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# Métis Nation of Ontario



**OFIFC**



## **A Collaborative Summary of Social Assistance Reform Urban Aboriginal Client Sessions**

**Jointly Submitted to: Ministry of Community and Social Services, Government of Ontario  
By: Métis Nation of Ontario, Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, and  
Ontario Native Women's Association  
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## Background

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In 2008, the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy committed to reviewing the social assistance system to remove barriers, increase opportunities, and better align the system with other government programs, particularly in terms of employment with the aim of improving outcomes for social assistance recipients. In 2010, Ontario appointed two commissioners, the Honourable Frances Lankin and Dr. Munir Shiekh to lead the social assistance review and in 2012 the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario released its final report entitled *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*.

*Brighter Prospects* identified 108 recommendations intended to guide the government's social assistance transformation towards a more simple, effective and accountable system. Drawing on the recommendations of *Brighter Prospects*, the 2013 and 2014 Ontario Budgets implemented initial changes to social assistance, focusing on improving incomes, simplifying benefits, and promoting better employment outcomes, and set the stage for long-term social assistance transformation.

Ongoing social assistance transformation is part of a new ten-year economic plan to help people find and maintain employment and contribute to improving the health of low-income individuals and families. The government's social assistance transformation is guided by four objectives:

- Motivate and support people to be successful in the workforce;
- Provide adequate assistance;
- Deliver modern, responsive services; and
- Ensure confidence in the system.

The 2013 Ontario Budget also committed to a broad engagement strategy on social assistance reform, with a specific focus on engaging Aboriginal communities. As part of the engagement strategy to achieve this commitment, the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) initiated collaboration with the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO), Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), and Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) through the Urban and Off-reserve Aboriginal Policy Engagement Table, to host urban Aboriginal client discussion sessions on social assistance reform. MCSS has also held client discussions in coordination with their municipal and First Nations delivery partners in communities across Ontario, including on-reserve sessions.

This report summarizes the seven engagement sessions throughout the province facilitated by the MNO, OFIFC and ONWA.

## About the Discussion Sessions

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The urban Aboriginal client discussion sessions were coordinated by the MNO, OFIFC, and ONWA, in collaboration with the MCSS as part of the government's commitment to engage key stakeholders in social assistance reform in Ontario.

The discussion sessions provided current and former Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) clients with an opportunity to identify the gaps and challenges they have experienced within the social assistance system as well as to propose ways in which the system could be transformed to increase wellbeing and enhance outcomes for recipients. Local staff from the host organizations recruited participants for the engagement sessions – identifying former and current Ontario Works and ODSP clients who accessed or are now accessing programs, services, and supports. This report identifies systemic issues that have an impact on all six communities and also likely impact services in other communities. While the issues raised in this report are systemic and shared across communities, the way in which community members experience these issues are nuanced by their community and region.

Seven engagement sessions took place throughout the province. MNO, OFIFC and ONWA were each responsible for facilitating engagement sessions, as outlined below:

### **MNO**

1. MNO Office, Sault Ste. Marie, December 2014, Ontario Works and ODSP Session, approximately 13 participants in attendance; and
2. Bethel Field House, Community Centre through the City of Ottawa, Ottawa, December 2014, Ontario Works and ODSP Session, approximately 4 participants in attendance.

### **OFIFC**

3. Dryden Native Friendship Centre, Dryden, November 2014, Ontario Works and ODSP Session, approximately 13 participants in attendance;
4. Council Fire Native Cultural Centre, Toronto, November 2014, Ontario Works Session, approximately 20 participants in attendance; and
5. Council Fire Native Cultural Centre, Toronto, December 2014, ODSP Session, approximately 10 participants in attendance.

## ONWA

6. ONWA Training Room, Thunder Bay, December 2014, Ontario Works and ODSP Session, approximately 9 participants in attendance; and
7. Timmins Native Friendship Centre, Timmins, December 2014, Ontario Works and ODSP Session, approximately 12 participants in attendance.

