

Response to:

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform February 2012 – An Aboriginal Perspective (Yvonne Maracle)

Chapter 6: First Nations and Social Assistance

How well do the various approaches set out in the previous chapters align with First Nations' desire for greater control and flexibility with respect to social assistance reform? What other approaches should be considered to meet the needs of First Nations?

It was noted in various statements about the need for flexibility as it relates to rules and criteria to meet the needs of those receiving benefits. As it relates to First Nations, this particular statement is very true. There are too many complex rules that limit accessibility and continuation for OW and ODSP support for many First Nations who are trying to access these programs.

Communication and trust issues are a definite barrier in establishing continuity for program services. The need for greater control over the social system as it pertains to First Nations people is not as evident as it could be within the previous chapters. Society as a whole does not understand the complexities as relates to the history and its relationship to First Nations people and their dependency on Social Services.

A First Nation approach provides the basis of the understanding and how to better deal with the First Nations clients who are using or want to access the program. The historical make up and family support puts individuals at risk of receiving OW or ODSP supports as many may live together to basically survive, whether in an urban or reserve setting. The system does not allow for these scenarios and penalize the family unit, placing added stress on them, potentially leading family members to become homeless overall in order to accommodate the system's rules.

Increased First Nation awareness training and/or involvement is greatly needed for the decision makers when deciding the approach to First Nation issues regarding OW and ODSP. First Nations people have a number of social barriers in front of them to begin with, the overall decision makers must become aware of the issues in order to provide a more improved system that would allow First Nations to become productive community members in the future.

Other approaches that should be considered is the need to educate front line workers on the training and educational opportunities that could be available to First Nation's clients. The potential for case management style and collaboration with on and off Reserve resources could greatly enhance the client's training opportunity, but they should not be penalized from the system and immediately "cut off" when trying to research and/or access other opportunities. It

has been my experience that some OW and ODSP Workers demonstrate racist reactions to clients when the client is trying to enhance their living conditions by accessing First Nations program. Another improvement would be to “educate” front line workers and managers about Aboriginal services within their local areas that could assist the client.

As part of the training the OW and ODSP workers receive should be the historical truth reflected to counteract the stereotypical ideas that First Nations come with money, that they don't contribute to society by not paying taxes, that everything is free for them and so on. It surprises me the number of people, including people in management positions who think this way, so training, education and true information needs to be a part of the training that all levels of government should receive as part of their regular training.

The reader does agree that the rates for OW and ODSP need to be greatly increased to meet the basic needs of all its clients. It is very hard to prosper when you're expected to survive on food bank hand outs as your daily meal supplement.

What position should the Commission recommend that Ontario take with the federal government on issues related to First Nations and social assistance?

The position should be one that First Nations remains a Federal responsibility and should not be easily passed on to the Province. It needs to take responsibility to the issue and develop (in collaboration with First Nation Leaders) initiatives that will support First Nations receiving OW and ODSP that is respectful to their needs and geographic areas. They need to take into account the number of social ills that already consume First Nations people and address them properly. In order to better prepare the fast growing population of First Nations in Canada, the government needs to financially support initiatives that will bring First Nations people into the fold that will allow them to become productive community members in the future, rather than a potential drain on the social system if that investment is not done immediately.

The federal government needs to support First Nation Leaders and pilot projects that are demonstrating improvements to administering OW and ODSP services to First Nations clients. They need to take into account the historical complexities that continue to keep a nation of people in the world of poverty.