



Staff Report to Council - for Information

Title: Q4 Income and Support Services Update

From: Tina Metcalfe, Director Human Services

Date: February 15, 2024

Report Purpose:

This report is for information.

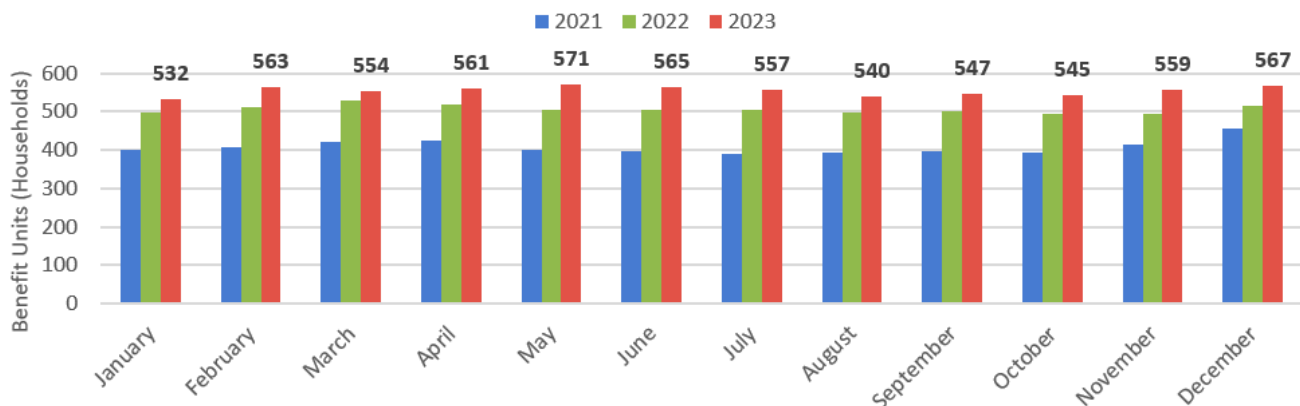
Report Summary:

The Income and Support Services update provides an overview of the service delivery components and outcomes throughout Q4.

Background:

Income Supports:

The Ontario Works caseload for January 1 to December 31, 2023 was an average of 555 households per month. This represents an 9.7% increase compared to the same period in 2022 and a 36% increase over the same period in 2021. These numbers are consistent with the January 2023 Provincial Social Assistance Caseload Forecast report released by MCCSS and caseloads are forecast to continue to rise throughout 2024/2025 by approximately 6.7%.



There was also a marked increase in the number of individuals requiring Emergency Assistance in 2023. Emergency assistance enables the immediate provision of financial assistance to an applicant in a crisis or emergency situation for up to a period of 48 days. Individuals provided with Emergency Assistance (EA) are not included in the Ontario Works caseload numbers. In 2023, there were 68 EA cases, an increase of 134% over 2022.

Employment Services Transformation and Social Assistance Renewal

As at Q4, the Integrated Case Management (ICM) protocol with the Employment Service System Manager (SSM) has been implemented across the two systems. To date, approximately 28% of adults on the Ontario Works caseload have been referred to employment services and caseworkers are actively engaged in Integrated Case Management with staff from five separate Employment Ontario Service providers to facilitate referrals, address on-going client support needs, issue benefits and track client progress.

Key divisional staff continued to attend both the Social Assistance Integration Committee and the Social Assistance/Service Provider Network monthly meetings with the SSM to foster relationships, identify issues, clarify responsibilities, and adapt processes particularly around benefit coordination and referral tracking. In Q4, staff collaborated with the SSM on developing effective processes for returned referrals and for tracking self-referred participants.

Centralized Intake continued to pose a significant challenge throughout Q4, directly affecting both staffing support required and clients. The provincial, centralized Intake and Benefit Administration Unit (IBAU), utilizing the Risk Based Eligibility Determination (RBED) tool, was anticipated to yield substantial administrative savings for local offices by processing more than 70% of social assistance applications received online. However, in Q4, only 18% of processed applications were granted through RBED.

In the interest of client service and to address the backlog, staff proactively monitored application queues, intervening locally when applications exceeded a 10-business day wait rather than awaiting IBAU action. In November, further mitigation was necessary, and staff discontinued the normal process of redirecting applicants to apply on-line and were processing applications instead. Currently, 65% of all applications processed still required intervention by Bruce County staff to determine eligibility.

Key staff and members of the Human Services leadership team are escalating concerns regarding the performance of centralized intake with program supervisors and at regional and provincial tables.

Person Centered Supports

Work continued in Q4 to complete Common Assessments, including the Mental Health and Addictions Screening tool, with all adult members of Ontario Works households. The results are used by Caseworkers to create individualized Action Plans and determine readiness for employment services.

Action plan activities, referrals and outcomes are entered into the SAMS case management system by caseworkers and in Q4 work began analyzing this data to track client progress and identify potential service gaps and needs throughout the area. As of the end of Q4, staff have completed Common Assessments with approximately 50% of adults on their caseload and have completed action plans with 78% of the caseload.

Lack of access to digital channels for program participants has been identified as a service gap by ISS staff, the SSM, Employment Ontario service providers and community partners. Work began in Q3 to address this gap, and in Q4 Caseworkers from the Income and Support Services division were able to procure 50 refurbished cell phones and 15 new Chromebooks using client support funding to distribute to clients in need.

Caseworkers are also assisting clients with applications to the new Rogers Connect for Success program which offers high-speed, low-cost internet and mobile services to eligible low-income households in Ontario.

Access to technology is enabling clients to connect with needed resources and supports in their community, especially when faced with transportation barriers. Caseworkers are connecting clients to on-line supports for mental health, primary care, addictions treatment and recovery, skills upgrading and language/cultural supports for newcomers. Cell phones are also a vital resource for clients participating in employment services.

Client support funding was also utilized in Q4 to purchase an additional 650 Good Food Box Tokens which will be distributed to Human Services clients who are experiencing food insecurity and are struggling to afford fresh and healthy food options.

In an effort to better support clients feeling overwhelmed by debt, staff attended a training event in November hosted by United Way Bruce Grey and the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force designed for front line social service workers. Key takeaways from the training included information and resources to connect clients to appropriate supports for debt consolidation, credit counselling, and bankruptcy/insolvency issues. Staff also continued to refer clients to the Financial Literacy program with the United Way Bruce Grey for support with budgeting, dealing with creditors, accessing tax credits/recognizing the benefits of filing income tax.

Financial/Staffing/Legal/IT Considerations:

Ontario Works Program Delivery Funding has been confirmed for 2024 from MCCSS and includes an additional 5% reduction in 2024 to reflect the remaining transfer of responsibilities for employment assistance to Employment Ontario and the Service System Manager from January - March 2024.

However, a successful application was submitted to MCCSS for One Time Funding to cover exceptional costs associated with Employment Services Transformation. As such, MCCSS will contribute \$51,627 to extend a contract position. The municipal portion of this 50/50 cost shared funding (\$51,627) was accounted for in the approved 2024 budget.

There are no legal or IT considerations associated with this report.

Interdepartmental Consultation:

There were no interdepartmental consultations for this report.

Link to Strategic Goals and Objectives:

Community and Partnerships - Build a strong and inclusive community

Community and Partnerships - Enhance and grow partnerships

Report Author:

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Departmental Approval:

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