These sessions were broken down into the four following topics which helped to guide the discussion:

1. **Improving Incomes:** Improving incomes and access to core supports outside the system to promote greater independence.
2. **Strengthening Integrity and Accountability:** Strengthening integrity and accountability through greater public transparency and outcomes-based business practices.
3. **Improving Client Service:** Improving client service by introducing modern, responsive service delivery.
4. **Improving Employment Outcomes:** Encouraging employment by enhancing supports and incentives to work, with an emphasis on clients more distant from the labour market.

## The Discussion: What We Heard

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Drawing on their personal experiences, urban Aboriginal Ontario Works and ODSP clients shared the ways in which gaps and challenges within the social assistance system impact their daily lives and their families. Participants also identified ways in which the system could be changed to enhance outcomes and opportunities for themselves and their families.

### Improving Incomes

Participants in the discussion sessions generally agreed that benefits under Ontario Works and ODSP are inadequate which, for most, results in a cycle of deep poverty that greatly impacts them and their families' health and wellbeing. Most participants also expressed that the daily struggle of making ends meet makes it very challenging to raise a family on social assistance. A number of participants shared the negative impact

that growing up in deep poverty has had on their children, particularly their mental health and how their children struggle with depression, suicide, anxiety, and low self-confidence. Participants noted that the low shelter amount and basic needs rates do not reflect the minimum cost of living in their communities and that these costs keep increasing.

The following needs are not being met by the current income benefits provided by social assistance as identified by participants in the discussion sessions:

#### Housing and Utilities

Participants indicated that the maximum shelter amount under Ontario Works and ODSP is inadequate, which is a major concern for them due to the high cost of rent and utilities. The shelter amount must cover the realistic basic cost of living in Northern Ontario and urban centres. Most participants indicated that the affordable housing in their communities is unsafe to live in, often unmaintained, requires major repairs, and has pest infestations. Some participants also indicated that housing available to Ontario Works and ODSP recipients does not align with Children and Family Services' rules, in particular, requirements that older children must have their own room.

Many participants identified that the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit should be brought back in order to help social assistance recipients deal with issues around overdue utility bills, broken appliances, or moving expenses. The loss of this benefit was viewed as having negatively impacted many of the participants and as increasing their risk of homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

#### Food

Participants discussed the challenge in buying healthy and nutritious food, with many also noting that they have difficulties affording food at all, and will skip meals, in order to afford housing and utility expenses.

In order to supplement their budget for food, many participants noted that they access a local food bank or food cabinet. However, they stated that this food is often packaged and processed and is thus not always the most nutritious. Additionally, because these supports are overused in the community, there are often limits as to how much support an individual can get and, at times, there is a shortage of food available. Some participants expressed fear when using food banks and other services, namely breakfast programs at schools, because Children and Family Services could be notified of their use and that it may negatively impact case files.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, in 2012, the Community Start-Up Fund and Maintenance Benefit was removed from social assistance and consolidated into the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) administered by municipalities to provide housing and homelessness services and supports. Eligible social assistance clients may access CHPI services and supports through the municipality in which they reside.

Some participants noted that their doctor had instructed them to eat healthy in order to improve and support their health, particularly those on ODSP; however, they do not have enough income to purchase healthy food. Even those in receipt of the Special Diet Allowance indicated that this benefit is often not enough to purchase the food they require for their health condition. Most participants indicated that they are unable to afford healthy food; specific examples were raised for the need to purchase fruits and vegetables, gluten-free food, non-processed food and food for specific health conditions, including Diabetes and Celiac Disease.

There should be specific food supports, in addition to the basic needs rate and shelter amount rate, to ensure that social assistance recipients are able to purchase healthy food.

### Transportation

The issue of transportation was a concern shared by all participants. Where public transit is available, it is expensive and not adequately covered by travel allowances, and where public transit is not available, travel allowances will not cover the cost of taxis or use of a vehicle. Many participants noted that their only option is walking; however, this is not always a realistic option due to the size of the community and surrounding area, or because of weather, particularly in the winter months. Participants also indicated that relying on walking is increasingly challenging for families with children and individuals with mobility issues; participants indicated that as a result, the ability to seek services can be extremely challenging. Some participants also indicated that they had experienced discrimination from public transit operators and the general public in regard to mobility issues.

