



# Staff Report to Council - for Information

**Title:** Q4 2024 Income and Support Services Update

**From:** Tina Metcalfe, Director Human Services

**Date:** February 20, 2025

**Report Number:** HS-2025-009

## 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 through to the end of Q4.

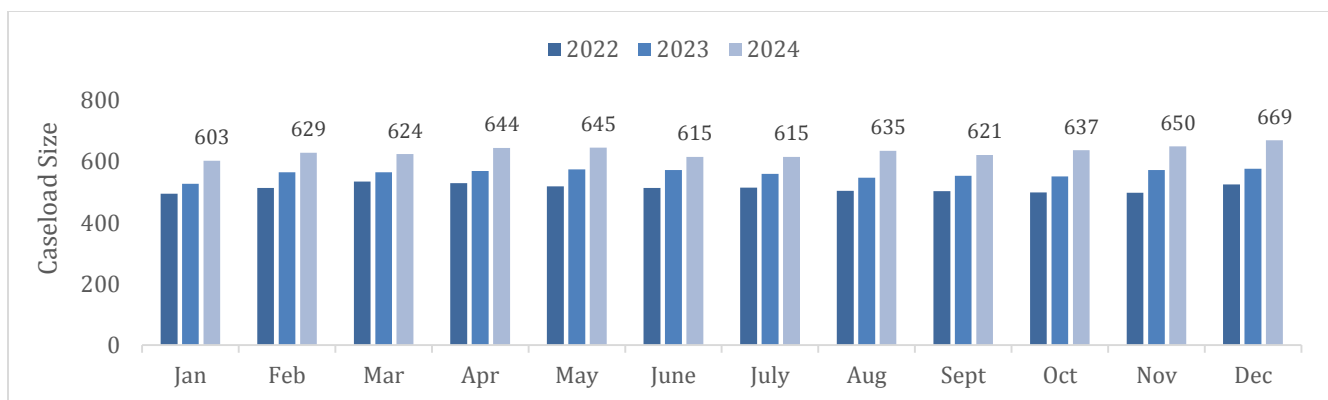
## Background/Analysis:

### Income Supports:

The Ontario Works caseload, including Temporary Care and Emergency Assistance cases, for January 1 to December 31, 2024, was an average of 632 households per month. This represents a 11.4% increase compared to the same period in 2023.

These statistics are consistent with the Fall 2024 Provincial Social Assistance Caseload Forecast report released by MCCSS and caseloads are forecast to continue to rise throughout 2025/2026 by an additional 10.6%.

As at the end of Q4, 680 applications for social assistance were received and processed for Bruce County residents representing an 18% increase over the total number of applications received in 2023.



## Direct Burial and Cremation Policy

In Q4, Income and Support Services finalized a comprehensive review of its Direct Burial and Cremation Policy to align with provincial regulations under the Funeral, Burial and Cremation Services Act, 2002 (Ontario Regulation 184/12). This review involved extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including the Georgian Bay Funeral Services Association and our lower-tier municipal partners operating cemeteries.

The resulting changes, which became effective January 1, 2025, established clear, standardized practices and financial maximums to ensure a consistent, respectful, and fiscally responsible approach to assisted burials and cremations for social assistance recipients and indigent individuals in Bruce County.

As at the end of Q4, Income and Support Services completed and approved 43 applications for Direct Burial/Cremation: 21 for social assistance recipients and 22 for indigent persons not receiving social assistance, an overall increase of 18.6 % from 2023.

## Integrated Employment Services

As at the end of Q4, 245 individuals on social assistance (26% of the cumulative caseload from January to December) have been referred to Employment Ontario (EO) for employment services while a total of 32 referrals were returned over the same period. Referrals to two separate EO providers were paused in Q4 due to their capacity to accept new referrals. Our two primary EO providers are now utilizing shared space in our Human Services locations to meet with clients and our Caseworkers on a regular basis, fostering greater collaboration and integrated case management.

