

## Report to Community and Protective Services Committee

**To:** Chair and Members  
**Community and Protective Services Committee**  
**From:** Kevin Dickins, Acting Managing Director, Housing, Social Services and Dearness Home  
**Subject:** 2020 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile  
**Date:** May 11, 2021

### Recommendation

That, on the recommendation of the Acting Managing Director, Housing, Social Services and Dearness Home, the following report on the 2020 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile **BE RECEIVED** for information purposes.

### Executive Summary

Social Services provides financial, and employment supports for Ontario Works recipients residing in the city of London in partnership with both internal and external stakeholders. Service delivery planning and design, data collection, and economic opportunities prioritize how to best support the City of London's most vulnerable, as well as effectively equip frontline staff delivering the services. COVID-19 had unprecedented impacts on service delivery throughout 2020 that required flexibility and adaptability in response to federal, provincial, and municipal policies and public health measures. This included shifting service delivery from predominantly in-person to telephone and virtual platforms, as well as fielding frequent policy and process updates from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS). Updates and direction from MCCSS included expanding access to Emergency Assistance and introducing a discretionary Emergency Benefit to assist with covering COVID-19 related expenses. MCCSS also introduced a Recovery and Renewal Plan in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, which acknowledged system gaps and outlined key areas to address going forward. The key areas of focus intend to improve effectiveness of connecting people to supports to achieve greater independence and active participation in local communities.

Access to services and continuity of client supports remained top priorities throughout 2020. Response times for the intake phone line and eligibility determination continued to be monitored regularly and informed service delivery adjustments to ensure individuals and families received supports in a timely manner. Due to COVID-19 and the requirement to rely heavily on technology, many employment agencies were required to deliver service and curriculums virtually. City of London Social Services was able to assist with providing digital devices as part of Employment Related Expenses (ERE) to ensure clients maintained connection and engagement with agencies providing employment supports. Overall, despite uncertainties related to COVID-19, employment supports and referrals continued to strengthen successful outcomes along with individualized options for clients. The COVID-19 response was also an opportunity to expand communication channels with clients and pivot engagement strategies.

### Linkage to the Corporate Strategic Plan

#### Strengthening Our Community

- Londoners have access to the supports they need to be successful.
- Londoners have access to the services and supports that promote well-being, health, and safety in their neighbourhoods and across the city.
- Decrease the number of London residents experiencing poverty
- Increase the number who feel welcomed and included.

#### Growing Our Economy

- Increase access employers have to the talent they require

- London creates a supportive environment where entrepreneurs, businesses, and talent can thrive.

### **Leading in Public Service**

- Londoners experience exceptional and valued customer service.
- The City of London is a leader in public service as an employer, a steward of public funds, and an innovator of service.

## **Analysis**

### **1.0 Background Information**

#### **1.1 Previous Reports Related to this Matter**

- 2019 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile (CPSC December 1, 2020)
- 2018 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile (CPSC May 28, 2019)
- 2016 Participant Profile Report-City of London Social Services/Ontario Works Program Delivery (CPSC July 18, 2017)
- Purchase of Service Agreements-Ontario Works Employment Assistance Services (CPSC December 10, 2018)
- Ontario Works Employment Innovations Bridges Out of Poverty & Circles Evaluation #2 (CPSC November 13, 2008)

### **2.0 Discussion and Considerations**

Aligning with Leading in Public Service, specifically under the strategy of reporting on corporate performance, Schedule 1 attached to this report is intended to provide an overview of 2020 service delivery outcomes and employment supports information, including performance indicators and participant demographics. In particular, the impacts of Covid-19 and associated effects to service delivery are identified (where applicable) within the subsections of the report.

Included in Schedule 1 are key highlights from the MCCSS Recovery and Renewal Plan as well as the Life Stabilization Framework. From a service delivery perspective, summaries related to the Social Services COVID-19 response, modernization initiatives, caseload demographics and time on assistance are provided. Also included is an overview of client feedback that was gathered to inform future planning and response efforts. A synopsis of changes to Emergency Assistance and London specific figures is outlined, as well as an overview of Discretionary Benefit supports that were provided in 2020 including the Emergency Benefits related to COVID-19. In terms of employment supports provided throughout 2020, specifics related to client communications, access to technology, partnership supports and shifts in service delivery are summarized in Schedule 1. Service delivery adjustments and associated outcomes illustrate the importance of maintaining connection and meaningful engagement with clients during the COVID-19 response. This includes the shifts to Circles London programming and the responsive of volunteers to sustain continuity of supports for Leaders. Notably, employment metrics associated with the City of London Strategic Plan are included and illustrate the successful outcomes attained during such an unpredictable year.