### Medical Needs

Participants feel that health benefits under Ontario Works and ODSP are inadequate, for example dental, eye care, medical supplies, and prescriptions. Participants also expressed difficulty in obtaining their necessary prescriptions, noting that the medications covered can often change; however, doctors and recipients are not notified. ODSP recipients also shared that costs such as casts, accessibility equipment (i.e., scooters and wheelchairs), fitness classes (to improve mobility and cognitive health) are most times not covered.

Some participants expressed concern over the difficulties they have in getting family doctors and the discrimination they face from health care professionals because they are on Ontario Works or ODSP.

Participants also noted that when seeking mental health services, they would prefer to access counselors over psychiatrists and psychologists. They are only able to access counselors for a short period of time, but are able to seek long-term services from

psychiatrists and psychologists and, when participants are approved for these services; they are faced with months-long waitlists.

Transportation and travel for medical related issues was also a huge concern for participants, in particular ODSP recipients. In more remote locations, many medical appointments or procedures require individuals to travel overnight, a cost that clients must pay for upfront and apply for a travel grant, which can take months to be reimbursed. Additionally, there are instances when the nature of the appointment requires a companion; however, the cost of their companion's travel, accommodation, and food is not eligible for re-imburement under social assistance.<sup>2</sup>

Many participants, especially ODSP recipients, discussed the negative effects of 'red tape' in Ontario Works and ODSP. For example, participants requiring approval of funding for certain medical equipment must go through an approved doctor rather than their own doctor, face long wait times to receive approved equipment, certain medical 'issues' are not covered under ODSP but are covered under Ontario Works, and there are burdensome annual medical form requirements.

#### Clothing

Participants indicated the difficulties in providing clothing for themselves and their children. Of particular concern was the inability to afford adequate coats and boots for winter, in addition, some participants indicated difficulty in affording appropriate clothes for job interviews and employment.

#### Other

Participants discussed the difficulty of making ends meet – providing the necessities for their families and an inability to afford emergency and unforeseen costs.

Participants expressed concern when receiving funding as a couple. Funding for Ontario Works and/or ODSP is automatically sent as one cheque, which raises security concerns for individuals in abusive relationships who may be unable to leave the relationship and/or without economic independence.

Participants also identified that they would like funding for their children to partake in extracurricular activities and for children over the age of 18 attending high school. Some participants further noted that they would like access to funding, in the form of bursaries, to partake in cultural and traditional activities.

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<sup>2</sup> These travel costs may be covered under discretionary benefits for Ontario Works clients, if required and approved by the administrator. For ODSP clients, these travel costs may be covered where an approved health professional specifies that it is necessary for someone to accompany the recipient.

## **Strengthening Integrity and Accountability**

Participants were asked to reflect on their experience with the social assistance system, which is often criticized for being too complex and difficult to understand and navigate.

The process of applying for social assistance, receiving discretionary benefits or other supports and completing reports as a recipient were described as being very slow. The forms are often complex, long, and utilize language (i.e., legal jargon) that is difficult for many recipients to understand. The questions are often repetitive and require participants to submit a lot of documentation from various sources which, for many, results in being caught in a runaround cycle to get adequate information.

Most participants noted that when asking social assistance staff, such as caseworkers, to help explain the forms or answer a question, participants are often treated as though they are incompetent. This was even more of a challenge for individuals with lower literacy levels who may require increased support in reading and filling out complex forms.

Some participants also indicated that they felt that there is differential treatment for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients and that some workers favour certain clients over others. Participants indicated that there should be Aboriginal workers at Ontario Works and ODSP to help recipients fill out forms and provide translation services. Another barrier that some participants indicated was the shortage of family doctors in their community to assist with their application for medical benefits.

