

To:	Warden Hicks and Members of Grey County Council
Committee Date:	February 25, 2021
Subject / Report No:	SSR-CW-02-21
Title:	Social Assistance Update – 2020 A Year in Review
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Reviewed by:	Barb Fedy, Director
Lower Tier(s) Affected:	
Status:	Recommendation adopted by Committee as presented per Resolution CW45-21

Recommendation

1. That **SSR-CW-02-21 Social Assistance Update – 2020 A Year in Review** be received for information

Executive Summary

The effects of the pandemic on residents and the local economy are substantial, but for those already facing significant barriers such as poverty, homelessness and food insecurity, these times are even more challenging. In 2020, Grey County Ontario Works staff continued to provide critical supports to vulnerable residents virtually while the Ontario Works offices remained closed to the public.

Background and Discussion

Since March 2020 Covid-19 [Federal benefits](#) have been meeting the needs of Ontario residents impacted by Covid-19 offsetting the need to access Ontario Works. Locally, there has been a decline in the Ontario Works caseload in line with provincial trends. It is expected there will be a surge in applications when Federal Benefits end by April 2021. In anticipation the provincial government accelerated several key initiatives to support economic recovery through a renewed modernization plan to transform Ontario Works. Grey County Ontario Works department embraced those initiatives ensuring customer-focused service delivery during a pandemic and allowing for high impact interactions with clients at a time when offices were closed, and in-person services were limited across the County.

[Impact of the Pandemic on the Ontario Works caseload](#)

Following expected caseload trends, the Grey County Ontario Works caseload declined from 1,333 cases at January 2020 to 1,044 on December 31, 2020, representing a 21% decrease. The decline was anticipated as the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) advised that individuals and families in financial need due to the COVID-19 pandemic were expected to be diverted to Employment Insurance (EI) or federal COVID-19 recovery benefits. Ontario Works clients are required to pursue all sources of income available to them, which would include any federal or provincial supports. As new benefits become available, staff discuss these and any other financial resources from the federal or provincial governments that clients may be able to access.

While the number of residents receiving Ontario Works within the county significantly changed the composition of the caseload remained comparable. The Grey County caseload continued to be almost equally split between males and females and was comprised primarily of singles between the ages of 34 and 50 with 91% of caseload renting their accommodation. Sole support parents accounted for 34% of the caseload. While most clients had some completed some high school education only 40% have completed Grade 12/13 and 16% have completed some post secondary education.

In 2021, the Ontario Works caseload is [forecast](#) to increase by about 21.2%, back to 2019 levels. With the end of the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) in March, staff anticipate a surge of Ontario Works applications; because of the differences in eligibility some people may no longer qualify for federal funds. Ontario Works continues to be the one stable financial support for people when they have exhausted all other benefits; it can be issued while someone is waiting to receive federal benefits.

Performance Outcomes

The impact of the pandemic is most visible in the Ontario Works performance outcomes highlighted in [Ontario Works 2020 Year at a Glance](#). Achieving the employment results as set out by MCCSS was not possible in 2020 and the provincial government no longer assessed municipal performance against the outcome measures. MCCSS confirmed that the 2020 budget would not be impacted by the decline in outcomes but would be held at 2019 baselines to provide stability to the municipality and to the clients.

Ontario Works clients are permitted to earn up to \$200 before benefit payments are reduced. In Grey County, the percentage of caseload with earnings decreased from 18.97% in 2019 to 12.55% in 2020 indicating job losses and reduced work hours. Grey County's overall performance of 12.55% was higher than the 2020 provincial average of 9%. This trend may be associated with staff supporting clients in addressing the barriers they face to employment and continuing to make progress towards life stability and employment during the pandemic.

Modernization of Social Assistance continues at a rapid pace.

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services fast-tracked its work to modernize the system to ensure that local Ontario Works offices were positioned to respond to residents requiring assistance despite office closures and in-person services unavailable. Grey County's Ontario Works staff continued modernizing processes working closely with clients on new initiatives. Caseworkers successfully supported social assistance recipients with digital technology and by year end, over 60% of the caseload was enrolled onto [My Benefits](#). MyBenefits is a new online service available 24/7; clients are no longer dependent upon in-

person visits and can access and provide the information required to retain financial benefits electronically. Throughout 2020, Grey County was the leader amongst all 47 social assistance offices in the implementation of MyBenefits.

In 2020, over 90% of all financial benefits were issued to recipients through Direct Bank Deposits (DBD) and Reloadable Payment Cards (RPC), placing funds directly in the hands of clients and eliminating third party cheque cashing services. Clients were able to immediately access funds without paying costly fees for cheque cashing services. Caseworkers continue to work with the few remaining clients receiving a paper cheque to convert to either DBD or RPC. This is intensive work as the clients are often without adequate identification or without a fixed address making bank enrollment challenging.

