

Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform

Facilitation Guide

Produced by:
The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination



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The Role of the Facilitator

A good facilitator is vital to the success of a community conversation. It is not necessary to have training or experience in facilitating a group discussion as long as you are enthusiastic, friendly, a good listener and able to think on your feet. It is essential that you know your role and prepare carefully for the discussion. You do not need to be an expert in the topic being discussed but you should know enough about it to be able to ask sensible questions and raise points that have been missed by the group. You must be able to create a friendly atmosphere of cooperation and trust where participants are comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas. **You are not a teacher: you do not have to answer all the questions; your role is to help the group find their own answers.**

Summary of the Facilitator Tasks

The following tasks are described in further details in this guide:

- **Be prepared.** The information in this guide has been put together for facilitators to make sure they understand the goals of the discussion, are familiar with the subject, and have questions for the group in advance.
- **Assist the group process.** The facilitator's role is to guide the group and to keep them focused on the content of the discussion.
- **Ensure the information collected from the discussion is reported back.**

Information collected from the discussions will be used to prepare a submission to the Commission on the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. Information should be returned to:

Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination

85 Westmount Road

Guelph ON N1H 5J2

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Background: Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

In the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy the Ontario government committed to reviewing social assistance, with a focus on removing barriers and increasing opportunities for people to work.

In December 2010, the Minister of Community and Social Services announced the appointment of two Commissioners from outside the government to lead a review of Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

On June 9, 2011 the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario released its first report, *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas*. Over the summer the Commission encouraged people across Ontario to come together in groups to engage in a discussion on the pressing issues facing social assistance. The Commission received more than 700 submissions in response.

The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, along with a number of community partners, gathered feedback from our community by hosting a community conversation and an online survey in August 2011. The information collected was submitted to the Commission on September 1, 2011. The submission is available on the Poverty Task Force website, www.gwpoverity.ca.

On February 2, 2012 the Commission released its second report, *Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform*, which discusses different approaches to improving some of the key areas of the social assistance system. Through this paper, the Commission is seeking further input and advice from stakeholders and communities by March 16, 2012 to help frame recommendations to the government.

Final recommendations to the government are expected to be presented by the Commission in June 2012.

Preparing for a Community Conversation

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Facilitators should review the facilitation guide thoroughly and take some time to familiarize themselves with the subject. The information provided in this guide will provide facilitators with sufficient information to guide the discussion.

For those interested in learning more about social assistance, the review process, and options proposed by the Commission, the following documents are commended:

Resource Centre – Social Assistance Today

<http://socialassistancereview.ca/social-assistance-today>

What We Heard: A Summary of Discussion on Social Assistance

<http://socialassistancereview.ca/commission-publications>

Discussion Paper 2: Approaches to Reform

<http://socialassistancereview.ca/commission-publications>

Webinar Series – Preparing for the Options Paper

<http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/webinars-preparing-for-the-options-paper/>

Guelph & Wellington: Recommendations for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

<http://socialassistancereview.ca/uploads/File/Guelph-Wellington-Task-Force-for-Poverty-Elimination.pdf>

Logistics

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The following logistics have been outlined for those groups and organizations that have requested the support of a facilitator from the Poverty Task Force. However, groups and organizations facilitating their own sessions may also find this section useful to consider.

- The building must be accessible for all participants
- Chairs for participants should be set up in a circle. Several chairs with no arms should be provided.
- Blank nametags will be provided for participants.
- A flip chart and paper or whiteboard with markers should be provided.
- The agenda should be written where all participants can see it or copies should be distributed.
- The following handouts will be provided for participants:
 - Background & Summary based on *Discussion Paper 2*
 - Printed copies of the online survey being distributed in Guelph & Wellington
 - A list of ways people can provide input

Proposed Agenda

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The following is a proposed agenda for facilitators to follow and adapt as necessary.

