

Ontario Works overpayment fines will harm vulnerable clients: DSB

By **Alicia McCutcheon** - January 29, 2020



MANITOULIN – Changes to Ontario Works’ service delivery since April 2019 has meant a doubling in the ‘clawback’ the province requires for overpayments made on the cheques of some of Ontario’s most vulnerable people, and this has some members of the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB) worrying about the well-being of their clients. In April 2019, the province stipulated that any Ontario Works case file review that showed an overpayment (meaning the client owes, in this case, the DSB money, usually due to monthly reporting issues) would see 10 percent of their monthly stipend removed and paid back to the DSB—double the five percent overpayment fee clients saw prior to April 2019.

As an example, the average monthly single rate for Ontario Works is \$733. For this amount, the province jumped its clawback rate from \$36 a cheque to \$73.

“This individual will be at the food bank at the end of the month, or at our front desk asking for help to pay their fuel bill,” a visibly agitated DSB chair Les Gamble said at the January meeting.

“If you’re renting and have your own place, that’s milk, that’s bread, that’s a lot of money,” added DSB CAO Fern Dominelli.

“It’s huge,” said Donna Stewart, director of integrated social services for the DSB, in a Monday interview with *The Expositor*.

Ms. Stewart said that the province has given parameters for bypassing a repayment, such as if it puts the client in a “hardship situation.”

“We can really claim that all of our clients are in a hardship situation,” Ms. Stewart continued. “We’re struggling because these are people who are already receiving not a whole lot of money.”

Most the DSB’s Ontario Works cases have overpayments on file, she added. There are myriad reasons why this might be: a result of incorrect income reporting in one case or a late report, after the cheque has already been issued, in another.

Ms. Stewart explained that the province has told the DSB that they will be monitored closely and are abiding by the government’s wishes. “But from a moral standpoint, it’s a tough sell,” Ms. Stewart admitted.

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Ms. Stewart said the DSB has not yet noticed any cascade affects from the increase in repayments, such as help needed with bill paying, but that it is still early days. "It's something we'll be monitoring closely."

