

**ONTARIO SPINAL CORD INJURY SOLUTIONS ALLIANCE
POLICY ANALYSIS:
Final Report of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario**

The Ontario Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Solutions Alliance was established in 2007 as a network of key SCI stakeholders from 70+ organizations including people with SCI, researchers, service providers, physicians, and funders from across Ontario that spans the continuum of care from injury onset through to community reintegration. It is supported by Spinal Cord Injury Ontario (formerly the Canadian Paraplegic Association Ontario) and the Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation.

There has been significant media in recent months about the need to reform social assistance in Ontario. In these challenging economic times, more people rely on social assistance, while policy makers express concerns about long-term dependency on social assistance for some people, as well as sustainability of the system over time.

The purpose of this document is to provide:

- 1) Context for the proposed changes to Ontario's social assistance regime;
- 2) A brief overview of these changes; and
- 3) Possible next steps for policy makers in the near future.

While this review may provoke some anxiety among our clients, it is crucial to stress that it is not a statement of intent on the part of the government: the recommendations are just those – nothing more at this point.

Nonetheless, the review does set the policy agenda for reform: chiefly, to reduce the number of those on social assistance in Ontario by reallocating resources and making targeted investments.

Context

In October 2012, the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario released its final report, *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*. Part of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, this is the most comprehensive review of social assistance in the province since the *Transitions* report of 1988. The Commission was co-chaired by Francis Lankin, former President and CEO of United Way Toronto and Dr. Munir Sheikh, former Chief Statistician with Statistics Canada.

The mandate of the Commission was “to develop specific recommendations and a concrete action plan for reforming the social assistance system to improve client outcomes.” Proposed reforms were to be **integrated** (include municipal partners and multiple providers of social services), **client-centered** (easier to navigate), and **sustainable** (affordable over the long term as a system of last resort).¹

The Ontario SCI Solutions Alliance engaged the Commission through two written submissions during the consultation phase. Its last submission was *Change and Consequence*, in response to the Commission's discussion paper, *Approaches for Reform*.

In this document, we made some of the recommendations below:

- With respect to **employment supports**, that services continue to be available from disability-specific service providers. That is, Spinal Cord Ontario is best suited to provide tailored supports to clients with spinal cord injuries in the Greater Toronto Area.
- With respect to an **extended health benefit for all low-income Ontarians**, we emphasized the need to ensure an integrated approach, including, but not limited to, attendant services.
- With respect to **compliance of regulations to the Ontario Disability Support Program**, we recommended a customized approach that enables case managers to use their discretion, rather than apply rules strictly and without context.

Clearly, social assistance – and the Ontario Disability Support Program in particular – remain a crucial support to many Ontarians with SCIs.

¹ Commission Terms of Reference, n. pag.

URL: <http://socialassistancereview.ca/terms-of-reference>

Policy Recommendations and Possible Impacts on Clients

Employment

If there is one theme to emerge from this report, it is the desire to reduce the number of people on social assistance and to facilitate their entry into the labour market. To this end, the Commission recommends that Pathways to Employment be implemented. These compulsory participation agreements recognize that approaches to employment need to be customized to the needs of clients. There are, however, concerns around the metrics or criteria that may be used to determine compliance with such Pathways, as well as how “disabled” a recipient may have to be not to work and still receive full benefits. Recent efforts to establish such criteria in jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom have proven controversial.²

RECOMMENDATION: Make Pathways to Employment voluntary, and provide financial incentives to increase participation.

Another major theme is the “drive to local” – or to mandate municipalities First Nations bands to administer employment supports directly. While the Ontario SCI Solutions Alliance may wish to deliberate the role of First Nations in providing services so as to ensure greater sensitivity to cultural realities, there are some problems with municipal administration, including, but not limited to, limited sensitivity to realities of disability. In this regard, we submit that disability organizations are better equipped to provide direct services, insofar as they are more aware of the nuances of barriers to employment and required accommodation supports for specific disabilities.³

While the Ontario Disability Employment Network originally advocated for municipalities to have a role in the provision of employment services, this was in a service manager capacity, not as one of direct service delivery.⁴

RECOMMENDATION: Enable disability service organizations to provide employment services where appropriate.

² BBC (14 October 2012). *Disability benefit shake-up fears of organizations*, n. pag.

URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-19936873>

³ Ontario Disability Employment Network (2011). *People Who Have a Disability and the Barriers to Employment*. London, Ontario: Author, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid. (2011). *Submission to the Social Assistance Review Commission*. London, Ontario: Author, p. 20.

Merging of Ontario Works and ODSP

The Commission recommends that Ontario Works (welfare) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) be merged into a single program. This is in the context of providing a “Disability Supplement” (see below). However, there are concerns that merging programs may cause sensitivity to disability to “drown out” in a merged policy field. As the Wellesley Institute notes, “A fundamental principle of the social assistance system must be that supports reflect individual needs. Merging OW and ODSP creates risks that people with disabilities will not receive supports that are essential to health. Disability is not a homogenous category; different people need different supports. It is important that the Province resists the urge to create a ‘one-size fits all’ social assistance system.”⁵

RECOMMENDATION: That Ontario Works and ODSP NOT be merged.

