

Durham Region Employment Network

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

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Durham Region Employment Network, DREN

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Introduction

Durham Region Employment Network

The Durham Region Employment Network (DREN) is an umbrella network of over 60 members. The development of equal access and opportunity to employment and services through community partnerships is our mandate. Our members come from many sectors: community supports, employment services, education supports, information services and economic development. Our members are focused on eliminating barriers to employment and are aligned with the Terms of Reference of the Commission “that the most promising way to improve outcomes for people receiving social assistance is to substantially improve their employment opportunities”. Improving employment opportunities however cannot be achieved without collaboration from many sectors and that is where DREN’s strength lies.

Before we share our members’ thoughts and recommendations we would like to take this opportunity to thank the people who contributed to having our members’ voices heard. We thank Joe Dale, the Executive Director of the Ontario Disability Employment Network, for facilitating our forum. From the Regional Municipality of Durham Region’s Income and Employment Support Division, David Thomas, Policy Analyst and Kelly O’Brien, Manager of Employment Supports for sharing their resources to ensure an open and welcoming multi-stakeholder community conversation.

Held on August 4th in Oshawa, representatives from the following groups contributed to the discussion and recommendations that follow:

- Cornerstone Community Association
- Community Living Oshawa Clarington
- Durham Community Legal Clinic
- The Youth Centre
- Ontario March of Dimes
- Brain Injury Association of Durham Region
- Transitional Support Coordinator Initiative
- Centre d’emploi francophone de Durham
- Computing by Voice
- Northern Lights Canada
- Durham College Employment Services
- Girls Incorporated of Durham Region
- Salvation Army Community and Family Services Oshawa
- Durham Mental Health Services
- Brock CERC
- Yorkworks
- Literacy Network of Durham Region
- Tradeability/Durham Region Local Training Board

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

The Commission must recommend better ways to help people receiving social assistance find jobs or improve their job skills. This includes placing reasonable expectations on people who receive social assistance to participate in employment activities, or in the treatment or rehabilitation they may need.

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

In addressing employers' needs there were two main themes – changing employers' perceptions and lengthening support. The group felt that there should be more training, education and marketing to employers to address stigma and misconceptions. Employers should be presented with the business case for why they should hire persons on OW or ODSP. It was commented that some employers perceive people who are receiving social assistance or having a disability as being unemployable. The old adage “seeing is believing” comes into play here. Each successful transition from social assistance to employment increases adoption of a new mindset by employers.

Recommendation 1: Educate employers on the untapped pool of potential employees

Recommendation 2: Increase and provide on-site job support

Recommendation 3: Lengthen supports to employees to cover not only the initial hiring stage but the transition period and long term follow-up

Networking has become an essential tool for searching out and connecting with employers. It is estimated that 80% of jobs are not advertised and yet social assistance allowances for transportation do not meet this new reality. Getting out into the community and connecting with potential sources is one of the most effective ways to connect to a job or to obtain a better job. Networking today also includes the Internet and telephone. These two very important communication tools are not only needed in getting a job but communicating with your employer. The Internet can be accessed at many community sites and hubs. The Durham Region Employment Network administers over 30 sites throughout Durham Region providing free access to the Internet through the Community Access Program funded by Industry Canada. However, a person needs transportation to reach these centres.

We recommend increasing transportation costs and making the telephone an essential service to link clients to employers. There are services like Talk2One Service in some communities which provide 60 free long distance minutes a month and a personal voice-mail system. However, there are limitations and issues for individuals with disabilities with Talk2One. It should be made a necessity for clients to have a landline. It is difficult if not impossible to get a job without access to a telephone.

Recommendation 4: Increase coverage of transportation costs

Recommendation 5: The telephone or accessible communication device should be considered an essential cost

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

Staff who supply employment supports felt there is too much emphasis on outcomes instead of working with clients to educate and train them to be job ready. Job readiness in itself has many definitions. For example, a client's perception of job readiness can be very different from the employers' vision of job readiness. For those who are not job ready supports are very limited.

