



OFFICIAL REPORT TO THE

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

Introduction

The Manitoulin-Sudbury District Board is pleased to have participated in the focus group sessions that were held during the month of August 2011. The report is presented in two folds: Clients / Participants by area and staff. In order to respect the comments made by clients, very little editing was done. You will find below the feedback received from both groups.

Background:

The Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB) is a municipal service management organization created by the provincial government to oversee the local planning, coordination and delivery of a range of services and programs divested to the municipal order of government. The specific programs our DSB is responsible for are: Ontario Works, Social Housing, Emergency Medical Services (Land Ambulance), and Child Care services.

District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) are unique to Northern Ontario. The Manitoulin-Sudbury DSB is one of Ontario's ten DSSABs. They, along with thirty-seven County, Upper Tier or Regional governments make up what is often referred to as Ontario's forty-seven Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs).

The Manitoulin-Sudbury DSB is responsible for the delivery of its services to the residents of the districts of Manitoulin and Sudbury. The DSB has a fourteen member Board of Directors that consists of municipally elected officials from the Districts of Manitoulin and Sudbury 18 member municipalities and Territories Without Municipal Organization (TWOMO). The districts cover a total of 45,000 square kilometers. The Manitoulin-Sudbury DSB does not include the City of Greater Sudbury which is the only CMSM not situated in Southern Ontario.



We held a client / participant focus session in each of our 4 catchment area. We also held a session for staff. The sessions were held on the following dates:

- Little Current:** Aug 8, 2011
- Warren:** Aug 10, 2011
- Chapleau:** Aug 17, 2011
- Espanola:** Aug 19, 2011
- DSB –OW staff:** Aug 18, 2011

We allocated 2 hours for each session. This was certainly not enough. For a few we went an extra ½ hour. Out of respect of time, the sessions ended but were not completed. The session for staff was fully completed.

Clients / Participants:

Total Caseload (as of July 31/11): 442

Total of Invitations sent: 290 (66% of total caseload)

Attendance:

Little Current: 10

Warren: 7

Chapleau: 13

Espanola: 31

A total of 61 participants attended. 21% of people invited or 14% of total caseload.

DSB –OW Staff:

Case Managers: 7

Integrated Program Assistant: 4

Family Support Worker: 1

Ontario Work Program Supervisor: 1

Director of Integrated Social Services: 1

The following is a summary of comments / opinions presented during our sessions:

Key Issues

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports To Employment

- a) What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?**

Little Current:

- Have regular contacts, questionnaires directed to employers
- Meeting with employers / Networking
- Nepotism barriers
- Have wage subsidy programs. Better educate employers on the advantages of hiring people on OW.
- Transportation issues on Manitoulin Island
- Have a client portal
- Have a resume data bank ex: Workopolis.
- Work in partnership with Employment Options (Cambrian College)

Warren:

- Wage subsidies to be modified to be accommodate employers
- Webpage like monster.ca to link employers & clients (database)
- Help client's with contracts for possible employment
- Self employment -deductions dollar for dollar hurt clients

Chapleau:

- Job training – teach people skills to put them in the work force
- Job shadowing / placement
- Job fair – different business show what they have
- Education / grade 12 diploma – employers are looking for this
- Everybody has requirements to participate– school – looking for work
- Education important but properly assessing skills is just as important
- Go to the employer / small businesses, identify weaknesses in businesses to promote clients with employers and match clients with employers
- Have something to bring the best out people, skills wise
- Have an indecent advocate available to clients
- Better communication / working relationship with other levels of government federal and municipal

Espanola:

- Skill and availability database should be set up for employers to access.
Job matching (job bank in reverse)
- Job Fair with local employers
- Employer cannot get a hold of clients without phones. A central answering service to get into contact with clients.
- Transportation is a major barrier
- Casual/Temporary job pool
- Employers are getting frustrated with clients for handing in resumes every month - alternate to the job search form/requirement to show clients are actively searching for employment

Staff:

- Separate system / software created that would capture client skills and needs of local employers (at a local level)
- Increase wage subsidy or add incentives for employers to hire such as tax breaks
- Provide Job Coaches to assist clients once hired with obstacles they may encounter to help with job retention

b) Can you suggest ways in which the skills of people receiving social assistance could be better developed to meet the needs of employers?

Little Current:

- Upgrading (GED)
- Apprenticeships, short-term CO-OP, short-term courses, on the job training
- Tourism (seasonal) work not enough to sustain, employers hire students because they are easier to boss around, work for less pay and more hours.
- When trying to get more education, not enough people interested for courses, so they postpone or cancel course.
- More child care resources for children with special needs.