Electronic Document Management was fully implemented in 2020, resulting in a reduction of paper-based systems and allowing staff easy access to client information electronically while working from home. The improved electronic system led to a review of the administrative processes to identify work that could become standardized across all administrative staff and identify new functions that would add greater value to both the client and staff.

The Ontario Works department implemented a new service delivery model at the end of 2019 that supported the provincial Risk Based Intake initiative. In 2020, this approach resulted in 68% of applications being processed within 4 days with only 5.4% overall found to be ineligible. The new model included specialized wraparound services to provide life stabilization supports to multi-barriered clients. The wraparound focus allowed caseworkers to keep in regular contact with recipients during a time where many clients were socially isolated often struggling to access basic needs such as food. Wraparound supports were available to half of the caseload in 2020, and this model will be expanded to the entire caseload in 2021.

Grey County Ontario Works volunteered to participate in the MCCSS' Social Assistance Mental Health Wellness Initiative. This program provides free, confidential online and phone-based counselling to eligible Ontario Works participants. It connects clients to internet and phone-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which can help manage anxiety and depression. To date 34 clients are participating.

To support clients with on-line access when drop-in computer services were no longer easily available with libraries and community partners closed, a partnership was established with ReNewed Computer Technology (RCT). Through RCT, Ontario Works staff can secure refurbished laptops with a 2-year warranty at a cost of \$165, covered by employment related benefits. In 2020, 107 computers were provided to social assistance recipients and an additional 37 laptops have been ordered for distribution in early 2021. The laptops are being used by clients to participate in Social Assistance Mental Health Wellness program, to facilitate computer literacy, for educational purposes and for job training. Clients report feeling connected to the community and able to continue to move forward with life stabilization and job searches.

The temporary emergency discretionary benefit for eligible Ontario Works clients ended July 31, 2020. With this benefit ending, there has been a steady increase in need for food which is being supported through the Social Services Pantry, a staff lead and funded initiative. In 2020, over 50 food hampers, 15 baby bags and 32 food gift cards were delivered to clients in need. In the first six weeks of 2021, over 20 food hampers have been delivered to food insecure residents.

As part of pandemic response, the department's transportation program continued to provide limited service. Over 2020 the van service provided 653 rides to clients, 90% of the rides connected individuals living in rural areas to medical services. In addition to regular duties, the van took on additional responsibilities for other departments including transporting personal protective equipment to the County's long-term care facilities, and supported community based partners with the distribution of basic needs such as the Good Food Box, other food hampers and backpacks with school supplies for low income families.

Despite an unusual year, the Ontario Works department continued to provide vulnerable Grey County residents with access to the right supports at the right time. Residents received a high level of service that provided financial stabilization, basic needs, and emotional support during the pandemic.

Recovery and renewal in 2021

In 2021, the Ontario Works caseload is forecast to increase by more than 20% (back to 2019 levels) as recipients of federal COVID-19 recovery benefits exhaust their benefits and turn to Ontario Works for support. To prepare for the anticipated surge in recipients, the Ontario Works department is undertaking several initiatives, all in line with the activities outlined by the MCCSS in the [Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal](#) presentation.

These initiatives include:

- Expanding wraparound specialized caseworker roles to the satellite offices.
- Strengthening community partnerships with local providers including improved information sharing and increased collaboration across partnerships such as those with the YMCA – Employment Services and the Four County Labour Board as well as the Grey County Economic Development department.
- Strategic planning to connect clients to Grey Transit Route ensuring no duplication of service.
- Implementing a [life stabilization model](#) in accordance with the MCCSS renewal plan.
- Completing the administrative process review and implementing recommendations.

Local Implications

On September 30, 2020, the Provincial Government announced the first phase of the social assistance recovery and renewal plan which aims to build a more responsive, efficient and person-centred social assistance system to get people back to work. The focus will be on improving access to employment and training services, developing new digital tools and modern service options, and processing financial assistance faster. The recovery and renewal plan builds upon what provinces and municipalities have learned throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and will begin to roll-out over 2021. The Ontario Works department is also preparing. Staff are continuing to modernize operations, enhance client service with new technology and a new service delivery model and will continue to be responsive to the changes implemented by the provincial government as part of its social service response to COVID-19.

Legal and Legislated Requirements

None with respect to work completed in 2020.

Changes to the Ontario Works Act and Ontario Disability Support Act are expected to align with the social assistance recovery and renewal plan. The extent of changes is not known at this time.

Financial and Resource Implications

MCCSS has confirmed that the 2021 budget is being kept at 2020 baselines (2018 actual expenditures) to provide stability and opportunity to respond to shifting priorities and client needs. Continued Social Assistance modernization by the Province is expected to impact the future Ontario Works budgets, possibly as early as 2022, by a minimum of a 20 percent reduction in funding. Details are not known at this time.

Relevant Consultation

- Internal (list)
- External (list)

Appendices and Attachments

[Federal Benefits](#)

[Ontario Works Caseload Forecast](#)

[2020 Ontario Works Year at a Glance](#)

[My Benefits](#)