Lack of literacy and numeracy skills is a pervasive problem amongst social assistance recipients. This is especially true when clients have been on social assistance in excess of a year. Community discussions around training always tend to rotate around computer and technical training and/or grade 12 acquisitions without the clear statement that many recipients lack the basic skills to pursue these goals. While the Literacy Network of Durham Region and local literacy programs are delivering services to OW clients including some limited assessment screening, there are very few resources or processes dedicated to dealing with this issue. Other service providers don't recognize the need for extensive literacy training amongst this group.

In addition it was discussed that often individuals are placed in programs, for example updating computer skills, which could be an important component of potential jobs, however this alone will not necessarily get them employed. For many small employers one staff position may fill numerous roles. They are hiring individuals that can work laterally. When employers hire an individual in a small setting it has a huge impact on the whole team. Employers do not just look at the person's skill set but how they work and fit with the whole team. Therefore training should incorporate soft skills into the mix.

Recommendation 6: Support people who are not job ready with the assistance they need to reach that point

Recommendation 7: Incorporate soft skills training to complement training in occupational requirements

What would make employment services and supports more effective and easier to access?

There was concern expressed about the direction being taken by the provincial government with reference to employment supports. In the past year, for example in the case of ODSP, there has been the deletion of employment supports as a separate division – now each intake worker has to be all things to all people. This is the same trend at Employment Ontario where they are integrating employment supports. The rationale is that job seekers need only to visit one centre for all their employment needs. This speaks to the more convenient one-stop shop. However, integrating services could result in a loss of access to specialized services unless those services are also readily available.

Recommendation 8: Ensure that one-stop centres and integration of services include easy access to specialized services

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

People with multiple barriers will require compensatory strategies and on-site support staff for employers. It is wrong to assume that social assistance can take on everything. There was agreement that better sharing of resources within the community will make Employment Services and Supports more effective and easier to access in regards to physical location and communications.

Increased community-based supports such as transition workers who can make the phone calls and provide outreach in the community are lacking and much in need. Transition workers can build connections and nurture relationships between community supports, caseworkers and employers.

Recommendation 9: Information must be accessible and in a format understandable to the client

Recommendation 10: Transition workers should be available to steer people through the system

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

The system as noted in the Commission's literature is rule-bound and focused on policing rather than assisting. People with disabilities need to be provided the supports to further their independence not policed. It is essential that communication be accessible in the form best suited for the person being served. Furthermore people with disabilities need to know their rights and responsibilities and all the resources that are available to them. As the system operates now it is intrusive and intimidating.

Accommodating people with disabilities is more than building ramps and having elevators. Accommodating individuals with disabilities requires direct contact, long-term support and relationship building. More people with disabilities need to be hired in front line roles, advisory roles and in leadership roles. An accessible service delivery and administration system has to have input from the users who must navigate it.

Recommendation 11: Hire more people with disabilities at ODSP and OW

Recommendation 12: Create an independent advisory group including people with disabilities

One of the clear messages that the group voiced was that contact needed to be direct. The application process is complicated and cumbersome. The form letters sent are too confusing and vague. Connect with the person through the telephone, going to their place of residence, email. Open up the communication channels. If a person is working or going to school and needs to fill out paperwork after hours, who is there to assist? A helpline to call on an ongoing basis if clients run into trouble outside of regular business hours might be a solution.

Recommendation 13: Simplify the process

Recommendation 14: Provide support outside of normal government business hours

People with hidden disabilities such as a mental health illness face barriers that are not often addressed. There is a stigma around mental health services. For example, if an individual has to tell an employer that they have to leave for a counseling appointment this creates increased stress. A

solution may identify finding employment with flexible schedules, or providing counseling services on evenings and weekends or having services for all employees on-site. For example, a mental health worker available within an organization/job site for all people benefits all employees not just those that social assistance supports. Many of these solutions we realize are outside the realm of the Commission's mandate but it demonstrates the need for collaboration with community support services and employers in finding alternative answers.

A clear understanding amongst OW and local service deliverers identifies literacy as a foundation skill absent in many populations. Additional focused literacy and numeracy programs, assessment and even psycho-educational testing should be widely available to OW recipients in partnership with Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs and support networks.

Free psycho-educational and cognitive testing must be funded and the access to this must be expanded to ensure that those who qualify for ODSP receive it. There needs to be a commitment to identifying disabilities at no cost to the client. Currently these tests are in excess of \$1,000 and are only occasionally provided by OW. This needs to change.