Participants found the process of income reporting to be confusing and disappointing due to claw backs that are in place. There was a general consensus that the current system keeps social assistance recipients from achieving financial independence because it does not allow them to save money in order to get ahead. For example, participants noted that the reductions on earned income is too high and even the new \$200 earning exemption is not enough to get ahead due to the increasingly high cost of living.

Participants also had concerns with money taken back by social assistance when recipients are in receipt of the federal government's Child Tax Benefit tax. Participants noted that this money is supposed to help support the child; however, they feel as though the social assistance system takes it away from the child when they already receive inadequate income supports, relative to the cost of living, to raise their children.

Overpayment was also cited as a huge issue in situations when the overpayment is corrected and then the recipient is left with less income the following month.

Participants were asked whether an online portal to complete income reporting would help simplify the process. In response, participants noted that not everyone has regular

access to a computer or the internet and that not everyone is computer literate. Many indicated that they would need supports to access the internet and would require training on how to use the portal and, in some cases, on how to use a computer. Participants did note that they can access computers at some local organizations; however, it was indicated that the Ministry would also need to support community internet access points to ensure that the internet connection meets the portal requirements, because there are many cases in which old technology does not support newly developed programs.

### **Improving Client Service**

There was a general consensus among participants that their experiences with client service from both Ontario Works and ODSP caseworkers were dissatisfactory. While some participants did have positive things to say about their caseworker, the majority of comments required changes in the way caseworkers interact with clients. These include the following:

- Clients are often not able to get in contact with their worker, citing that the caseworkers are overworked and do not have enough time to see clients;
- Clients want their caseworkers to treat them with respect, to not minimize the situation, to not compare their circumstance to someone else's, and to recognize that each client's needs and experiences are unique;
- Caseworkers need to ensure better communication with clients and that information is explained clearly so that clients understand;
  - Participants noted that they feel that there are a lot of benefits that are available that they do not know about, referring to them as "hidden services".
  - Participants recommended networking opportunities, sharing information with community organizations, and establishing support groups as ways to better communicate with clients;
- There needs to be confidential spaces for clients to discuss private matters with their caseworkers;
- Participants noted that they have experienced racism from their caseworker and that caseworkers need to undergo cultural competency training;
- Many participants noted concern for their safety when in Ontario Works/ODSP offices;
  - Participants noted that glass is used to separate workers from clients; they felt that this indicated a need to protect workers from clients; participants expressed feeling unsafe when accessing services.
    - In one session, participants noted that illegal activities took place in the bathrooms of ODSP offices and that police are often present on days that they receive cheques.
  - Participants also indicated a lack of emotional safety in offices; this was expressed as a fear of being judged, anxiety and a fear of authority.

- Participants noted that each individual ODSP case needs to be treated differently;
- Caseworkers need to do more outreach and be more flexible in supporting people with limited mobility issues or children;
- Caseworkers need more training and expertise on mental health issues and disabilities;
- A positive relationship with their caseworker is extremely important, but many noted that they are not able to change caseworkers when they have a bad relationship or they have a poor relationship as a result of caseworker turnover or changing workers regularly; and
- There needs to be a mechanism to file a complaint about a caseworker or request a change of caseworker.

Participants indicated it would be helpful to have an Aboriginal liaison for social assistance recipients who could help clients with paperwork, understand available benefits, and to advocate directly to their caseworkers and the social assistance system in general about complications or issues they are experiencing. This liaison would ideally be located within an urban Aboriginal organization.

Additionally, participants noted that there is a need to have Aboriginal language interpreters available when meeting with caseworkers or seeking social assistance services. Participants noted that some people within the community are reluctant to approach the Ontario Works and/or ODSP offices because of language barriers. Participants indicated that the social assistance services and caseworkers should be located within the urban Aboriginal community organizations where they receive supports as this is where they feel safe.

### **Improving Employment Outcomes**

Participants were asked to reflect on their experience with employment services as a pathway while receiving Ontario Works and ODSP.