Standard Rate

The Commission recommends that a standard rate be implemented; this would merge the Basic Needs and Shelter portion of ODSP as it currently exists. It is not yet clear if the standard rate would be harmonized to reflect the true cost of living, although the Commission recognizes the need for future increases depending on region of residence. Part of the challenge with this recommendation is that what constitutes a Standard Rate, or for that matter, a Basic Measure of Adequacy, has yet to be fully determined.

As Poverty Free Ontario notes:

“The proxy BMA for Ontario used by the Commissioners in their report would keep both a single person and a single parent with one child at about 70% of the LIM, Ontario’s official income poverty line. While the BMA would alleviate the income situation of recipients from their current depth of poverty, as a long-term measure of adequacy it would still condemn them to lives of hardship in deep poverty below 80% of the LIM.”⁶

RECOMMENDATION: *Pending further information.*

⁵ Wellesley Institute (24 October 2012). Important progress towards a health-enabling social assistance system, but more work is required, n. pag.

URL: <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/economics/important-progress-toward-a-health-enabling-social-assistance-system-but-more-work-is-required/>

⁶ Poverty Free Ontario (31 October 2012). PFO Bulletin #10 – Final Report on the Social Assistance Review: Limited Improvements, Serious Concerns, n. pag.

URL: <http://www.povertyfreeontario.ca/2012/10/31/pfo-bulletin-10-final-report-on-the-social-assistance-review-limited-improvements-serious-concerns/>

Disability Supplement

The Commission recommends the creation of a Disability Supplement for all low-income persons with disabilities to be provided outside of social assistance. The objective is to remove the “welfare wall” where some persons may enter (and decline to leave) social assistance to receive select benefits. As with the standard rate, details are limited. However, it is worth noting that the Commission calls for combined income and the disability supplement be “equivalent to the maximum rate, at the time of implementation, for a single adult (renter) receiving ODSP” (recommendation 40). It is worth noting, however, that existing ODSP rates, while higher than those of Ontario Works, are low in relation to the cost of living.

RECOMMENDATION: *Pending further information.*

Housing Benefit

It is not yet clear if the Province will provide a housing benefit for those on social assistance – although the Commission recommends that this be made available to all low-income Ontarians (recommendation 54).

RECOMMENDATION: *Pending further information.* We do know that former Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit funds have been transferred to the Preventing Homelessness Initiative with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing; however, there are concerns that this pool of funding is open to more people, and is therefore, less funding per person.

Uniform Children’s Supplement

Presently, increased benefits for children who are part of a benefit unit on ODSP are delivered on a staggered basis.

RECOMMENDATION: We approve of a flat rate uniform children’s supplement, provided the base amount is not less than the present maximum, and that it is indexed to inflation.

Transfer to Health-Related Benefits (e.g., ADP) to MOHLTC

Broadly, the Commission recommends a shift for health-related benefits to be transferred to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. These include, but are not limited to the twenty-five (25) percent co-payment portion of the Assistive Devices Program over the long term. They also recommend that these benefits be available to all low-income Ontarians. While this may sound positive at first glance, there are concerns that overall benefits may be reduced on a per person basis to provide benefits to more people overall.

RECOMMENDATION: *Pending further information.* SCI Ontario is working to address the pricing of wheelchairs in particular.

Other recommendations, such as those pertaining to reporting requirements and asset rules, are in an internal document on the 108 regulations.

Possible Next Steps for Policy Makers

Upon the release of the Commission’s report, the Minister of Community and Social Services, the Hon. John Milloy committed the province to “[make] improvements to social assistance for those who are able to work” and “[determine] the best ways to simplify and streamline the system.”⁷ That said, substantive change to the system in the short term is unlikely. Nonetheless, the “policy parameters” are being established for the debate. Thus, some core points that we may wish to emphasize include, but are not limited to:

- Ensuring that disability-specific employment supports are provided;
- Enabling clients to determine whether or not to pursue Pathways to Employment, with incentives provided for participation;
- Mandating that social assistance benefits for persons with disabilities be kept distinct vis-à-vis the general population; and

⁷ Ministry of Community and Social Services (24 October 2012). Statement by Minister Milloy on Social Assistance Review. Toronto: Government of Ontario, n. pag.

URL: <http://news.ontario.ca/mcss/en/2012/10/statement-by-minister-milloy-on-social-assistance-review.html>



- That supplementary benefits (e.g., health-related benefits) not be reduced if harmonized to expand eligibility to the general population.

At present, opportunities to engage decision makers directly are limited in the context of prorogation. However, the Ontario SCI Solutions Alliance will work with its partners in the broader disability community to establish some core, common messages to share with governmental partners at a future date.

Conclusion

This overview is but one step with regards Ontario Spinal Cord Injury Solutions Alliance's engagement on this file. Should you have any questions or suggestions, please contact Nathan Hauch at nathan.hauch@sciontario.org.