targeted funding to the completion of CVP interviews, often resulting in people unnecessarily going through more than one review a year (e.g., in 2004, 1,600 clients had their financial situation reviewed multiple times, again with little positive effect on program integrity).

Further, CVP as it now exists is not appropriately funded. In 2005, TSS conducted over 40,000 reviews to access the maximum funding available from the Province. From a cost-benefit perspective, the Province's incentive funds do not cover the cost of completing the required reviews.

5.7 The Importance of Research and Evaluation

Recommendation:

5.7a Consistent with both widespread international practice and the recommendations of the Matthews Report, the Province make a legislative commitment to the evaluation of social assistance programs and policies.

5.7b The Province establish an Evaluation Fund so that future social assistance reforms better reflect evidence-based policies and practices.

5.7c Recognizing the quality and range of research that has been undertaken by Toronto Social Services, the Province provide the City with ongoing funding for research and evaluation to support the delivery of the Ontario Works program in Toronto.

Increasingly, in jurisdictions across North America and Europe, changes to social programs are guided by evidence-based research, drawing on local experiences and emerging best practices.

In countries that have implemented far reaching social assistance reforms, such as the US and UK, ongoing research and evaluation have played a key role in shaping program design. Despite extensive changes to the social assistance system over the past decade in Ontario, there is limited

research into the outcomes of social assistance reform in Ontario, as the Matthews Report recently confirmed.

What research has been completed, has been undertaken by municipalities, community agencies or academics. Toronto Social Services has conducted a number of studies in an attempt to measure the impact of reforms and identify service and delivery issues. There has been a distinct absence of research at the provincial level, and there has been no support provided to do relevant research.

A better understanding of the impacts and outcomes of policies is necessary to improve services to clients. Only rigorous research and evaluation can determine what works, what does not, and whether resources have been used effectively and efficiently.

There is also a growing body of literature that demonstrates the value of *local* evaluation, which takes into account that caseloads, programs and outcomes differ significantly from place to place. In Ontario, the unique context of local delivery means that there is a similarly unique need for locally-specific evaluation.

It is now time that the Province support research on social assistance programs in Ontario. An effective way to do so would be to establish an evaluation fund through which municipalities, in partnership with academic, community or other agencies, could receive funds to conduct relevant research and evaluation.

6.0 From Action Plan to Action

In closing...

Recommendation:

- 6.0a Toronto Social Services develop an implementation strategy for taking action on the recommendations contained in Systems of Survival, Systems of Support.*
- 6.0b To develop a successful, grounded and community-centred implementation strategy, Toronto Social Services will engage stakeholders across the city by:*
- (i) working with community agencies, partners and clients to develop and implement a strategy for advocating to the federal, provincial and City governments to make the changes called for in the Action Plan;*
 - (ii) holding a series of focused forums with interested and involved stakeholders and communities to advance specific parts of the Action Plan (e.g., development of an employment services plan); and*
 - (iii) strengthening and integrating service planning and service delivery partnerships with City divisions and at the provincial and federal levels.*

Over the last decade and more, the “large forces” described earlier have created new social risks, such as precarious employment, long term unemployment and social exclusion. More people are finding that even a job does not keep them out of poverty. And supports that used to be available to help people, like Employment Insurance, are increasingly inaccessible. These new risks have created new pressures and challenges everywhere, but especially in large urban centres like Toronto.

Currently, over the course of a year, nearly one in ten people in Toronto rely on OW at some point. Social assistance, an essential part of the city’s systems of survival and support, has been transformed from a system of last resort to one of first, last and only resort for growing numbers of vulnerable people in Toronto.

This Action Plan started with a positive conviction: that OW must be a program that includes rather than excludes people, and that it must support rather than stigmatize the people who use it. That conviction underpins the recommendations and actions that are proposed in this report.

Systems of Survival, Systems of Support, while it focuses on OW, forms part of the City’s broader efforts to respond to the new realities of poverty and employment and the new challenges they pose. The recommendations and actions proposed are essential to improving the quality of life for all residents and the ability of the City to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Indeed, in many ways, to maintain and enhance social cohesion, the two are inseparable.

As a result, the Action Plan identifies a number of longer term recommendations that will create new systems of survival and support better suited to the diverse needs of Toronto's low income population. These systems will ensure that benefits, services and supports for low income people are available, adequate, and appropriate. In short, Ontario Works in Toronto will provide more, not less.

Recognizing that for many of those who turn to OW there is nowhere else to go, the plan suggests a number of actions which will significantly improve the well-being of vulnerable residents and which can be rapidly implemented. To ensure that social assistance is a true "system of survival", for example, it is imperative that basic needs and shelter rates are significantly increased to reflect the true costs of housing, utilities, healthy diets and participation in everyday community life.

Increases are also needed to asset limits and allowances such as transportation and dental to support clients to make successful and permanent transitions from social assistance to independence. There also needs to be recognition that it is unwise and unsustainable to fund an income redistribution program such as OW based on local property taxes.

In addition to improving the systems of survival, there is a need to expand the systems of support available to social assistance recipients. New services and greater service capacity are required to support the goals of sustainable work and steady

incomes. As a result of the "large forces", the City of Toronto, through TSS, is now the primary service manager for employment services and supports to Toronto's most vulnerable unemployed residents. Essentially, TSS has become *the* employment program for many in the city. And yet this role is largely unrecognized.



The recent announcement of a Labour Market Development Agreement and a Labour Market Partnership Agreement for Ontario indicates there is a willingness to transfer greater responsibilities to orders of government that are closest and most responsive to the issues. This progress is welcome and needs to continue.