#### Stage 1: Pre-Entry

Participants discussed some of the barriers faced when looking for employment. Most participants indicated that they had a lack of confidence in their skills, training, and education needed to obtain employment. Some participants also indicated that employers did not want to train prospective employees and expected applicants to be job-ready with relevant on-the-job training and experience. Across all sessions, participants felt that racism has negatively impacted their search for employment and access to services. Further, it was evident in some communities that class, nepotism and discrimination against social assistance recipients also impacted the search for employment. Participants noted that receiving supports from Aboriginal organizations was more helpful and less discriminatory.

Some participants stated that a lack of income hindered their job search, and even if they found a job, a lack of child care and the cost of getting to and from work made the possibility of continued employment unrealistic. Some participants also discussed the severe and negative implications that the external labour market has on employment outcomes of social assistance recipients within their local community. In some communities there are limited job opportunities available; participants indicated that this also discouraged their search for employment and they expressed frustration with Ontario Works' focus on employment outcomes stating that these outcomes felt impossible to achieve within their communities.

When asked why they started looking for employment, some participants' responses included: "to afford healthy food"; "to care for dependents"; "left an abusive relationship and trying to rebuild family and get children back"; "to meet career goals and have a better standard of living"; and "to have a more fulfilled life and feel happy".

Participants shared specific feedback relating to ODSP and its employment services. Many participants felt that there needs to be a decision mechanism in place to determine which ODSP recipients are able to work. Most participants indicated that ODSP needs to be more flexible when providing employment supports in order to meet the varying needs of ODSP clients. In addition, there appeared to be an overall confusion amongst participants receiving ODSP as to whether or not they are able to work and if there are any limits to the number of eligible hours, etc.

### Stage 2: Entry

In their initial search for employment and employment supports, participants contacted a number of different service providers in addition to Ontario Works employment supports. The majority of participants indicated that they did not find the Ontario Works employment supports, including caseworkers, to be very helpful. Challenges were raised in accessing employment related programs, namely program requirements for individuals to be EI eligible and government loan programs requiring a minimum caseload to receive support.

Most participants indicated that they attended various training programs and workshops and were in contact with local community organizations whose mandate is to provide assistance in job searches. Participants identified that they had to go to multiple agencies in order to get needed information and services and, as a result, feel there are duplication of services. Participants felt it would be more effective for them if there was one hub of information and services where they could access all the information they needed. However, some participants felt that networking with many agencies provided them with volunteer opportunities that helped them "get their foot in the door".

Most participants did note that they had certain expectations of the agency or person helping them in their employment search, namely to:

- Support in developing resume and job applications;
- Share available job postings with them;
- Help them to ensure that they are qualified for the position they are applying for and, if they are not qualified, inform them as to what they need to do in order to become qualified;
- Help find resources to pay for the training needed to obtain employment; and
- Provide support in obtaining and paying for Criminal Record checks.

Most participants also noted that they wanted to access services from an Aboriginal community based organization that would provide these services in a culture-based way.

### Stage 3: Needs Assessment

In some consultation sessions, there was little discussion around Needs Assessments. The Ontario Works and ODSP Needs Assessment process was explained to participants; however, many participants did not seem to know if they had actually undergone a Needs Assessment, including Ontario Works clients for whom a participation agreement is mandatory to maintain eligibility for assistance. As such, it is not clear whether the needs of the participants had been assessed or whether they are involved in the process at all. It was also not clear whether Ontario Works clients were aware of what action items or goals are within their participation agreement, mainly because they were unsure of what a participation agreement was.

For participants that were aware of Needs Assessments, most suggested that caseworkers need to build trust with clients and that they do not receive follow up from their caseworker. Participants suggested that the Needs Assessment should be strength-based and that an employment counsellor may be helpful in recognizing strengths.

Some participants indicated that they have difficulty meeting the activities in their participation agreement when they do not have access to a telephone, computer or public transit. Further, some participants indicated that support is needed in areas of travel, affordable and trustworthy childcare and that there needs to be encouragement to leave Ontario Works. Participants stressed the need to find stable employment, for example, a part time casual job does not provide health coverage and as a result does not offer incentive to leave Ontario Works.

