



REPORT TO: Co-Chairs and Members of
Public Health and Social Services Committee

SUBJECT: Commission for the Review of Social Assistance Review in Ontario

RECOMMENDATION

That this Committee recommends to Regional Council that this report be received for information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In January 2011 the Ontario government initiated a major review of the province's social assistance programs. This is the first major review of the province's social assistance programs in 20 years. It is being led by two commissioners, Frances Lankin and Dr. Munir Sheikh.
- Niagara was one of the total eleven communities visited by the commission. They visited Niagara on July 5, 2011 to consult with social service agencies, social assistance recipients, employers and other stakeholders.
- Early in 2012 the Commission will release a paper outlining possible approaches to reforming social assistance, and will again seek feedback from stakeholders and communities.
- The Commission's Final Report is due to the provincial government in June 2012.
- Feedback from Niagara included strengthening client centred service by working across silos, changing social assistance rules to support individuals and families living in poverty and improving benefits and labour market conditions for workers.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

This report is for informational purposes only and has no financial implications.

PURPOSE

This report has been prepared to provide an update to Committee and Council regarding the review of the province's social assistance programs.

BACKGROUND

In December 2008, the Province of Ontario released its poverty reduction strategy report entitled "Breaking the Cycle Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy"¹ (COM 08-2009). The Province's goal is to reduce the number of children living in poverty by 25 per cent (90,000 children) over 5 years (by 2014). One of the strategies includes a "review of social assistance with the goal of removing barriers and increasing opportunity – with a particular focus on people trying to move into employment from social assistance."

In December 2009, the Ontario government created the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council. The Council was asked to report on the "scope and terms of reference that would guide the development of the social assistance review." The final report² was submitted to the Hon. Madeleine Meilleur, Minister of Community & Social Services, in May 2010.

The recommendation arising from this Council was for the creation of a transformed income security system in Ontario that would:

- Contribute to labour market opportunities to ensure jobs provide real pathways out of poverty;
- Provide workforce development and related services to help all Ontarians do better, including support for out-of-work and underemployed Ontarians to transition into sustainable employment;
- Support Ontarians in good and bad times, through livable incomes and community supports.

As part of the strategy to accomplish this goal the Council recommended that the Ontario Income Security Review be structured with two commissioners and an advisory council.

In January 2011 the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance Review in Ontario was formed. The Commission is being led by two commissioners who are tasked with carrying out a comprehensive review, and provide the government with specific recommendations and a concrete action plan for reforming the social assistance system.

REPORT

In January 2011 the Ontario government launched the first major review of the province's social assistance programs in 20 years. The review is being led by two commissioners:

- The Honourable Frances Lankin, P.C., Past President and CEO of United Way Toronto
- Dr. Munir Sheikh, former Chief Statistician for the Government of Canada.

The goal of the review is to help Ontario develop an action plan that will make social assistance:

- more effective at getting people into jobs
- easier to understand
- work better with other federal, provincial and municipal income security programs, such as Employment Insurance, and
- more accountable and fiscally responsible

¹ <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/index.aspx>

² <http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/documents/en/mcass/publications/social/sarac%20report/SARAC%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

In June of 2011 the Commission released *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas*,³ to provide information on the key issues facing social assistance. The paper also posed a series of questions meant to encourage people from across Ontario to respond in writing or through group discussions on possible reform solutions. To date the Commission has received almost 700 submissions in writing.

The Commissioners also attended throughout the summer 11 “community conversations” meetings with more than 2,000 individuals in total attendance in Windsor, London, Hamilton, Peel Region, Toronto, Peterborough, Kingston, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Timmins and Niagara Region.

The commission visited Niagara on July 5, 2011 and consulted with three groups of individuals. The first meeting took place in Welland at the Rose City Kids Centre and involved local leaders from Regional Council, social service agencies, newcomers and business. The second and third meetings took place in Niagara Falls in the Branscombe Early Learning and Family Centre, first with individuals with lived experience of poverty and secondly with front line staff of service and employment agencies. In total 70 people attended the sessions and provided comment.

During each of the sessions in Niagara the following three questions were posed:

1. What are some examples of community projects that provide people with work and other valuable opportunities for engagement/personal growth and improvement?
2. What elements are vital to making these connections for people living in poverty, including social assistance clients?
3. In what ways can social assistance help eliminate poverty and improve working conditions for the working poor?

Community Services also worked with the Niagara North Legal Clinic and Start Me Up Niagara to host an open invitation session for individuals who were not able to participate in the Commission’s visit. The summary of the discussions can be found on the Regional website⁴.

In reviewing these comments, three strong themes that emerged were that Niagara should strengthen client centred service by working across silos, that social assistance rules needed to change to support individuals and families living in poverty and that benefits and labour market conditions needed to be improved for workers. Community Services is working with the Niagara Planning and Research Council to bring together stakeholders in response to this feedback and to build an action plan. A working group has been established to develop the action plan; the group is comprised of front line agency staff, a Community Services manager and staff from the Niagara Planning and Research Council. The working group will also inform the Niagara Prosperity Initiatives Community Committee’s work plan focused on increasing collaboration.

³ <http://www.socialassistancereview.ca/uploads/File/A-Discussion-Paper---Issues-and-Ideas---English.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/pdf/SARCreport.pdf>

The Commission will be releasing a second paper in early 2012 outlining potential approaches to reform. Further input and advice from stakeholders and communities will be sought to help frame the Commission's recommendations to the government which is due in June 2012. Niagara Region Community Services staff will be reviewing this second paper and will prepare a follow-up report to Public Health and Social Services Committee.

Submitted by:

Approved by:

Katherine Chislett
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Mike Trojan
Chief Administrative Officer

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