

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services

Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal

Questions and Answers for Stakeholders and Partners

General

1. What changes are planned for social assistance programs?

Building on what provinces and municipalities have learned during the COVID-19 outbreak, and the need to fundamentally change how we do business, we will begin to roll-out the first phase of the social assistance recovery and renewal plan over the next few months, focusing on:

- Accelerated digital delivery solutions, including the launch of a new and easy-to-use Social Assistance Digital Application and expansion of the MyBenefits digital platform to improve access for people receiving social assistance and allow two-way digital messaging between clients and caseworkers.
- Centralized and automated delivery, beginning with centralized intake pilots across several municipalities and centralization of benefits in several ODSP offices that reduce paperwork, giving caseworkers more time to support clients through crisis and helping them get back to work.
- Risk-based eligibility review, to be developed alongside the centralized intake pilots, that uses provincial, federal and third-party sources to make financial assistance processing faster, while strengthening program integrity.
- Access to employment and training, partnering with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development to support people to get back to work, including people with disabilities who have been particularly hard hit by job losses during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Administration of key ODSP health benefits will be centralized. This means that for some ODSP sites, benefits applications will be processed by a central team rather than at the local office.

2. Where and when are these changes taking effect?

New digital tools and service options will roll out in phases:

- The new online application will roll out over the next few months starting with testing Ontario Works applications in the prototype municipalities
- New features will be added to MyBenefits continuously throughout the year.

Centralized intake and automated eligibility verification will roll out over the next few months starting with testing Ontario Works applications in the prototype municipalities.

Centralized benefits processing for participating ODSP sites will begin November 23, 2020.

3. What is the purpose of these changes?

For years, social assistance has been about paperwork, instead of getting people back to work. Often those who do leave the system end up coming back. As many Ontarians face the possibility of longer-term unemployment, the social assistance system needs to be able to respond to the economic realities being experienced in the province.

The COVID-19 outbreak is showing us a new approach is needed now more than ever - more Ontarians are looking to us for help with basic needs, to stabilize their family's life, and to get back to work and financial security. Now is the time to build on the learnings from COVID-19 and work to fundamentally change how we deliver services.

This includes eliminating red tape and creating a sustainable system that gives recipients a path to jobs, and greater independence and improved outcomes. By setting up automated digital systems, we will help staff to better support social assistance clients who are able to work by connecting them to the support they need to help them get back to work and to financial independence.

People on ODSP will also benefit from this plan. Many people on ODSP also lost jobs as a result of COVID-19. In fact, people with disabilities are disproportionately employed in the retail and services sectors that have been hardest hit and are facing challenges to stabilize their lives.

The ministry's plan isn't just about getting people back to work. It's about being more effective at connecting people to the supports that they need to achieve greater independence and participate in their communities.

4. What changes are happening to the online application for social assistance needed?

In next few months, the new online application will be able to accept Ontario Works applications for municipal prototype sites. Online applications for Ontario Works outside the prototypes sites and for ODSP will continue to be accepted through OASA at this time.

The current process for applying to social assistance is administratively heavy, dependent on paper-based and manual transactions and repetitive tasks. The Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA), will focus on minimizing administrative burden to allow staff the time they need to focus on value-added activities. SADA will also address the projected increased volume of online applications as the province recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ontario Disability Support Program

5. How will these changes affect the way ODSP is delivered?

Administration of key ODSP health benefits will be centralized. This means that for some ODSP sites, benefits applications will be processed by a central team rather than at the local office.

We are taking a phased approach to centralizing benefits administration, starting in November 2020 with select benefits for nine (9) ODSP offices, expanding to all ODSP offices early in 2021.

Benefits in scope for centralization right now include:

- Special Diet Allowance
- Pregnancy/Breast-feeding Nutritional Allowance
- Mobility Devices, Batteries, Repairs
- Low Cost Energy Conservation benefit
- MSN invoice and voucher payments.

Benefits centralization will be expanded beyond the Employment Services Transformation (EST) prototypes in January 2021. Information on implementation will be shared as soon as it becomes available.

In addition to benefits centralization, we will be working with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) to improve access to employment and

training services for current and potential social assistance clients whose employment was impacted by COVID-19, to help them get back to work as jobs are available.

6. How will ODSP clients be impacted and informed of any potential impacts?

ODSP clients will benefit from new features that will continue to be added in MyBenefits, like two-way messaging, which will give them more choices about how to connect and save them time and effort.