ODSP recipients also indicated that caseworkers need additional training and qualifications to understand and work with people with physical and mental health disabilities. Participants feel as though ODSP currently treats all disabilities the same;

however, participants indicated that disabilities impact an individual's life in different ways and that every individual has differing needs, educational backgrounds, skills, and experiences that should be taken into account. Some ODSP recipients also indicated that there is inconsistent information regarding employment supports available to them.

#### Stage 4: Services and Supports

There were a number of participants unaware of employment services available through Ontario Works and ODSP.

Among the participants who were aware of employment supports and services, many wanted services that would help transition them into meaningful and sustainable employment, preferably employment paying more than minimum wage to a job that would allow them to raise their families. However, many participants noted that the programs and services offered to them as Ontario Works recipients are too limited to actually get them to that goal. Participants indicated that they often do not receive supports and services at point of contact, but are directed to others that could assist them, noting that there is also a lack of information sharing amongst caseworkers. Some participants also noted that "there appears to be a different process if you are First Nation, Métis or Inuit."

Many participants noted that they required educational upgrading (e.g. obtaining grade 12 diploma, and training in literacy and basic skills) before they would even be ready to search for employment because they did not have the basic minimum education levels that many jobs require. Participants indicated that many available supports require individuals to be EI eligible; this was seen as a barrier to getting the training needed to get job-ready. Participants also focused on the gaps and challenges with available training and the disconnect between training and the labour market, indicating that oftentimes they go through multiple training programs, but are still not able to obtain a job upon completion. Participants indicated that they would prefer to seek employment supports and services from Aboriginal community organizations that offer culture-based services.

Many participants noted that there was a lack of recognition of volunteering as contributing to building an individual's job-readiness skills. Participants noted that this was compounded by both Ontario Works and ODSP's lack of support for participating in volunteering opportunities, including transportation and childcare costs.

### Stage 5: Employment Outcomes

Overall, participants did not feel the system was overly successful at preparing clients for employment or helping them to find employment, some participants also noted that there was no encouragement or assistance from their caseworkers. On the topic of employment searches, participants shared the barriers they experience from employers, including:

- Their disability;
- Racism;
- Ageism;
- Being overqualified;
- Lack of driver's license (and vehicle);
- Lack of job experience; and
- Lack of employment references.

Almost all participants noted a lack of supports available to clients who are transitioning from social assistance to employment. Participants also noted a lack of follow up from caseworkers after they received employment – specifically some participants noted a need for budgeting supports and a continuation of benefits for a certain period after attaining employment. A number of participants also had negative experiences with employers who abuse the system by hiring someone using hiring incentives and then firing the employee after the hiring incentive is over. For many participants, the decision to transition into work full-time is challenging if the job does not offer adequate income to cover transportation, child-care and health benefits that they had received from Ontario Works or ODSP.

Participants receiving ODSP noted that there is a lack of ongoing supports to maintain employment. In particular, those with mental health issues may experience challenges adjusting to employment and employers have demonstrated a lack of understanding and awareness around mental health issues. Some participants noted that they had experienced discrimination from employers and had been fired due to taking long-term disability leave, sick days or made no accommodation for medical conditions, leaving the participant unable to succeed. Participants felt that ODSP caseworkers should be working with employers during the hiring and accommodation process to ensure clients' human rights are upheld.

Some participants discussed a lack of employment prospects; while recipients want to work, there are limited employment opportunities in their communities. As one participant stated “the social assistance employment system cannot be broken or fixed because there are no jobs. With no jobs the system is obsolete.”

## Moving Forward

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The participants were encouraged by being able to share their experiences and what they felt needed (or needs) to be done to improve the system; however, they stressed that the government actually needs to listen to what the expressed needs, challenges, and gaps in services are and actually move forward in implementing what was shared.

