

Report SSR-SS-04-16

To: Chair Burley and Members of the Social Services Committee
From: Wendy Henderson, Ontario Works Manager
Meeting Date: March 9, 2016
Subject: **Auditor General's Report re: Social Assistance Management System (SAMS)**
Status: Recommendation adopted by Committee as presented per Resolution SSC27-16; Endorsed by County Council April 5, 2016 per Resolution CC44-16;

Recommendation

THAT Report SSR-SS-04-16 outlining a summary of some sections of the provincial auditor general's report regarding the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) and the impact of its implementation on the delivery and administration of Ontario Works (OW) in Grey County be received for information.

Background

As requested at the January 13, 2016 meeting of the Social Services Committee, the following is a summary of some sections of the provincial auditor general's report regarding the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) and the impact of its implementation on the delivery and administration of Ontario Works (OW) in Grey County.

The auditor general's report repeated and validated many of the observations and issues documented in the Pricewaterhouse Coopers' (PwC) SAMS Transition Review (April 20, 2015), and those of the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) business recovery work group's report (September 2015). More importantly, all three reports validated many of the SAMS experiences of Grey County Ontario Works and Finance staff.

SAMS Defects

The auditor general's report found that SAMS was defective at the time it was launched in November 2014. Approximately 2400 defects caused significant social assistance eligibility errors including overpayments, underpayments (arrears), as well as letters and tax slips with inaccurate information. At the time of the October 2015 audit report, it was estimated that the errors created approximately \$140M in incorrect benefits and that SAMS will continue to calculate incorrect entitlements. The known defects and its complexities, as well as uncorrected (and yet to be identified) errors in SAMS will continue to result in the creation of invalid payments and overpayments.

Caseworkers must carefully review lists for issued and suspended payments, as well as overpayment reports every day to ensure that eligible clients are issued the correct entitlement, that overpayments are legitimate, as well as to be certain that all expected payments are generated. Unanticipated results must be investigated. As well, a manager reviews daily payment and overpayment lists as frequently as possible. The number of issues and their complexities significantly restrict caseworkers' abilities to provide other program services to clients.

SAMS is able to generate letters as a result of certain transactions, however they must be carefully reviewed to ensure they reflect accurate information. Immediately after launch, much time was invested with clients who received letters with erroneous information to alleviate their concerns and to investigate the problems. In early 2015, clients demanded immediate action when they found that their T5 tax slips for 2014 were incorrect. As well drug benefit cards reflected incorrect information requiring staff time to research, re-print and send out correct information to clients and pharmacies.

SAMS Workarounds and Routine Case Management Tasks

SAMS requires a number of "workarounds" in many routine transactions. A workaround is a series of steps to deal with a defect. When SAMS went live, 27 'known' workarounds were required which demanded "new learning" by staff. By the end of 2014, an additional 59 more workarounds had been developed and these did not include those developed by individual offices. Some workarounds require upwards of 34 steps to complete a routine case management function.

Regular case management work takes much longer to process in SAMS than in the former technology. For example, an application for Ontario Works (OW) used to average 87.6 minutes from initial call to eligibility determination and grant. In SAMS, it takes approximately 153.8 minutes by a seasoned caseworker; processing an income reporting statement takes 6 minutes longer; inputting an address takes 10 minutes longer and involves entering data in 38 screens; adding a dependent child in SAMS

takes more than 40 minutes; a referral to the Disability Adjudication Unit, which used to only take 1 minute, takes 35 minutes in SAMS. The additional data entry to complete routine case management work in SAMS reduces caseworker time delivering other services to clients.

SAMS Training

The auditor general's report spoke to the inadequate training and lack of support for caseworkers working in SAMS. SAMS training sessions took place while the technology continued to be developed; hence the training was not relevant to the final version. The training did not include some important processes, such as working with converted data. In addition, the SAMS Help Desk staff had no working knowledge of SAMS in order to respond to and resolve caseworkers' issues. This served to compound staff frustration and anxiety. As well, staff felt their concerns were dismissed and the reason SAMS did not function as designed was attributable to low competency and skill levels.