There is also a need for assessment services to complete the Health Questionnaire, coordinate additional health tests and referrals, and to summarize findings for the qualifying process for ODSP. Many people have been without family doctors for many years and have great difficulty finding a new doctor who will accept their complex care. Even if one of these individuals finds a doctor, then the short length of time working with that physician does not add much validity to the doctor's insights, leaves the doctor ignorant about the individual's true disability for in-depth reporting, or lengthens the application process as the doctor seeks medical tests and referrals to specialists to form an informed opinion. Government regulated or approved facilities need to offer disability determination packages across a wide spectrum of circumstances that include assisting those who have been without a family physician for prolonged periods so that quick, accurate, and well-investigated determinations may be documented in disability submission packages.

There is also the issue of individuals who do not want to disclose if they have a disability. Their reasons are diverse but many fear discrimination, especially in applying for a job. This makes it difficult to refer the client to appropriate resources. In this regard, having an assessment done on a holistic basis and a supportive oriented system is essential. It is important to not only identify barriers but also the individual's strengths and have the appropriate knowledge and supports to assist. Furthermore, it is imperative that staff can ensure that clients clearly understand their rights and responsibilities.

Recommendation 15: Holistic assessment tools to identify barriers and strengths

Recommendation 16: All staff be knowledgeable and trained on Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Ontario Human Rights Code, AODA and any other legislation that pertains to the people they serve

Recommendation 17: Provide and fund psycho-educational and cognitive testing to identify disabilities

Recommendation 18: Provide government regulated or approved facilities to offer disability determinations across a wide spectrum of disabilities

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

The Commission must make recommendations to the government on an appropriate benefit structure that reduces barriers and supports people to find employment. This includes ensuring that people are better off working and guaranteeing income security for people who cannot work.

How should social assistance rates be determined?

How can individuals who do not have proper housing, food, clothing, transportation begin to even look for work? How can these individuals be at a point where they can seek employment? Social assistance rates should be determined based on basic shelter amounts. It is not realistic to say that an individual can get an apartment for \$300. The shelter maximum needs to be based on reality of the local rent market. There needs to be accommodation based on regional housing rates to find out the average cost of shelter within specific communities. In addition, the Cost of Nutritious Food demonstrates the stark reality that it is impossible to eat well on the money left over after paying rent. It is clear that social assistance rates are too low.

Recommendation 19: Increase shelter amounts to reflect average market rents in the community

Recommendation 20: Increase utility amounts to reflect realistic average utility costs

Recommendation 21: Increase food amounts to reflect average cost of a nutritious food basket

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

Individuals actively wanting to work should be supported to move forward. Social assistance rates are not enough to have an adequate standard of living nor are many jobs available. Jobs that are available, especially in this economy, are low-paying part-time positions, contract and commission-based. Those that do find work are then subjected to income withdrawals, loss of benefits and at times even their rent-to-geared housing. Other income such as CPP, self-employment and rental income are treated imputatively. As noted in the report "What stops us from working?" it is not that people do not want to work but that it does not pay to work.

The long standing argument has been that if social assistance is too generous people will choose not to work. For example, if two individuals are working at the same job and someone receiving social assistance comes out with more income than the other person, is this fair? The government supplements many wages and for many reasons. The government supplement's student's wages because they lack experience, it supplements doctors wages to entice them to northern regions; it supplements wages in the energy field and so on. The majority of people on social assistance do not choose to be in this position. There are many reasons why they need assistance and therefore flexibility in the decision making process to meet those unique circumstances is paramount. Incentives need to be in place to overcome the barriers to employment for a prosperous Ontario.

Recommendation 22: Define a poverty level

Recommendation 23: Identify the poverty line as the point at which claw backs set in

Recommendation 24: Extend the length of time after entering workforce to start retraction of services

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?

Recommendation 25: Transportation should be expanded beyond work related benefits (social inclusion & networking)

Recommendation 26: Dental and medical benefits should be extended to all

Recommendation 27: Employment Start-up Benefit

Recommendation 28: Rent geared to income housing

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

Before discussing asset limits and exemptions the group discussed the current reporting structure. Currently clients need to submit monthly reports of all income. This is problematic on a number of fronts: if the client is not working they still need to fill in forms; if paid bi-weekly their income is drastically cut in following months; their earnings are reconciled in following months – not the actual month they are paid in; etc.