- | | | |
|------------|---|---|
| 10 minutes | Welcome & introductions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome participants, introduce the facilitator and note taker, and ask participants to introduce themselves• Review agenda |
| 10 minutes | Background & information about the review process | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review main areas identified by the Commission (employment supports, education & training, assets & benefits, rules, future of social assistance) <p>Identify the goals of the discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To obtain input on approaches to transforming social assistance and broader issues that affect the system |
| 10 minutes | Instructions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Guidelines for a respectful discussion• Goal is to identify common ground – don't force consensus |
| 60 minutes | Discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• (This time can be broken up according to the number of questions you wish to discuss) |
| 30 minutes | Closing the discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Summarize feedback collected• Acknowledge participants contributions• Talk about next steps & follow up |

Next Steps & Follow Up

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Information collected from community conversations and the online survey will be analyzed and written into a final report to submit to the Commission on September 1, 2012. The report will be posted on the Poverty Task Force website, www.gwpoverty.ca, and hard copies can be mailed upon request.

Community members, groups and organizations may also provide feedback directly to the Commission via email at socialassistancereview@ontario.ca or by mail or fax:

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
2 Bloor Street West
4th Floor, Suite 400
Toronto, ON
M4W 3E2

Fax: 416-212-0413

The Poverty Task Force can provide a follow-up information session for groups and organizations to review the final submission to the Commission if requested.

The Poverty Task Force will update any new information from Commission on their website as it is released. Information can also be found on the Commission's website, www.socialassistancereview.ca.

Issue Background & Discussion Questions

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Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform focuses on different approaches to improving some of the key areas of the social assistance system. The paper is organized by five outcomes for the review, plus a chapter on issues that are specific to First Nations.

The five areas are:

1. Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment
2. Appropriate Benefit Structure
3. Easier to Understand
4. Viable over the Long Term
5. An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

The following pages provide a summary of each area, along with the questions for discussion suggested by the Commission.

Since some of the information in the Commission's report deals with technical information and is quite detailed and lengthy, we have proposed questions in each area that we suggest using for discussions in our community.

Employment Supports, Education & Training

Summary

The Commission's report notes that employment is one of the best ways to help people move out of poverty and acknowledges that current employment services and supports are failing to meet the needs of those who are unable to easily enter the workforce.

This section of the report covers the main features of effective employment services and supports and provides options for improving access to employment services and supports.

Features of Effective Services & Supports

- Assessment tools to identify barriers to employment
- Training courses that teach skills for the local labour market
- Employment services and supports that recognize the barriers to employment facing people with disabilities
- Higher benefit structure for people with disabilities that are not able to work
- Engagement strategies and incentives to encourage and support employers to hire more social assistance recipients
- Integrated pre- and post-employment supports tailored to individual needs
- Early intervention and appropriate supports to people with mental illnesses
- Integrated access (a one-stop entry point) to housing, child care, and other services

Questions for Discussion

1. In your opinion, how can employment services be made more effective for social assistance recipients?

Options

The Commission's report presents the following approaches aimed at improving coordination and integration of employment services and related supports.

1. Strengthen collaboration among those currently responsible for delivering employment services with no changes to the roles and responsibilities of municipalities, First Nations, or the Province.
2. Allow municipalities and First Nations to deliver all employment services for people receiving social assistance, whether OW or ODSP.
3. Have all employment services delivered by Employment Ontario (EO). In this case, social assistance administrators could retain responsibility for overall case management, including referrals to EO.

Questions for Discussion

1. Of the options presented, which do you think the Commission should recommend? Why?

Appropriate Benefit Structure

Summary: Appropriate Benefit Structure

The Commission's report recognizes that the benefit structure needs to take into account the cost of living, fairness between low-income workers and people receiving social assistance, and incentives to take on employment.

Options

The Commission's report presents the following options for addressing the trade-offs between the objectives of adequacy, fairness, and incentives to work:

1. Provide extended health benefits to all low-income Ontarians, regardless of whether they are working or receiving social assistance.
2. Establish a rate structure that changes over the period in which an individual receives social assistance (i.e. a basic rate for the first 18-24 months and a higher rate for those in need of longer-term income support).
3. Provide an earned income supplement to enhance the incomes of low-income workers and provide an incentive for those not working to enter the workforce.
4. Provide a housing benefit for all low-income Ontarians, regardless of whether they are working or receiving social assistance.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can the benefit structure be made adequate and fair for low-income earners and social assistance recipients?