The next step is to more specifically recognize the role that the City of Toronto and Toronto Social Services have played and must continue to play in addressing employment needs in the city.

A key recommendation therefore is that Toronto Social Services, on behalf of the City, take responsibility for leading the planning, management and delivery of employment services and supports for the city's unemployed and vulnerable residents. This entails looking at ways low income people can gain better access to the education, training, employment and job retention supports they require to obtain and sustain decent jobs. This new role needs to be recognized in the form of increased resources and flexibility.

As part of this transformation, greater co-ordination and integration of services across the city is vital. Otherwise, the promise of increased access will not be realized. TSS and other human service agencies in the city will continue to seek out more effective ways of working together so that services are available to those in need, regardless of the service door they enter. To this end, the plan recommends greater integration of application processes and joint service planning for mutual clients.

To transform OW into a more effective and appropriate program for the city, changes to the program itself are also clearly necessary. It bears repeating that Toronto is the fourth largest social assistance delivery agency in the country. Policies and programs must reflect the unique size, diversity and turnover of Toronto's caseload and the different challenges these create. In particular, there is a need for a service delivery model and technologies that support a truly Toronto-centred program. It is also critical that there be a renewed commitment from the federal and provincial governments to the next steps outlined in this plan.

Systems of Survival, Systems of Support is an ambitious and broad ranging Plan. It was meant to be. What is now required is an implementation strategy, developed in collaboration with TSS' service delivery partners, that will set out a plan and process for moving from Action Plan to action.

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Appendix A—Action Plan Consultations

Client Consultations:

Throughout July and August of 2005, four client consultations were held at Metro Hall and the North York, Scarborough and Etobicoke Civic Centres. A total of 81 clients participated in the sessions.

Staff Consultations:

During March and April of 2005 a number of consultations were held with Toronto Social Services frontline caseworkers and managers. A total of 30 staff participated in these focus groups.

Intergovernmental Consultation:

In September 2005 TSS met with representatives from the Intergovernmental Committee for Labour Force and Economic Development in Toronto (ICE). Representatives from the following federal, provincial and municipal government agencies attended:

- Service Canada (formerly Human Resource Skills Development Canada)
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada
- Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration
- Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
 - Apprenticeship Branch
 - Access to Professions and Trades
 - Job Connect
- Ministry of Economic Development and Trade

Community Agency Consultations:

Throughout the early Fall of 2005, five district Community Agency Consultations were held with a total of 31 agencies represented.

TSS also hosted a separate session with broader Community Agency representatives participating. Representatives from an additional 10 agencies participated in this session.

The full list of community agencies participating in the consultations follows:

- Adventure Place/Better Beginnings Now
- Alpha-Toronto
- Arab Community Centre of Toronto
- AWIC Community and Social Services
- Catholic Cross-Cultural Services
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
- Centre for Information and Community Services
- Chinese Family Services of Ontario
- City Adult Learning Centre
- Community and Social Planning Council of Toronto
- Daily Bread Food Bank
- Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services
- Evergreen Youth Services
- Flemingdon Community Legal Services
- Income Security Advocacy Committee
- Jessie's Centre for Teenagers
- John Howard Society of Toronto
- Lakeshore Area Multiservice Project
- Massey Centre
- Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training

-
- Native Child and Family Services of Toronto
 - New Experiences for Women
 - ON TRACK
 - Oriole Community Services Association
 - Pape Adolescent Resource Centre – Children’s Aid Society of Toronto
 - Progress Career Planning Centre
 - Red Door Family Shelter
 - Rexdale Youth Employment Resource Centre
 - St. Christopher House
 - St. John the Compassionate Mission
 - St. Stephen’s Community House
 - Somali Immigrant Women Association
 - South Asian Family Support Services
 - The Centre - CARES
 - Times Change Women’s Employment Service
 - Toronto Training Board
 - Tropicana Community Services / Alternative Youth Centre for Employment
 - United Way of Greater Toronto
 - YMCA of Greater Toronto
 - YWCA Toronto
 - York Community Services

Appendix B—Sample Ontario Works Rules & Policies

Ontario Works Policy	Impact on Clients
Verification of employment related expenses and securing a job*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> excessively detailed requirements for verification of Employment Related Expenses (e.g., Metropass) puts roadblocks in the way of participation could put a client's job at risk if they are required to produce an employer's letter
Vehicle asset limits of \$5,000.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> penalizes clients who need transportation to obtain or maintain employment. vehicles with value of \$5,000 or less are usually older and less reliable raising maintenance issues and costs for clients
Co-residency investigations in all cases where there are non family members residing with clients*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> when not related to eligibility, intrusive for people not applying may put residency at risk
Property ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a client unable to obtain documentation may be found ineligible even though circumstances are not in their control
Medical transportation - all transportation expenditures over \$ 15.00 must be verified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> causes unnecessary anxiety for already medically distressed clients
Overpayments accrued prior to SDMT, and/or in other jurisdictions*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> administrative errors may be the cause and not the client's fault
SDMT-generated Letters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> letters intimidate clients due to threatening bureaucratic language
Loans as income policy*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> intrusive repetitive requests for information causing frustration and heightened client anxiety
Clients under 18 reapplying for assistance due to unjustified absences from school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regulation can affect eligibility of a 16/17-year-old person who has a legitimate need for social assistance results in increased homelessness, and youth at risk

* Processes not supported by provincial Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT)





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