Staff Impacts

Staff confidence, morale, and self-esteem plummeted with the launch of SAMS. It shattered the confidence of staff that previously could quickly and correctly provide timely service to clients. Staff struggled with the tool they were required to use and which did not work as they had been assured; the numerous job aids were unhelpful; a process which worked on Tuesday, did not work on Thursday; as one defect was addressed, another problem was created, and other flaws identified. Add in the dismissive response to legitimate concerns, unhelpful statements that they did not possess the necessary competencies, coupled with a strong desire to serve clients, staff is to be commended on their resiliency and perseverance.

One year later in November 2015, a seasoned caseworker commented that while caseworkers are increasingly more confident in SAMS, the continuous learning, unlearning and relearning was very wearing.

None of the Grey County staff requested or required leaves of absence as a result of SAMS' implementation. A significant amount of overtime was approved to support staff efforts to ensure good customer service continued to be provided in a timely manner. Overtime requests have declined considerably since the summer of 2015.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services (Ministry) flowed \$198,000 during 2014 and early 2015 to Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) to support Ontario Works. A contract caseworker position was approved for the 2015 budget, however it was later learned that all the funding was to be expensed by March 31, 2015.

Consequently the contract caseworker position was approved to be funded through the caseload reserve. The position was approved to be extended for 2016, also funded through the caseload reserve (SSR-SS-12-15).

As already explained, processing transactions and case management functions in SAMS takes a long time. Since training and implementation, approximately 20 stand-up workstations have been purchased to support staff's ergonomic needs, most funded using the 100% SAMS funding and supported with medical documentation. The units enable staff to stand and moderately move around, while working at their computer for long periods of time.

A roller mouse has also proven to be beneficial to support the fine motor movements in wrists and hands to move through the tabs, screens and the many, many clicks required in SAMS.

Reports and Financial Reconciliation

The auditor general's report confirmed what Grey County Finance staff has been sharing with committee and council over the past year. Municipalities cannot pull off reports in order to complete their claims to the Ministry so it can flow its share of the social assistance costs. Therefore, the Ministry advanced funding which was calculated based on the average of the three months before SAMS was launched.

In November 2015, finance staff identified a funding shortfall of \$884,669.45 for Grey County. The shortfall reflected data from the months October 2014 to September 2015 as well as an unidentified variance between the bank reconciliations and SAMS reports. An adjustment from the Ministry was requested. A retroactive adjustment of \$657,935.06 was approved for January – December 2015 as well as an advance of \$898,877.04 effective January 2016 and onward.

As has also been communicated to Committee and County Council, and as the auditor general's report indicated, municipalities are unable to reconcile bank records with SAMS records because SAMS could not provide accurate data for social assistance payments. Approval to hire a finance officer (SSR-SS-12-15) was requested to assist in dealing with back-end financials and the increasing backlog of financial work. This position will be funded in part using our caseload reserve.

As stated, SAMS defects generated many payment errors which were suspended by the Ministry. These suspended payments must now be investigated and corrected as they affect clients' 2015 T5 tax slips. Currently managers are addressing the some 117 suspended payments for Grey County. The amounts range from \$0.00 - \$20,000. Once payments affecting the 2015 tax year are addressed, the task will return to

caseworkers, who may require overtime in order to correctly address these errors going forward.

Conclusion

The functionality of SAMS is critical to the effective program management and delivery of Ontario Works. It must correctly determine financial eligibility, correctly calculate payments, and generate accurate and appropriate letters and useful reports. It must protect client privacy and reduce the risk of fraud and abuse. It should also be relatively easy to use.

Until all the known defects have been corrected, and unintended outcomes as a result of those corrections have been addressed, SAMS will continue to present a challenge to the effective and efficient administration and service delivery of Ontario Works.

Financial/Staffing/Legal/Information Technology Considerations

There are no financial, staffing, legal, or information technology considerations for this report.

Link to Strategic Goals/Priorities

This report informs the Social Services Committee and County Council of the impact of SAMS on the delivery, management and administration of Ontario Works in Grey County. Committee and Council will have a greater understanding so as to support Ontario Works and Finance staff to achieve excellence in governance and service.

Attachments

None

Respectfully submitted by,

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Director Sign Off: *Barbara Fedy, Social Services Director*