Summary: Designing Benefits for People with Disabilities

The Commissioner's report notes that they have not been able to find a stated reason for why ODSP benefits are more adequate than OW benefits. The assumption is that people with disabilities are unlikely to work and therefore require more adequate benefits. The Commission suggests that the desire of ODSP recipients to work is underestimated.

Options

The Commission's report presents the following options to improve the design of benefits for people with disabilities:

1. Provide a new supplementary disability benefit, outside the social assistance system, for all low-income people with disabilities. As a person's employment earnings increased, this benefit would be phased out.
2. Provide a basic income for people with severe disabilities who are unlikely to generate significant earnings over their lifetimes.

Questions for Discussion

1. In your opinion, how should income supplements for low-income people with disabilities be designed and delivered?

Summary: Dealing with the Complexity of Benefits

The Commissioner's report recognizes that the benefit structure has become very complicated, is difficult to administer, is inconsistently applied, and is not transparent to recipients.

Options

The Commission's report presents the following options to deal with the complexity of benefits:

1. Combine basic needs component and shelter allowance into a standard rate for all adults
2. Eliminate the "dependent adult" category for all adults not enrolled in post-secondary education
3. Merge some special benefits into the standard rate

Questions for Discussion

1. In your opinion, how can the current structure be changed to reduce complexity?

Easier to Understand

Summary: Complexity, Compliance and Risk Management

The Commission's report notes that both caseworkers and people receiving social assistance have difficulties navigating the maze of benefits, eligibility criteria, rules, and exceptions. This complexity is due in part to the program design. The current "surveillance approach" is meant to ensure that the program is accountable to taxpayers.

Options

The Commission's report suggests that an audit-based system may be a better way to approach risk-management. This system could include the following:

- Replacing the current comprehensive verification requirements, applied to all recipients, with a more targeted, audit-based process.
- Continue to require people receiving social assistance to report monthly on whether their income, childcare, or housing costs have changed, but only require documentation (i.e. pay stubs or receipts) if there is an audit.
- Develop a new risk identification tool to be used along with the audit-based system to better target people for eligibility reviews.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think an audit-based system is a good idea?
2. What level of reporting/monitoring is necessary to maintain a system that is accountable to Ontario taxpayers?
3. What penalties would discourage others from misusing the system?

Summary: Treatment of Assets

The Commission's report notes asset rules were consistently identified as a major obstacle for people trying to make the transition to work and become more financially resilient.

Current asset rules require individuals to use all financial resources available to them before turning to social assistance. The Commission recognizes that this reduces an individual's ability to leave the system permanently. In addition, the current treatment of assets limits people's ability to save for the future.

The report notes that there is no rationale to explain why asset limits should be higher for ODSP than OW.

Options

The Commission's report suggests the following options to revise asset rules:

1. Increase OW asset limits to equal those of ODSP
2. Increase asset limits for an initial period of time when an individual first enters the program
3. Make changes to the rules that will help improve an individual's longer-term financial security (i.e. increase limits on RRSPs)

Questions for Discussion

1. Should people be required to spend down their assets before receiving social assistance? Why or why not?

Viable Over the Long-Term

Options

The Commission's report presents the following approaches to improve integration and delivery and to make the system sustainable.

1. Continue with the current model of separate delivery of OW and ODSP income support, while integrating employment services and supports for everyone receiving social assistance.
2. Provide employment services and income support through a one-stop delivery model that would integrate OW and ODSP at the local level.
3. Have municipalities deliver human services components of social assistance, including case management and employment services, while the province delivers administrative services, such as issuing social assistance cheques.

Questions for Discussion

1. How should INCOME supports be delivered?
2. How should EMPLOYMENT supports be delivered?

An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Summary

The Commission's report acknowledges that a number of policies and program designs beyond the social assistance program create challenges for income security in Ontario and Canada. The following are examples:

- Many immigrants are forced to turn to social assistance due to language barriers, lack of Canadian experience, and not having their credentials recognized
- Many Ontarians are forced to turn to social assistance because they have limited access to Employment Insurance
- The availability of prescription drugs, dental and vision benefits to low-income earners are limited
- The minimum wage is inadequate
- There is a lack of affordable housing to support people in need

Questions for Discussion

1. What programs in the federal/provincial social safety net need to be improved in order to decrease the reliance on social assistance?