

Ontario Social Assistance Review Consultation Process
Tuesday, August 9, 2011 4 – 6 p.m.

Purpose: To assess how inclusive the first phase of the Ontario Social Assistance Review has been.

Rationale: The Livable and Inclusive Communities (LIC) project is a partnership between the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo and the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS). Five working groups have been engaged to pilot the CCDS Planning and Evaluation Frameworks to either plan or evaluate local initiatives. The Frameworks assist communities to be more inclusive of people aging with and into disability in all aspects of community development: planning, implementation and review. For more information on the project, visit: http://www.waterlooregion.org/spc/kw/2009-03/livable_communities_project_aging_and_disabilities_updated.html or <http://disabilitystudies.ca/licproject/>.

Working groups had previously applied the tools to review initiatives such as the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy and the Integrated Accessibility Regulation. They wanted to apply the evaluation framework to the social assistance review as an example of community planning with significant impact on all residents.

Method: Participants from all working groups of the Livable and Inclusive Communities project were invited to participate in a discussion around the review process. A total of eight people participated in the discussion with the Social Planning council staff. Group members included retired professionals, adults who have lived experience with mobility, visual and mental health challenges as well as experience with social assistance. The group used the *Evaluation Tool for the Ontario Social Assistance Review Consultation Process* (attached) to guide their discussions.

Participants reviewed the following documents. Social Planning Council staff gave the participants a summary of the Ontario Social Assistance Review and background information. All are attached to this report:

- *About the Social Assistance Review* (overview of the social assistance review)
- *Guide to Hosting Community Conversation* (from the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario)
- *Recommendations from the Report of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council May 2010*
- *Summary and Workbook* (from the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario)
- Income Levels Fact Sheet
- *Evaluation Tool for the Ontario Social Assistance Review Consultation Process* (adaptation of the Working Group 1 Evaluation Tool)

Excerpts from:

- Vision Statement (taken from the *Summary and Workbook*, June 2011)
- *Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario Terms of Reference: Mandate, Scope and Outcomes*, pages 4 – 5
- *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas*

The following is an outline of our report:

- Social Assistance Review Vision (p. 2)
- Stakeholder Identification (p. 3)
- Stakeholder Engagement (p. 4)
- Mandate of the Commission (p. 5)
- Conclusion (p. 6)
- Recommendations (p. 6)

Social Assistance Review Vision:

A 21st century income security system that enables all Ontarians to live with dignity, participate in their communities, and contribute to a prospering economy.

The vision statement emphasizes quality of life and community participation. However, it does not go far enough. Access to community necessities is noticeably absent from the vision statement. There is an implication that community contribution is economic. We interpreted this to mean employment.

Participants had definite expectations about what a vision statement should be and what it should do:

- A guide for the entire process
- Consistent with the principles for a livable and inclusive community (see recommendations, page 6)
- Meaningful for all
- Lead to measurable outcomes

Working group members were not clear on how the Commission's vision statement connected to the *Discussion Paper Summary and Workbook* document.

Observations:

- The vision as it stands is far too vague
- List of outcomes does not include ways to assess achievement
- Objectives focus on employment and neglect other important community components
- There are numerous underlying assumptions to the Commission's vision and approach (see below)

The Commission has made numerous troubling assumptions:

- Lots of speculation about the ability to work and the interpretation of need
- Review assumes the problem is barriers to employment
- Clear indication that an individual is better off working, no matter what "work" is
- No meaningful acknowledgement that many jobs are not secure and are low paying (i.e. stated, but not reflected in the list of objectives)
- Limited options to get out of poverty, no specifics as to how this is accomplished

Stakeholder Identification: As the discussion progressed, it became clear that the most important factors to determine inclusivity are stakeholder identification and engagement.