Warren:

- Help with obtaining drivers license, car insurance
- Continue & get more workshops to help client's obtain more skills
- More accessible labor market information to educate client's on future employment opportunities, employment sectors with future demand for skilled employees
- More bulletin boards or booklets with labor market information

Chapleau:

- Upgrading the skills, technology is fast and always changing
- To bring people to the level required for employment
- Advertising of employers who are looking for someone (short term placements)
- More in house training ex: heavy machinery courses
- Helping clients get their driver's license

Espanola:

- More training courses, job shadowing or placements
- Pay for drivers licenses, fines etc.
- Help getting grade 12
- Basic computer class, Second language courses
- Pay for online learning
- Job coaching
- Help pay for vehicle expenses such as repairs when employment is secured

Staff:

- Focus on basic skills such as life skills/communication skills/appropriate dress & hygiene/ basic math skills
- In addition to literacy screening applicants should be given basic computer skills assessment
- Be able to pay for social insurance cards/health cards and birth certificate replacements and driver's licenses

c) What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access?**Little Current:**

- Create a webpage (portal) ex: Assign a user name
 - Job list (applied for)
 - List of upcoming courses
 - List of completed courses
 - Completed to-date checklist
- On going support for:
 - Resume writing skills, cover letter skills
 - Electronic resume, communicate via email
- Have a Drop-in Centre / Support group

Warren:

- Make ERE a monthly benefit to help with job searches, interviews etc.
- ESUB \$253.00 is not enough for school items
- Have difference funding for school items and work items

Chapleau:

- Internet access – having your own portal, improving communications
- Electronic communication
- Offer courses through a portal – online learning
- More funds / money for educational purposes
- Extra funds added to the monthly assistance to help with job searching
- Leniency when it comes to getting job, no letters from employers to verify jobs. Respect privacy of individuals

Espanola:

- Help contact employer for clients with specific skills (job developer)

Staff:

- Reasonable cost of employment related items should be paid in full
- Less documentation required for small items (such as work boots)/more flexibility for issuing costs

- Review the verification process for when a client finds work and requires assistance. Respect client's privacy
- Benefit for telephone bill/costs – basic phone charges
- Remove 3 month period for exemption
- Centralized phone # for employers to contact for potential applicants
- Transportation costs for employment should be covered.
- Connection to job bank

d) What would improve services to people receiving social assistance who face multiple barriers to employment?

Little Current:

- More money/ subsidy for informal child care
- Clients to access webpage (portal)
- Pay transportation or cost of gas so clients can look for work

Warren:

- Have someone that is qualified and knowledgeable to help apply for pardons
- Formal child care funding / subsidy in rural areas for everyday use such as job search & shift work
- The child care agencies in the school close for the summer and parents must find other sources of child care for summer months.
- Counselling should be more accessible in rural areas
- Have family housing and not just single unit housing in our area

Chapleau:

- Pay for pardons from criminal records
- Job developer available > once you are job ready / job matching
- Better or childcare available
- Better or more social housing available ex: family units
- Pay for pardons from criminal records
- Job developer once you are job ready / job matching
- Childcare and housing issues
- Make available > Basic life skills and essential skills for employment
- More information on Apprentiship and post secondary education

Espanola:

- Assistance with obtaining a drivers license and vehicle repairs
- Proper clothing and grooming
- Help people with life skills, prepare for job interviews, dress for success
- Child care for children with special needs, parent relief
- Supply with list of providers, qualified for children with special needs
- Financial help with pardons

Staff:

- Support through a community worker/mental health worker/job coach and funding for the staff required
- Joint consent with other organizations in order to co-ordinate services to better help the client
- Increased rates/affordable housing/transportation costs for employment
- More staff required for services outside of social assistance such as mental health, as wait lists are very long

e) How can Ontario's social assistance system better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or the treatment or rehabilitation they may need?**Little Current:**

- Have a list of employers that are wheel chair accessible (link on portal)
- Targeted job search / job developer to assist with employer recruiting

Warren:

- Lack of doctors to help apply for ODSP
- Medical travel allowance of .41cents/km is not enough
- Process for paying for medical trips is difficult for clients as they must come up with the money before the appointments and then be reimbursed with suitable proof of employment
- OW should have vans to travel clients to medical appointments

Chapleau:

- Have an assessment / evaluation completed at application
- Self disclosure of disabilities
- Helping people realize what they can and can't do
- Marketing of clients to employers
- Easier access to occupational health services
- Having health professionals travel to our rural community

Espanola:

- Database to screen people with specific disabilities for specific employment.

Staff:

- Central portal such as 211 service where clients can have access to referrals to mental health, child care, VON etc. This would also offer better service co-ordination

- More health professionals for Northern Ontario – for ODSP applications/diagnosis of barriers etc. Currently a lot of clients do not have a family doctor so having ODSP applications completed is very frustrating for all parties

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

a) How should social assistance rates be determined?