The following recommendations are based on key points raised in the discussion sessions. These recommendations are provided here for consideration by the MCSS in moving forward on social assistance reform and supporting urban Aboriginal people accessing social assistance:

### Benefits:

1. **Income Benefits:** The income benefits, both basic needs and shelter amount, must be increased and made more flexible in order to reflect the true cost of living in local communities, including Northern Ontario and large urban centres. Clients should be able to cover their most basic needs, including housing, utilities, food, clothing, and transportation.
2. **Food Benefit:** A specific food benefit, above and beyond the basic needs rate, should be created to ensure that all clients have the ability to purchase healthy and nutritious food.
3. **Special Diet Allowance:** The Special Diet Allowance needs to be increased.
4. **Medical Benefits:** Client's and their dependent's medical needs are not being met; many medications and counseling services are not covered and some benefits are inadequate. Traditional and alternative medicine is not covered. There is a lack of communication between the social assistance and health care systems, and medical transportation benefits are inadequate.
5. **Transportation Benefit:** A benefit is needed to provide those who are searching for jobs, seeking medical services, volunteering, or getting children to and from school with transit passes or where public transit is not available, funding is needed for other means of transportation such as a personal vehicle or taxi.
6. **Cultural Benefits:** A cultural income benefit for clients is needed in order for them to partake in cultural and traditional activities that support the development of their cultural identity, parental and child development, and to promote their healing.

7. **Child Care Benefits:** Benefits for children's activities and schooling are needed. This may include: school supplies, internet coverage, computers and tutoring supports. Funding should extend to children of all ages who are still in school and living as dependents. In addition, an increase to daycare subsidies will provide additional incentives for clients to find employment.
8. **Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit:** Clients want to have access to the Start-Up benefit again.
9. **Transitioning Supports:** Supports and discretionary benefits, (i.e., child care, transportation and mental health) need to be more accessible for those who have recently transitioned from Ontario Works into employment. It should be less complex for individuals to transition back into Ontario Works if, for whatever reason, their employment is terminated.
10. **Employment Supports:** Increased information sharing with clients of employment benefits and community resources in various forms such as handouts and hosted workshops. Participants also want caseworkers to recognize and support clients in seeking community and peer supports (i.e., job shadowing and volunteer opportunities). Participants want caseworkers to provide support and training on how to deal with racism and discrimination. Participants identified the need to be referred or have the ability to access employment services directly from Aboriginal community organizations that provide these services.
11. **Training Supports:** Increased access to meaningful training and educational opportunities that actually lead to real jobs (not temporary minimum wage employment) are needed. There also needs to be access to training and post-secondary education opportunities for Ontario Works and ODSP recipients as many funded programs are only accessible by those eligible for employment insurance.
12. **Mental Health Supports:** Increased access to mental health supports to help recipients on the path to employment and continued mental health supports upon obtaining employment are needed to help them mentally cope with this life transition and enhance the sustainability of their employment.
13. **Self-Employment Supports:** Increased supports for those who want to become self-employed are needed.

## Process:

1. **Income Reporting:** The current income reporting process is difficult to use accurately, deters clients from working, and makes it difficult for clients to acquire any savings, which they would need in order to sustainably leave social assistance. Participants want less money clawed back from earnings and to explore other avenues for reporting income, such as various drop-off locations within local communities.
2. **Communication:** Clients want to be able to understand the forms and documents and for caseworkers to clearly and respectfully explain them. They also want to be informed of discretionary benefits that might support them and for communication around changing eligibility status to be improved. ODSP caseworkers also need to communicate with clients about working while on ODSP, not all clients are aware that they can work while on ODSP.
3. **Accountability:** The process for submitting forms needs to be improved. Many participants have had multiple forms lost by Ontario Works/ODSP and their benefits are affected as a result. This could include better oversight of submissions made by caseworkers to ensure information is accurately recorded.
4. **Online Access:** If Ontario Works/ODSP processes move online, considerations need to be given to affordability and access to computers and internet, especially for clients with mobility issues. Further, many clients are not computer literate and publically accessible computers may not have adequate technological capacity to operate the system.
5. **Participation Agreement/Needs Assessment:** Many participants are not aware of their participation agreement and needs assessment; caseworkers need to work better with their clients to involve them in the process of creating agreements and assessments. The needs assessment process is not effective at directing clients to the necessary supports and services.
6. **Caseworkers:** Clients want their caseworker to treat them with respect and dignity, to be culturally competent, to understand their individual needs and that their experiences are unique, and to have lower caseloads so that they actually have time to support them. There needs to be more caseworkers and/or assistant caseworkers to help support the clients in achieving their goals in a reasonable timeframe.
7. **Cultural Competency Training for Caseworkers:** Ongoing training for Ontario Works/ODSP staff by Aboriginal organizations is needed to ensure that support and services are culturally relevant and competent.