Stakeholders identified in the Commission's documents	Stakeholders that participants identified as missing from the list (some are implied in the commission's documents, but are not overtly engaged)
People with lived experience of social assistance	Seniors
	People with disabilities
	People from visible minorities
	Tax payers
	Rural communities
	Isolated communities
Advocacy groups	
Labour organizations	
Business	
First Nation communities	
Other levels of government	
	Ministry of Labour
	Ministry of Health and Long Term Care
	Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
	Ministry of Transportation

Problems participants recognized with the Commission's stakeholder identification:

- How knowledgeable are the stakeholders about the system rules and eligibility requirements?
- No recognition of expertise for role that stakeholders play

Stakeholder Engagement:

Stakeholder engagement strategies identified in the Commission's documents	Problems participants identified with the Commission's stakeholders engagement strategies
12 Community Conversations hosted by individuals and/or community organizations	No funds for communities to host meetings
Community consultations with the commissioners	What happens if stakeholders do not come or participate?
Online submissions of <i>Discuss Paper: Issues and Ideas</i> or the <i>Summary and Workbook</i>	Workbook allows only restrictive input
Written submissions of <i>Discuss Paper: Issues and Ideas</i> or the <i>Summary and Workbook</i>	Feedback questions don't ask if income is sufficient
	Commission should ask questions that reflect stakeholders' perspectives and values
	Stakeholders are not asked to communicate their issues and do not know what the "system" should look like or does look like now.
Website comment form (approximately 150 words)	All input is self-initiated. This assumes people have the knowledge, skills, physical capability, and financial means to make their voices heard.
Submission to the Commission via mail, email, fax, or phone	Input is entirely internet dependent – even documents that can be mailed or faxed must first be downloaded from the Commission's website.
	Commission's communication is not simple; the language level is too difficult for many people; the documents are long; contents lack detail and basic information.
	Complicated process due to diversity of people involved. The Commission has not tailored opportunities for input. This is a "one size fits all" approach.

The *when* and *how* of stakeholder engagement are not identified in the Commission's documents. Working group members believe it is essential to note at what point any group of stakeholders should be engaged. i.e. planning, implementation, review. Various methods of engagement could be used, depending on the nature of the group and what degree of engagement is desired. i.e. inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower.

Mandate of the Commission: Participants felt it was important to discuss the Commission's mandate as it determines outcomes and the process for achieving them.

The Commission's mandate as defined in the Terms of Reference, pages 4 - 5	Participant Feedback
The Commission has been established to develop specific recommendations and a concrete action plan for reforming the social assistance system to improve client outcomes.	Commissioners have a restricted interpretation of their mandate and will not make recommendations about other government ministries that impact the social assistance system: labour, health, housing, transportation. This restricts the Commission's ability to produce meaningful change for those who use social assistance.
A reformed social assistance system should:	
Be acknowledged as one part of a larger income security system that encompasses municipal, provincial and federal programs	Inadequate scope for the review as articulated by the Commissioners during a telephone interview i.e. lack of authority to examine other federal, provincial, and municipal income security programs and make recommendations. This is not consistent with the Terms of Reference (p. 5) and certainly not broad enough to bring about meaningful change.
Recognize that municipal, provincial and federal governments, along with individuals, have mutual responsibilities for improving the outcomes of low-income Ontarians	
Be simple to understand and access, and provide basic income support for people in need in a fair and equitable fashion	Who defines terms like: "basic income" and "fair and equitable"?
Interact effectively with other municipal, provincial and federal programs outside of social assistance, including education, training, housing, child care and health benefits, to support employment	
Respect the autonomy, responsibility and dignity of clients, and recognize that they are best placed to decide how to spend their money to meet their needs	How is this possible when the entire system is premised on the notion of "last resort"? The framework is punitive, and restricts benefits as much as possible.
Be financially sustainable and accountable to taxpayers	Different way of presenting social justice so it is palatable to conservative economic views.
Be less resource intensive to administer	
Meet its intended purpose as a system of last resort	The Commission's mandate comes from the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy, as noted on page 2 of the <i>Discussion Paper</i> . The words "system of last resort" are nowhere in that document.
	Commissioners indicated clearly that employment is not part of their mandate, yet it is still included in the objectives; this is contradictory and provides no accountability.