Little Current:

- Single person can't live by themselves / need a roommate just to get by (increase shelter costs), currently using grocery money to pay bills, only have \$20 /week for food.
- Increase shelter rates by area (have regional rates) Toronto vs. Manitoulin Island

Warren:

- Rates should be based on the economy / Low income cut off
- Should have allowance for phone connections and monthly bill if expected to job search
- Rates for rent should be based on the geographical area you live in

Chapleau:

- Rate of inflation – if grocery goes up, so should your cheque
- By community / geographical
- Basic Needs paid twice a month (assist with better budgeting)

Espanola:

- Cost of living per community/geographically
- Shelter should be determined by actual costs
- Shelter should include actual utility costs ex: telephone
- Paying for drugs not covered by drug card, expanding drugs allowed with drug card ex: vitamins , baby formula
- Rates should be based on LICO chart
- Clothing allowance for all members

Staff:

- Flat rate for shelter based on family size and according to actual average cost of appropriate housing in each geographical area
- Rates should be based on local economy
- Single or couples without children should have same shelter rate
- Rates should be based on an amount less than minimum wage/40 hrs/week increased by the # of adults in the benefit unit

- 50% exemption should be based on maximum financial assistance

b) How should benefits be designed to deal with the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people are better off working?

Little Current:

- Have a one (1) month grace period for income reporting when starting a new job.
- Have an extra incentive for getting a job –issued automatically
- Financial support for self employment (Eg. income exemption)

Warren:

- Incentives for getting jobs (ex: a \$500 bonus)
- Make EEHB longer than 6 months or flexibility on length of time on EEHB depending on employers benefit commence date
- One month without deducting any money from OW benefits when first starting a new job

Chapleau:

- Offset employment expenses ex: allow for travel, meals etc. the 50% exemption is not enough
- First month no deduction then start deductions
- If you get a full time job you get an incentive payment
- Increase start up for training
- More flexibility on benefits
- Issue multiple benefits ex: FT employment and ESUB for same job

Espanola:

- 50% exemption should start right away –not have to wait 3 months-
- First month no deduction then start deductions
- Full-time employment bonus paid automatically

Staff:

- 50% exemption should be immediate
- No waiting for full-time employment benefit
- Low-income families should receive health benefits (drug/dental card)
- “bonus” benefit for gaining employment
- 1 month grace for first month of employment – 50% exemption to only start in 2nd month of employment
- Short term employment should not go on EEHB if possible & terminate instead
- EEHB should be extended to 12 months

c) Considering the potential for increased costs, what new benefits, if any, should be provided to all low-income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance?

Little Current:

- Dental care benefits
- Vision care benefits

Warren:

- Provide cost decrease for drugs/vision care/dental care for all low income families
- Yearly/monthly Bonus benefits awarded to low income families who work
- Have benefit cards for low income families for drug/dental/vision care

Chapleau:

- Dental benefits
- Vision benefits
- Drug benefits
- Ambulance fee's, hospital fees
- Help with utilities (rural and Northern Ontario)
- Assistance with Telephone –rebate for rural and Northern Ontario
- Provide subsidy for informal Childcare

Espanola:

- Drug, dental and vision
- Informal child care subsidy
- Eye examination
- Chiropractic and specialists
- Funding or tax credit for recreational activities for adults
- Better accessibility to low income housing
- Subsidy for vehicle insurance /Gas refund
- Transportation assistance (public)
- Assistance for community garden

Staff:

- After hour child care subsidy/informal child care subsidy
- Energy benefit to cover utilities cost
- Ministry of Health should pay for all health related benefits
- Back to school and winter clothing benefits
- Employment expenses benefit / Telephone costs

d) Should asset limits and exemptions be changed to improve the social assistance system?

Little Current:

- Sentimental items (through inheritance)

Warren:

- Asset level should be high & more exemptions be made depending on need of asset
- RRSP should be exempted even if not locked in
- Canada's savings bonds should be exempted
- Self employment / tools of the trade should be exempt even if not in use for same employment
- Should be given a grace period before having to dispose of assets

Chapleau:

- Allow more exemptions. As long as there is a valuable reason for the assets
- Exempt RRSP

Espanola:

- Allow period of exemption ex: 2 years. If you are still on in 2 years, the exemption is removed and you would be expected to cash it in/use it to live off.
- Exempt RRSP
- Full exemption of all assets if client is pending EI

Staff:

- Increase asset limits for all to \$5,000
- Exempt RRSP
- More time to dispose of assets
- Allow some exemptions to the disposition of assets if appropriately used as in paying off debt etc. if it doesn't exceed the asset limit
- More leniency for disposition of assets – at grant and within the 12 month period prior to grant

e) How should benefits for people with disabilities be designed and delivered?