8. **Aboriginal Liaison:** Establish Aboriginal Liaison workers to support urban Aboriginal clients in understanding the available benefits and rights, support clients in the application process, support clients moving into the local community, as well as to advocate on their behalf to caseworkers. A liaison would ideally be a place-based service within Aboriginal organizations that are already providing a suite of employment, health and other socio-economic supports and services.
9. **Services in Aboriginal Organizations:** Participants prefer to access urban Aboriginal organizations that offer culture-based services and supports that reflect and recognize the experiences of First Nations, Metis and Inuit clients. Participants indicated that it would be more effective to have Aboriginal caseworkers and to have Ontario Works and ODSP located within these Urban Aboriginal organizations in order to increase trust and understanding between them and their caseworker.
10. **Coordination:** There needs to be increased coordination between Ontario Works, ODSP and Aboriginal organizations in supporting individuals accessing the social assistance and mental health systems.
11. **Mediation:** There should be a mediation process to support clients who are denied discretionary benefits by their caseworker as well as a process to submit complaints about poor treatment from caseworkers at the provincial level.<sup>3</sup>
12. **Benefits for couples and families:** It is important that Ontario Works and ODSP benefits are distributed in such a way that provides economic independence to all recipients and is flexible in adapting to various family circumstances. This is especially important for the safety of clients in abusive relationships, providing individuals with the means to leave if necessary.
13. **The External Labour Market:** At times the local labour market makes it difficult for clients to obtain employment; the system should recognize the differences within the local context when administering Ontario Works and ODSP.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the process for addressing issues related to eligibility decisions and complaints about program delivery are determined and developed at the local level. MCSS supports local processes that are transparent and fair to ensure program integrity.

## ODSP:

The following highlights were raised, in addition to the above points, specifically in regard to ODSP recipients:

1. **Employment Focus:** Many participants were concerned that ODSP is going to become employment-focused. They noted that ODSP should provide adequate support to those who can work, but not penalize those who cannot.
2. **Application Process:** Participants want to see increased consistency in the application process for ODSP and note that it can be difficult to demonstrate some disabilities in order to receive funding.
3. **Training:** ODSP clients want access to training and academic upgrading that can help them improve their outcomes; however, they feel they are not eligible for many or do not know about them. Funding also needs to be available to clients who can only study part-time or less.
4. **Health Providers:** Clients want to have their own doctors, with whom they have pre-existing relationships, to be recognized by ODSP.
5. **Recognition of the Individual:** The ODSP system needs to be multi-faceted and flexible to meet the needs of a diverse range of clients. ODSP must recognize that all disabilities are different and impact an individual's life in different ways.
6. **Flexibility in Case Management:** Clients want ODSP to recognize that those with mobility issues and parents with small children experience significant difficulties getting to the ODSP office and should be provided more flexibility, including the possibility of home visits.
7. **Mental Health Liaison:** Caseworkers are not currently advising clients on mental health services or referring them to available services. Participants indicated that there should be a Mental Health Liaison for ODSP clients to direct them to these services and help them navigate the complicated mental health care system in Ontario.
8. **Disability Education:** Participants indicated that they want education and training to be available for caseworkers, service organizations and the public on different disabilities to reduce discrimination and misinformation.