Conclusion: What grade would you give this initiative on how well it engaged stakeholders? (from the *Evaluation Tool for the Ontario Social Assistance Review Consultation Process*, this is appended to this report)

It was unanimous. All participants gave the Commission a failing grade due to:

- Lack of a clear vision to guide the process
- Narrow stakeholder identification
- Limited engagement strategies
- Restricted opportunities for input

Recommendations: It was not our intention to make recommendations beyond the inclusivity of the process. However, group member identified these issues as priorities for the social assistance review:

1. Commissioners must identify trends from public feedback. i.e. similar concerns, notable differences among stakeholders
2. There must be an interim report prior to the October election so that social assistance/poverty becomes an election issue (commissioners have refused citing lack of resources).
3. There should be no claw-backs or benefit reductions for people on social assistance until they reach the Low Income Measure.
4. The Commissioners must report everything they heard, even if it is outside their interpretation of their mandate.
5. Blend ODSP and OW into one system so people do not fall through the cracks e.g., many people on OW have an unrecognized disability and may not meet the requirements for ODSP.
6. Acknowledge the changing dynamics for assistance recipients in a meaningful way (i.e. they are currently stated, but not addressed in the list of objectives):
 - Higher numbers of people on assistance
 - Increased number of single parent families
 - Temp agencies take part of salary and enforce job restrictions
7. Follow the principles of inclusivity developed by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies as a guide to the social assistance review process:
 - All people have access to quality community necessities and amenities
 - All people, regardless of any difference, have the same opportunities to take part in all aspects of community life
 - All people, regardless of any difference, have a sense of belonging and respect in the community

We appreciate this opportunity to provide input into the Social Assistance Review process.

Evaluation Tool for the Ontario Social Assistance Review Consultation Process

(adaptation of the Working Group 1 Evaluation Tool)

This framework, which can also be called a “tool,” is designed to help evaluate existing initiatives to determine whether they contribute to Livable and Inclusive Communities for people aging with and into disability. This evaluation can be used to improve an initiative and to advocate for more inclusive communities and more inclusive planning processes.

Name of the initiative:	<i>Ontario Social Assistance Review</i>
Reason for the evaluation:	<i>To assess how inclusive the first phase of the Ontario Social Assistance Review has been</i>
Who is doing the evaluation?	<i>Livable and Inclusive Communities Project participants</i>
What expertise do they bring to the table?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>Lived experience with disability, aging and income supports</i><i>Active community participants knowledgeable about the area in which they live</i>
Information sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>About the Social Assistance Review (overview of the review)</i><i>A Guide to Hosting Community Conversation (from the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario)</i><i>Recommendations from the Report of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council May 2010</i><i>Summary and Workbook (from the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario)</i><i>Income Levels Fact Sheet</i><i>Evaluation Tool for the Ontario Social Assistance Review Consultation Process (adaptation of the Working Group 1 Evaluation Tool)</i> <p><i>Excerpts from:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>Vision Statement: (taken from the Summary and Workbook, June 2011)</i><i>Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario Terms of Reference, 5. Mandate, Scope and Outcomes, pages 4 - 5</i>
Date of the evaluation:	<i>August 9, 2011</i>

Stakeholders and Community Engagement

1. Who was part of planning the initiative? *Stakeholders were not part of planning the review. This was done by the Commissioners within the parameters determined by the Minister of Community and Social Services. The following chart reflects stakeholder involvement to provide input only.*

Stakeholder	Role in the community	Strategies to Engage – <i>all the same, not tailored to each stakeholder</i>	How did they benefit from the initiative	How did they contribute to the initiative
<i>People with lived experience of social assistance</i>	<i>Vulnerable population, beneficiaries of income assistance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 Community Conversations hosted by individuals and/or community organizations • Community consultations with the commissioners • Online submissions of Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas or the Summary and Workbook • Written submissions of Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas or the Summary and Workbook • Website comment form (approximately 150 words) • Individual contact with local Member of Provincial Parliament • Submission to the Commission via mail, email, fax, or phone 	<p><i>It is too early to tell how or even if these stakeholders will benefit from the outcomes of this review.</i></p>	<p><i>All have contributed by providing input as determined by the review process. All stakeholders were given the same opportunities for input.</i></p>
<i>Advocacy groups</i>	<i>Influence political change by giving voice to those not typically heard</i>			
<i>Labour organizations</i>	<i>Collective power to influence decisions on behalf of members and the wider society, Intervention wage bargaining, Setting standards in relation to jobs, terms, conditions</i>			
<i>Business</i>	<i>Employers Responsible to follow employment standards, health and safety regulations, promote positive labour relations</i>			
<i>First Nation communities</i>	<i>Vulnerable population, possible beneficiaries of income assistance</i>			
<i>Other levels of government</i>	<i>Policy makers</i>			

2. Are all the relevant community components represented in the list of stakeholders? *4 out of 12*

NA	Natural Environment	No	Recreation/Culture
No	Built Environment (includes housing)	No	Health and Well-being
Yes	Business	Yes	Income
No	Education	Yes	Employment
No	Transportation	No	Volunteerism
No	Relationships	Yes	Formal supports
No	Safety	No	Informal supports

3. Did the stakeholder list include those expected to benefit from the initiative? *Partially*

Yes, people with lived experience of social assistance are included.