Little Current:

- Have a weekly / monthly supportive phone call
- Trillium

Warren:

- Partner's income / earnings should not affect ODSP benefit

Espanola:

Not answered

Staff:

- Disabilities benefit should be given only to the person with the disability, family members' income should not be deducted from the disability benefits.
- ODSP should provide drug benefits for those receiving CPP-D

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

a) Are the rules meeting their objectives? Are there rules that are not working? What changes do you suggest?

Little Current:

- Shelter (place to stay) – How do you get money for a place if you don't have a residence (catch 22)
- Suspension Letters
- Earnings exemption start at 50% when first applying for OW

Warren:

- Flexibility on monthly activity report / job search requirements
- More flexibility on monthly job searching when in school
- More or better communication between agencies on what is expected from clients

Espanola:

- Medical reports for chronic reasons should not have to be submitted every 3 months or 6 months. Only when there is change to the situation
- Employment verification / respect client's privacy
- Should increase rates for medical travel for ODSP
- There should be more consistency between the 2 programs (OW & ODSP)

Staff:

- If client is participating in an approved activity then job searching should not be required
- Increase to CSUMB
- Living with parents rules too complex
- Flat rate for shelter
- Special diet needs to be simplified, should not have to review special diets for permanent diets

- Receipts should not be needed for employment items
- Quit/fired rule needs to be reinstated – there should be consequences for quitting or being fired other than not being eligible for benefits – possible attendance for courses/seminars
- P.A. agreement extension/flexible review times
- Recognize working as an activity on a P.A.
- 2212's for irrelevant spouses – creates extra work

b) How can special-purpose benefits be delivered more efficiently and equitably? Should some be delivered outside of the social assistance system?

Warren:

- The money from special diet is not enough and should cover other health related items (ex: special formula for children, folic acid etc.)
- Should have a broader list of items covered under the special diet benefits
- Have full dental coverage for adults and not just emergency
- Drug benefit plan should cover a broader range of drugs

Staff:

- Special diet/drug/dental and vision care should be offered outside of social assistance – possibly by Ministry of Health
- ODSP should issue their own discretionary benefits
- Employment benefits for ODSP participating should be issued directly from OW office

Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

a) What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?

Warren:

- Help clients financially while they are looking for employment or gathering skills for future employment
- Better evaluate / assess people to help with choosing suitable employment

Staff:

- Outcome should be based on individual needs
- No job search for clients without a grade 12 – upgrading / education should be priority if not mandatory

- Better standard of life which would benefit not only the client but the community
- b) What additional data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of social assistance benefits and services? For example, should ethnocultural and racial data be collected in order to evaluate and improve supports for people from racialized and ethnocultural communities?**

Staff:

- Information regarding client history pertaining to employment – better employment assessment on the onset of clients

- c) What can the provincial government and municipalities do to better integrate services?**

Staff:

- ODSP & OW reporting periods should be the same – pay run / date should be the same
- Streamline and reduce bureaucracy between programs – link systems/programs used
- Makes access to information less bureaucratic. Ex: no need for consent between programs available under the same roof
- Simplify application forms to encompass all programs
- Same asset limits for ODSP and OW clients
- CAS to fund temporary care

Issue 5:

An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

- a) What should Ontario do to address the short-term income support and training needs of people who are not eligible for EI?**

Staff:

- Social assistance clients should be able to access the same training / funding dollars as EI recipients
- Change EI rules so no minimum hours are required to access – benefits should be calculated based on hours worked for short term unemployment
- EI application process – time to process should be quicker and no waiting period

- OW application should be simpler for those awaiting EI as an assignment will recoup all benefits issued.

b) What should the interaction be between income-tested benefits, such as WITB and child benefits, and the social assistance system?

Staff:

- Children should be added back to social assistance and the extras such as NCBS/OCB/CTC etc should not be considered income
- In year review of child benefits if loss of income for CTC etc.

c) Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance?

Staff:

- Tape matching with EI – access to EI database for all staff
- System links to other program databases such as CPP/EI/OSAP/WSIB etc

CONCLUSION:

The feedback received from clients / participants was very interesting and informative. It gave a different perspective to the issues presented. The communication and participation flowed very well. As mentioned in our introduction, with the exception of the staff session, time did not allow all issues & questions to be answered.

Client / Participants were encouraged to complete the discussion paper on their own. They were provided with information on how to submit their issues to the commission

The Manitoulin-Sudbury District Service Board is satisfied with the results and pleased to have participated in this process. This report will be posted on the DSB web site.

The Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board is looking forward to the official report / recommendations from the Commission.

Sincerely Yours.