In October, key divisional staff participated in specialized training with Sarah Delicate, focused on assessing client motivation, reliability, and dependability before referring them to an Employment Ontario (EO) provider. Offered by the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Service System Manager (SSM), this training was designed for social assistance and EO leadership to strengthen their understanding of the assessment's importance and application. This foundational knowledge will support the effective implementation and rollout of the assessment tool for staff use in 2025.

## Social Assistance Renewal

As reported in the last quarter, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) announced an expansion of its Centralized Intake model for Ontario Works. This initiative aims to streamline the application process by transferring responsibility for initial eligibility decisions and payment authorizations to the province, enabling municipalities to focus on client-centered case management for ongoing clients.

In late November, Bruce County was notified that it would be part of Phase 2 of the provincial expansion, with implementation effective December 16, 2024. Through further amendments to Schedule 1 of Ontario Regulation 136/98 (Designation of Geographic Areas, Delivery Agents and Delivery Partners), Bruce County is now designated as a delivery partner, while MCCSS assumes the role of Ontario Works delivery agent for initial eligibility and payment decisions. Municipalities will continue to oversee emergency assistance, temporary care assistance, under-18 applications, and ongoing eligibility reviews. There are no impacts to funding arrangements as a result of these amendments. While Bruce County Human Services offices no longer initiate Ontario Works applications, they will maintain a

"no wrong door" approach to support applicants. Specifically, staff will provide information and guidance on online and phone application processes, offer access to computers and/or phones for applicants at all Human Services locations and assist applicants in completing online applications and submitting required documentation to the Ontario Works Intake Unit for those experiencing difficulties.

With the legislative changes, the responsibility for the collection of Ontario Works overpayments will shift to MCCSS as the delivery agent. Therefore, as of December 16, 2024, Bruce County will refer all new inactive overpayments to the ministry's Financial Services Unit (FSU) within the Social Assistance Central Services Branch for collection. "New inactive" overpayments are debts owed by Ontario Works recipients who terminate from the program on or after December 16, 2024. This includes all pre-existing overpayments on their file. Overpayments owed by former Ontario Works recipients who terminated before December 16, 2024, are considered historical overpayments and the responsibility for collection on these debts will remain with our office at this time.

Full provincial implementation of Centralized Intake is expected to be completed in 2025, at which point MCCSS has indicated it will mark the conclusion of the Social Assistance Renewal initiative.

#### Person-Centered Supports

In Q4, staff continued to prioritize stability supports for social assistance clients in an effort to improve their ability to achieve financial independence and community connection.

By the end of 2024, 93% of participants had a completed Action Plan outlining their goals and support needs. Staff use this information to refer participants to appropriate services and supports to address their needs and help them achieve their goals.

The barriers most commonly identified by program participants as an impediment to exiting social assistance were insufficient financial resources, transportation, food security, mental health and physical health, with over one hundred participants identifying that they do not have access to a primary care provider. Housing instability was also identified by approximately 20% of Ontario Works recipients as an immediate concern.

As at the end of Q4, benefits to assist with participation in stability supports were distributed to 250 clients and 31 cell phones and 16 laptops were distributed as well. Providing technology enables clients to connect with needed resources including access to on-line supports for mental health, primary care, addictions treatment and recovery, skills upgrading and language/cultural supports for newcomers especially when faced with transportation barriers.

Also, in Q4, client support funds were utilized to purchase an additional 500 Good Food Box tokens to be distributed to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Additionally, staff referred 283 children from social assistance households to the Dorrell Young Christmas Program for additional supports.

To further support staff in serving clients effectively, all Income and Support Services staff participated in De-escalation Training provided by Sisa Counselling and Consulting Services. The training equipped staff with strategies to assess potential violence, defuse aggressive situations, and understand key concepts such as workplace safety and conflict resolution. Departmental leadership will work on implementing recommendations coming from the training to ensure a safer and more supportive environment for staff and clients alike.

**Financial/Staffing/Legal/IT Considerations:**

There are no financial, staffing, 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 - Enhance and grow partnerships

Community and Partnerships - Build a strong and inclusive community

**Link to Departmental Plan Goals and Objectives, if any:**

**Report Author:**

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**Departmental Approval:**

Tina Metcalfe, Human Services

**Approved for Submission:**

Christine MacDonald, Chief Administrative Officer