No, whole community will benefit as people's needs are met. Community at large is not represented. There is no mention of accountability for shared public dollars.

4. Were all potential stakeholders involved in meaningful ways? *Unknown*

All stakeholders were involved in the same way regardless of factors such as literacy levels, social isolation, and economic status. There were no distinctions as to when or how to engage different players. We do not yet know if participant input had an impact on the outcomes of the review.

5. How well were all of the identified stakeholders supported so they could work well together (i.e. contribute fully and comfortably)?

Nothing has indicated that this was the case during consultations.

6. a. Was shared responsibility developed among all the stakeholders?

No, stakeholders are involved only to provide input. They do not contribute to process.

b. How do we know?

Responsibility rests with the two commissioners who are accountable to the Minister of Community and Social Services. The public is not mentioned in the Commission Accountability section in the terms of reference.

7. a. At the current stage, who owns the initiative?

The Minister of Community and Social Services, the Honourable Madeleine Meilleur.

The Commissioners have been appointed by an Order in Council on the recommendation of the Minister. They are accountable to the Minister and the Minister's staff.

b. Is this acceptable or should there be another kind of ownership?

Stakeholders should have been involved in identifying the goals of the review, determining how the review would be conducted and how the results would be used. Participation has been restricted to input into a pre-determined process.

8. How well was information communicated to stakeholders, target population, and other groups?

At this point in time via the Commission's website and various media releases. (newspaper, radio, internet videos, TV interviews)

9. What is the current communication activity related to this initiative?

Reporting Requirements (from the terms of reference)

It is expected that over the course of their work, the Commission will regularly engage with the Minister and the Minister's staff in order to provide updates on the status and progress of their work.

The Commission is responsible for responding to ministry requests for information in a timely way, including information regarding:

- Issues and events that may concern the Minister in the exercise of the Minister's responsibilities; and*
- Public communications including the media responses, news releases, communication plans and contentious issues.*

Communications (from the terms of reference)

The Commission will provide the ministry with an opportunity to review materials prepared for public release in advance, including the engagement paper. Materials prepared for public release will be provided in English and French, and will meet accessibility requirements

There is no mention of a public request for information. All communication is initiated by the commissioners and subject to Ministry approval.

10. Other observations about stakeholders and community engagement:

The Commission's Vision Statement:

- Far too vague to use as a guide for the review process*
- List of outcomes does not include ways to assess achievement*
- Objectives focus on employment and neglect other important community components*
- There are numerous underlying assumptions to the Commission's vision and approach (particularly related to employability and assessment of need)*
- Does not go far enough to promote the principles of a livable and inclusive community*

Stakeholder identification:

- *Stakeholders that participants identified as missing from the list (some are implied in the commission's documents, but are not overtly engaged)*
 - *Seniors*
 - *People with disabilities*
 - *People from visible minorities*
 - *Tax payers*
 - *Rural communities*
 - *Isolated communities*
 - *Ministry of Labour*
 - *Ministry of Health and Long Term Care*
 - *Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing*
 - *Ministry of Transportation*
- *How knowledgeable are the stakeholders about the system rules and eligibility requirements?*
- *No recognition of expertise for role that stakeholders play*

Stakeholder Engagement:

- *Workbook allows only restrictive input*
- *Feedback questions don't ask if income is sufficient*
- *Commission should ask questions that reflect stakeholders' perspectives and values*
- *Stakeholders are not asked to communicate their issues and do not know what the "system" should look like or does look like now.*
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- *Commission's communication is not simple; the language level is too difficult for many people; the documents are long; contents lack detail and basic information.*
- *Complicated process due to diversity of people involved. The Commission has not tailored opportunities for input. This is a "one size fits all" approach.*

11. What grade would you give this initiative on how well it engaged stakeholders?
(Use A, B, C, D, F)

F - for the following reasons:

- *Lack of a clear vision to guide the process*
- *Narrow stakeholder identification*
- *Limited engagement strategies*
- *Restricted opportunities for input*