Recommendation 29: Reconcile earnings annually utilizing the poverty level cut-off to determine any over payments as necessary

Recommendation 30: Reports required only when additional income is earned

In addition to recommendations 29 and 30 is the issue of suspension letters. A simple mistake on a report form can have serious consequences. Many clients receive suspension letters that they do not understand. They can receive these letters because they fail to comply with a rule or because they reported something incorrectly. This is a punitive and intimidating environment. If the administrative burden was lessened by implementing recommendations 29 and 30, these suspension letters would be decreased. Certainly, instead of letters direct contact could be made with the individuals to explain and discuss discrepancies.

Recommendation 31: Direct contact be reasonably attempted to discuss discrepancies before a suspension letter is issued

In regards to asset limits and exemptions, the consensus of the group is that we should be encouraging financial stability and the current system does not do this. In fact, it increases vulnerability for people on Ontario Works to remain in poverty and be unable to handle financial fluctuations.

Recommendation 32: Increase asset limits on par with ODSP

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

There was agreement amongst the group that the benefit structure needs to be flexible and accommodating to individual needs. People with disabilities have low levels of workforce participation. There have been many programs that have so far been ineffective in changing these participation rates. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the reality of a shortage of workers due to retirement of baby boomers may help, however the extent of the problem is much larger. It is an issue of social exclusion. Therefore, to tie eligibility for benefits to employment-

related activities disregards the reality of the many barriers that people with disabilities face: transportation, education, training, housing, communication.

Recommendation 33: Province needs to develop labour market strategies to increase job opportunities for people with disabilities

Recommendation 34: Recognize and treat self-employment, volunteerism, self-directed training as work related activities

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

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

Many commented that although there are 800 rules, staff interpretations generate even more. Written literature is not any better if you factor in that literacy is a foundation skill that may be absent. As mentioned earlier communication needs to be clear and be provided in different formats. There was also discussion on the use of technology. The lack of use of communication technologies by staff and workers to connect with those clients is a missed opportunity. Durham Region has a large rural area. Finding support in rural and first Nations communities is extremely difficult. Clients must travel into an urban office and transportation may not be available. If satellite services are too expensive to maintain then certainly other modes of communication should be utilized.

Recommendation 35: Provide alternate formats for communicating information

Recommendation 36: Utilize technology tools to communicate – videoconferencing, Skype, email

Conclusion

While the forum concluded without addressing all the questions listed in the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario the discussions were thorough and active. The overall feeling was that an overhaul of the system of social assistance programs needs to begin with the identification of them as a “last resort”. We identified many different groups of people that may need to access social assistance: seniors, youth, people with disabilities, laid off workers, etc. The majority of people on social assistance do not choose to be in this position. There are many reasons and unique circumstances why they need assistance and the length of that assistance may vary. Flexibility in the decision making process to meet those unique circumstances is paramount and people should be treated with dignity and respect.

Recommendation 37: Develop a Rights Based framework rather than a system of “last resort”

We thank the Commission for Social Assistance Review in Ontario for opening the request for submissions to our members and the community. We sincerely hope that our input will benefit the Commission’s task of developing a “21st century income security system that enables all Ontarians to live with dignity, participate in their communities, and contribute to a prospering economy.”

OTHER PRIORITIES FOR MODIFICATIONS TO THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

- Individuals eligible for Child Tax Benefit should also be eligible for Income Splitting
- Increased transparency in the ODSP application and eligibility process
- Easier access to medical records
- Transportation subsidy for job seekers
- Affordable, flexible, child care
- Realistic asset levels and exemptions
 - o Timeline if moving forward before deleting assets
- A “People’s Advocate” group/mechanism
- Change perceptions and education about Ontario Works/ODSP
 - o More humanized to be on Ontario Works/ODSP (remove stigma)
- Community Start Up Benefits should increase by a certain amount each year with a more flexible interpretation
- Greater investment in employment supports
- Employability and access to supports should not be determined due to level or severity of disability