Clients will be contacted by their local office as needed, and we will be utilizing the MCCSS website and social media to ensure clients are made aware of any changes as they take place.

7. How do these changes fit with changes in the Employment Services Transformation in ODSP prototype offices?

Benefits centralization will support Employment Services Transformation (EST) in ODSP prototype offices by reducing the administrative workload of local office staff, supporting them in focusing on tasks associated with EST. This includes more high-impact activities with clients such as case management and conversations with clients to help support their life stabilization needs and, where appropriate help them move towards employment readiness.

Ontario Works

8. How will these changes affect the way Ontario Works is delivered?

We will centralize and automate financial assistance intake and initial eligibility decisions, starting with a limited number of Ontario Works prototype sites. This means that intake for new applicants to Ontario Works who apply using the new Social Assistance Digital Application (SADA) will be automated by using data from provincial, federal and third-party sources and supported by a central team instead of being processed through the local office.

Intake for some Ontario Works applicants at the prototype sites will continue to be processed at the local office, including those who apply using the Online Application for Social Assistance or at the local office, or who may be assessed as requiring additional verification.

Starting in 2021, centralized and automated financial assistance intake will be expanded to more municipalities.

9. Can the province make eligibility decisions for Ontario Works?

The centralized, risk-based process will focus on using technology to support the CMSMs and DSSABs in their roles as Ontario Works delivery agents. Using a risk-based algorithm developed in collaboration with the municipal service delivery partners, low and medium-risk applications can be auto-granted through SAMS technology. Provincial staff in the central team can support this process through manual interventions where required. Higher risk cases will be passed to municipalities and DSSABs for determination. As this is a prototype, there will be ongoing testing of the model, and we will make adjustments where necessary.

10. How will municipalities be engaged on co-design and implementation?

Municipal and DSSAB stakeholders and partners will be engaged in a co-design process to develop plans for implementation of Ontario Works intake centralization through existing engagement tables such as bi-weekly touch points with the Commissioners and Chief Administrative Officers and the Provincial Municipal Social Assistance Employment Committee (PMSAEC). The ministry will establish additional working groups or sub-committees as required.

In the longer term, a new provincial-municipal transformation vision will be co-designed with municipal and DSSAB stakeholders and partners and set the stage for system transformation that drives outcomes, accountability and system performance.

11. Will funding for municipal delivery agents be impacted?

2021 Ontario Works planning allocations are being kept at the 2020 baselines to provide stability for Ontario Works delivery partners during the COVID-19 recovery period. Ontario Works delivery partners will be able to re-invest in additional capacity resulting from recent modernization investments and policy initiatives, to respond to local priorities and enhance outcomes for clients.

Please note the applicable Employment Services Transformation (EST) transfers will be applied to EST prototype 2020 baselines.

If you have any questions or need more information, please do not hesitate to contact your Program Supervisor/MCCSS contact.

12. How will Ontario Works applicants and clients be impacted and informed of any potential impacts?

Ontario Works applicants will benefit from a seamless onboarding process that allows their first caseworker interactions to focus on building a good relationship and building a plan for the future rather than on administration.

Clients will be contacted by their local office as needed, and we will utilize the MCCSS website and social media to ensure clients are made aware of any changes as they take place.

13. Do these plans apply to First Nations Ontario Works delivery partners?

In recognition of their unique needs and priorities, the province will work with First Nations delivery partners on a separate plan to renew social assistance in First Nations communities.

14. How will information be shared with municipal and DSSAB stakeholders and partners going forward?

Information will be shared as soon as it becomes available through a number of sources including regular engagements with municipal and DSSAB stakeholder and partners and written communications from the ministry.

15. How do these changes fit with changes in the Employment Services Transformation in Ontario Works prototype offices?

Centralized and automated financial assistance intake and initial eligibility reviews will support Employment Services Transformation (EST) in ODSP prototype offices by reducing the administrative workload of local office staff, supporting them in focusing on tasks associated with EST. This includes more high-impact activities with clients such as case management and conversations with clients to help support their life stabilization needs and, where appropriate help them move towards employment readiness.

16. How will the government respond if federal benefits are not implemented as expected?

The changes being introduced today as part of the social assistance recovery and renewal plan help prepare us to support a variety of potential needs from social assistance clients and applicants, including in the event federal benefits are not implemented as expected.

We continue to plan for a wide range of contingencies and will engage with delivery partners to co-develop approaches and implementation plans.

17. Who should municipal and DSSAB stakeholders and partners contact if they have questions or concerns?

For program-specific questions, please contact your program supervisor.