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## Report 2024-129

**Report Title:** Ontario Works Centralized Intake Expansion

**Committee Name:** Social Services

**Committee Meeting Date:** October 2, 2024

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**Approved by:** Jennifer Moore, CAO

**Council Meeting Date:** October 16, 2024

**Strategic Plan Priorities:**  Innovate for Service Excellence  
 Ignite Economic Opportunity  
 Foster a Thriving Community  
 Propel Sustainable Growth  
 Champion a Vibrant Future

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### Information Report

**That** the Social Services Committee receive Report 2024-129 'Ontario Works Centralized Intake Expansion', for information; and

**Further That** the Committee recommend that County Council receive the report for information."

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### Purpose

The following report will provide an update on the Ontario Works Centralized Intake Expansion that takes effect October 1, 2024.

### Background

## **Current State**

As reported to the Social Services Standing Committee and Council through report 2021-20, starting in the fall of 2020, the Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services launched a prototype for Centralized Intake in select Municipalities. Northumberland County was onboarded with this updated process in February 2021 as part of the second group to launch. The prototype commenced with the introduction of the Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA). Between 2020 and 2023, all Ontario Works delivery sites across the province (except for First Nations) have launched with this initiative.

Centralized Intake under the prototype and current model, involved the processing of applications for Ontario Works financial assistance from initial intake through to grant using a digital process using a centralized team of staff hired by the Ministry. All files that are launched through the Digital Application undergo a risk assessment using established third-party information sharing, including Equifax, Canada Revenue Agency data matches, incarceration data matches, inter-provincial data matches, ServiceOntario and Service Canada database matches. Low and Medium Risk files could be auto-granted and then transferred to the local office for minor administrative clean-up and case management. High-Risk files were automatically flagged to the local office to intervene before eligibility could be determined.

Following grant, the file would be transferred to the local office to complete other case management activities, including developing an Action Plan and referrals to employment agencies or other community services. Intakes would continue to be completed in local offices for individuals unable to complete the digital process, those requiring additional supports of a Translator or Trustee and those who were unable to verify their identity using the digital process. The local office was also responsible for issuing ineligible decision letters as well as appeals relating to all eligibility decisions on file.

Those applying for assistance continued to have options available to them to apply, including:

- In-Person in their local office
- Over the phone with their local office
- Online using the Social Assistance Digital Application
- Over the phone with ServiceOntario (with their application being submitted using SADA)

Since onboarding, Northumberland County staff have participated and supplied feedback to the Ministry on the process as well as supported the initiative through referring applicants to the digital process for applying for assistance. In 2024 (up to September 20, 2024), 90% of applications for Ontario Works are completed through the Social Assistance Digital Application.

## **Delivery Agent & Delivery Partner**

As reported to the Social Services Standing Committee and Council through Report 2021-122, prior to February 2021, the Ontario Works Act designated Municipalities as the Delivery Agent for Social Assistance in a designated geographic area.

In February 2021, the Ontario Works Act was amended to reflect the ability to designate the Province as the Delivery Agent for Ontario Works and to appoint Municipalities as Delivery Partners. This change was to take effect at a future date.

Under the revised legislation, the Delivery Agent is responsible for the delivery of Ontario Works Social Assistance in a particular geographic area. The Delivery Partner performs the functions assigned by regulation, including high-impact person-centred support activities that connect recipients to a broader system of supports.

The enacting legislation comes into effect on October 1, 2024. With this change in legislation, municipal Delivery Partners will no longer have delegated authority to determine eligibility for initial eligibility for Ontario Works applicants, except for applicants under the age of 18, applications for Temporary Care Assistance and applications for Emergency Assistance.

### **Centralized Intake Expansion – October 1, 2024**

Starting October 1, 2024, 10 Municipalities across the province will be launching with an expanded Centralized Intake Model. The 10 sites are:

- City of Brantford
- City of Hamilton
- City of Kawartha Lakes & County of Haliburton
- City & County of Peterborough
- County of Northumberland
- District of Muskoka
- Norfolk & Haldimand County
- Regional Municipality of Niagara
- Regional Municipality of Peel
- Regional Municipality of York

### **Application Process Post October 1, 2024**

Using the existing Social Assistance Digital Application and a Digital First approach, all applications for Ontario Works financial assistance (except for Assistance for applicants under the age of 18, Temporary Care Assistance and Emergency Assistance) will be completed using the Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA). Applicants can access this application online or by calling a toll-free number that is managed by ServiceOntario staff. The Province will not be providing in-person service for the completion of the initial application.

