

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM: SECTOR IMPLICATIONS, SECTOR PERSPECTIVES

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To the many in the non-profit sector who have long known and admired the progressive work of Frances Lankin, it will come as no surprise that the Report on social assistance that she issued recently with Munir Sheikh proposes an informed and insightful strategy to initiate and sustain movement on fundamental reforms to Ontario's badly underperforming social assistance system.

As most will already know, the Report proposes a simplified, unified and much more supportive social assistance program to serve those who now receive Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The consolidated program would be delivered by municipalities or First Nations.¹

While heavily focused on improving sustainable employment outcomes, the program would guarantee income security for those who cannot work. In the longer run disability, child and many health benefits would be moved outside social assistance and made available to all low-income Ontarians to promote equity and make it easier to transition from social assistance.

The demographic groups among those with lived experience in the system, and agencies working with and for them, will have their own assessments of how the individual recommendations affect their particular circumstances, and may well critique elements of the Report and put forward further reforms they see as essential to meet their particular needs. For the sector as a whole, however, the reform proposals can be seen as a sophisticated blend of progressive ideas with pragmatic calculations of what will maximize the odds of real progress being made on an issue that governments are pervasively and perennially loathe to touch.

At the same time, the Report contains enough references to the corrosive effects of income inequality (see pages 18, 21, and 112 (citing the work of Stiglitz), 113 and 130 (citing the work of Wilkinson), racism (see pages 44 and 118), disadvantaged neighbourhoods (see pages 129 and 132) and a highly inhospitable labour market (see page 112 and also pages 66-67 and 118)) to ground the work of those advocates who wish to keep the pressure on for larger-scale, faster movement on an anti-poverty, anti-inequality agenda.

The purpose of this commentary is not to assess the specifics of the proposed reforms to social assistance, on which agencies in the sector may diverge, but instead to highlight certain programmatic and structural proposals in the Report that present significant opportunities for those in the sector, including a number to which the sector could usefully bring a collective focus.

¹ In the Report, and in this note, the term 'municipality' means the 37 Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs), and in northern Ontario, the 10 District Social Services Administration Boards

The emphasis the Report places on providing employment services to persons on ODSP will create new opportunities for agencies with expertise in working with persons with disabilities. Ideally, a revised program will be designed to favour and resource those agencies that can provide post-employment supports and mentoring to clients and can also help employers make the cultural and other workplace adaptations necessary to create a supportive working environment for new groups of employees.

Similarly, if the province accepts the Report's advice, based in part on the Province's own Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), on moving to also better meet the needs of other particularly disadvantaged groups (in the PRS the other groups are immigrants, women, single mothers, Aboriginal peoples and racialized groups), agencies with expertise in serving those groups may also find their skills increasingly called upon. In this regard, the reference to a variety of possible equity lenses (page 122) has the potential to drive much needed attention to ways to reach and serve the most disadvantaged (see also pages 16, 102 and 119 on the critical need for data on race and other indicia of disadvantage in Ontario).

As well, the Report's strong support for the integration of social assistance services with child care and housing services should offer important opportunities for agencies that are already taking – or can be positioned to take – a leadership role in providing these kinds of wraparound services (see pages 19, 46, 58-59, 124 and 166-67).

Along with these new or enhanced opportunities, there will be challenges in working in a system that will increasingly make funding decisions using outcomes-based performance measures (see pages 61, 99-102 and 167-8). These are already in use to some extent in Ontario, but increased reliance on them will require increased sophistication in bidding on contract opportunities and increased capacity to deal with more complex service, reporting and auditing activities.

Indeed, this may be an area for early attention from the sector as a whole. Outcome measures are a sound way to drive and finance service delivery priorities – in this case, both providing services to those with multiple barriers and moving recipients of all abilities into sustainable employment – but they can disadvantage smaller and less-well established service providers. This disadvantage flows not from an inability to provide effective and efficient services, but instead from possibly lacking the resources or experience needed to write the kinds of proposals required to win contracts and to track and then report on complex outcomes.

To address this, a priority for the sector may be working with government to help ensure not only that the outcomes measures make sense in the real world (see page 101), but also that there is a level playing field in a more complex contracting environment. This latter goal can be advanced by working with government at the outset to design a contracting system that can be utilized fairly by small, nimble and tight-to-the-community agencies, as well as those which are large and more distanced from the community with sophisticated bid-writing and contract administration capacities. It can also be advanced by providing ongoing resources and training to smaller agencies to help with these challenging tasks.

Because of the restrictive nature of its mandate, the Commission does not say much about the needs of the sector itself.² As a result, there could be value, when engaging with government, in referring back to the overview – and strong endorsement – of those needs in the 2008 *Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*.

Heavily influenced by the work of Frances Lankin in her *Blue Ribbon Report*, and by her ongoing advice to the co-chairs throughout that review, the Roots Report outlines in some detail the steps government should take to ensure the viability of the sector. In this regard, see in particular Volume I, pages 315-323, which covers issues ranging from core, stable and multi-year funding through to funding for collaboration, planning and innovation to ways in which the funding processes of government (and across governments) should be streamlined and simplified.

In the same vein, the sector may wish to remind the government of the advice to government in the Roots Report on the critical importance of responding to a broken social context by working actively – and investing – to build and strengthen communities (see in particular Volume I, pages 297-301, 311-15, 324-26 and 346-52). This approach is as important to supporting the resilience and sustained success of social assistance recipients as it is to instilling a sense of hope, opportunity and optimism to combat violence among disadvantaged youth.

Another area of possible attention for the sector as a whole is the Report's call for more research and evaluation. These are important goals, but it is also important that the right things be measured and researched and that agencies be provided with the time and/or resources to be effective participants. With regard to evaluations in particular, it is important that they be designed to be collaborative and supportive rather than intrusive and punitive. As well, it is important that evaluations seek to identify and share best practices and highlight areas in need of improvement. Given this, the sector as a whole may find it particularly valuable to be closely involved in designing the evaluation framework and policies (see generally Roots at pages 323-4).

Another opportunity for the sector as a whole lies in the potential to offer employment opportunities and volunteer placements for recipients who cannot find employment. Such placements could help agencies get closer to the needs of their communities while also helping recipients gain additional skills and experience. This potential is significant since the Report proposes that all recipients, including those now on ODSP, have a “pathways plan” focused on employment or community participation, and that at some point all face financial consequences for failing to fulfill their plan.

Given the overwhelming emphasis in the Report on employment, it is vital in this regard that the government be reminded that the Commission, in emphasizing employment, frequently includes the recognition of community participation as an acceptable alternative (see pages 23, 52-53, 100 and 121). It is in providing opportunities for that participation that agencies can help the neediest recipients maintain their benefits, and expand their own reach, helping recipients prepare for employment, or, at least, and importantly, break their social isolation.

² Although the Report's reference to the reality that moves to outcomes-based funding must be supported by core funding is important (see page 101).

Finally, while it is significant that the Report recommends the inclusion of community agencies in a stakeholder advisory panel (see page 105), the sector may wish to argue for inclusion in the Provincial Coordinating Council called for by the Report at pages 104-05. This Council would bring together the Province, the municipalities and First Nations to plan and oversee the social assistance system, and it would seem that those objectives would be furthered significantly if representatives of those involved in on-the-ground delivery were at the table as full members.

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