While our staff will not be able to submit applications through SADA using our system, they will be able to support an individual to submit an online application if they attend the office in-person, using the public facing website. There will be a data point that captures if the local office has assisted with the application.

The Expanded model for Centralized Intake will see the Province taking on all initial grant decisions for Ontario Works assistance, except for assistance for Under 18 applicants, Temporary Care Assistance and Emergency Assistance, which will remain with a municipal responsibility. In taking on eligibility decisions, the Province will be responsible for screening for initial eligibility, updating the electronic file, issuing decision letters and handling appeals for ineligible decisions. Provincial staff will be responsible for gathering all required digital or wet signatures from applicants to determine the initial grant for assistance. In-person service for the grant process through the Provincial staff will be by appointment only, with Provincial staff utilizing existing provincial office space through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)

offices. We are currently working with the Ministry project team on the in-person service location for Northumberland, as we do not currently have an ODSP office within our jurisdiction.

### **Post-Grant Transition to Local Office**

Only granted files for assistance will be forwarded to the local office for post-grant case management activities, including the completion of the Action Plan, connection to employment or other community supports, and minor administrative functions (completion of Assignment of Benefit Forms for third party benefit income, Agreements to Reimburse for pending sources of income, verifying identify of dependent children). The local office will be responsible for determining ongoing eligibility for assistance, appeals related to ongoing eligibility and meeting outcomes related to exits and employment.

Should an applicant be facing an immediate crisis, including fleeing domestic violence, victim of flood or fire, or if they are facing eviction within 7 days, applicants will be referred to the Local Office to consider Emergency Assistance. Once the situation has stabilized, the application for ongoing assistance can be considered through the Centralized Intake model.

### **Province-Wide Launch of Centralized Intake Expansion**

While no set timelines have been provided by the Ministry, it is expected that the expanded model will be implemented across the province in 2025.

### **Additional Communications**

At the time of preparing this report, we are awaiting a full communication package, including information that can be shared with community partners/agencies. The information contained in this report has been shared with all Community & Social Services staff.

### **Consultations**

The Ontario Works Manager has participated in weekly meetings starting August 15, 2024 with the Ministry. Until September 6, 2024, we were under strict Non-Disclosure Agreements with the Ministry on communicating information. Since the lifting of the confidentiality, ongoing communication with the Director of Community & Social Services, Director of Health & Human Services, the Chief Administrative Officer and the Director of Corporate Services have occurred. In addition, Staff have been advised of the changes. Pending receipt of a full communication package from the Ministry (not available at the time of preparing this report), engagement with Community Partners on the changes will take place.

### **Legislative Authority / Risk Considerations**

We are governed by the *Ontario Works Act, 1997* and regulation for program delivery.

### **Discussion / Options**

At the time of preparing this report, we have not formally launched in the new model. We will be using the Fall of 2024 to review the impact locally on this change. Currently within the Social Services lobby, there is a computer terminal for clients and applicants to access, as well as a telephone. We will be reviewing the use of these resources post-implementation. In addition, we will be reviewing the needs within our community to identify access points for technology and internet for applicants to apply. Finally, we will be considering the space needs for in-person service for the application process by provincial staff.

At this time there is no change to our current staffing model as a result of this expanded model. This change is anticipated to provide more time for Caseworkers to case plan with clients to support their goals towards self-sufficiency, independence and employment. The change will have an impact on our administrative team specifically to the initial screening of regular Ontario Works applicants, however, it is anticipated that the staff would be available to support individuals with the application through the public-facing portal.

### **Financial Impact**

At this time, there is no impact to our current funding agreement or relationship with the Province. Allocations for 2025 have been set with no significant change to funding.

### **Member Municipality Impacts**

There are no impacts to member municipalities because of this change.

### **Conclusion / Outcomes**

This report has been submitted for informational purposes regarding the Ontario Works Centralized Intake Expansion.

### **Attachments**

N/A