The information on the attached Schedule 1 is inclusive of six Social Services offices that provided client service in 2020. Data and information provided in the report is extracted from MCCSS Performance Reports, the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS), Social Services Client Management System (CMS) and City of London Financial Business Supports monitoring reports. Any data referenced from MCCSS or SAMS (aside from total caseload numbers) is reflective of the City of London CMSM, which includes Middlesex County who maintained a caseload in 2020 averaging 338 benefit units.

### 3.0 Financial Impact/Considerations

#### 3.1 2020 Caseload Expenditures

		2020 Budget	2020 Actual	2020 Surplus/(Deficit)
Average Monthly Caseload		11,500	10,137	1,363
Total Expenditures	Gross	\$109,020,000	\$95,967,661	\$13,052,339
	Net (0%)	1 \$0	\$0	\$0
Average Case Cost	Gross	\$790	\$789	\$1
	Net (0%)	1 \$0	\$0	\$0

Note: Net share reduced to 0%. Uploading of 100% social assistance benefit costs to the Province was fully phased in by 2018. Expenditures and Average Case cost exclude Discretionary Benefits, Repayments and Reimbursements, and Transition Child Benefit.

### Conclusion

Business continuity efforts throughout 2020 prioritized client access to services and supports, as well as ensuring policies and processes were updated in accordance with ever changing provincial direction and public health measures. Overall, despite an extremely unpredictable year, Ontario Works clients were able to access essential services and supports in order to work towards life stability and employment goals. Provincially, it was recognized as part of the Recovery and Renewal Plan that there is a fundamental need to change ways services are delivered. It was acknowledged that existing policies do not define life stabilization, nor reflect the supports that are needed for clients to address barriers to employment. Going forward in 2021, life stabilization and local context will be key pillars for Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal efforts.

**Prepared by:** Amanda Circelli Manager, Evaluation & Systems Planning  
**Submitted by:** Shirley Glover Acting Manager, Employment and Income Supports  
**Recommended by:** Kevin Dickins, Acting Managing Director, Housing, Social Services and Dearness Home



Tuesday, October 19

## Finding a Great Job during the COVID-19 Pandemic

[Leads Employment Services](#), a community employment agency offering free services through Ontario Works, is designed to help individuals find and keep good jobs. Albert, whose name was changed for privacy reasons, was one of those individuals.

Albert had set himself a goal of working at Home Depot. That's when the experts at Leads Employment Services leapt into action, helping him to secure an interview and working with Albert on his virtual interview skills. Albert's determination and the help of Leads Employment Services helped him land the job. Albert is thrilled with his position at Home Depot and only has positive things to say about his great coworkers and customers.

Even at this time, good jobs are available. Albert used the free employment services offered through Ontario Works to achieve his goal.

If you want to learn more about free employment services and training offered through Ontario Works, please contact your Caseworker or Employment Support Specialist. You can learn more about Leads Employment Services by calling 1-866-955-3237 or visiting their [website](#).

Tel: 519-439-0352  
Toll free: 1-866-955-3237  
www.leadsservices.com

**LEADS** employment services  
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## Schedule 1

### Ontario Works Participant & Service Delivery Profile

City of London Social Services administers the Ontario Works program on behalf of the Province of Ontario through the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) as a Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM). Ontario Works is an employment assistance and financial support program focused on helping individuals and families gain and maintain sustainable employment through training, education, skill development and individualized supports. Aligning with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) priorities to achieve improved employment outcomes for Ontario Works participants, City of London Social Services applies a local perspective when seeking ways to increase sustainable employment and assist clients in achieving financial independence. Ultimately, Social Services has the responsibility to provide service and supports that respond to the needs of Ontario Works clients residing in the London community in partnership with both internal and external stakeholders.

City of London Social Services delivers the Ontario Works program through a decentralized service delivery model. Five community-based offices and one satellite office are situated across the city providing access to employment services and financial supports. Service delivery design and resourcing decisions are informed by data, local context, and community needs. Continual evaluation and review of service delivery approach and objectives ensures planning, design and implementation best support the City of London's most vulnerable, as well as effectively equip frontline staff delivering the services.

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, MCCSS announced a recovery and renewal plan for Social Assistance to address the economic realities being experienced in the province. The first phase of the plan was built on learnings gathered during the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the need to fundamentally change ways services are delivered. The plan focused on four key areas:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accelerated digital delivery solutions</li><li>• Centralized and automated delivery</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Risk-based eligibility review</li><li>• Access to employment and training</li></ul> |
|---|---|

The changes intend to improve the effectiveness of connecting people to supports to achieve greater independence and actively participate in local communities.

Towards year end of 2020, the MCCSS released a life stabilization framework that acknowledged the critical importance of addressing barriers to employment readiness and independence within the community. Four categories of barriers identified in the framework were basic needs, community support, health, and life skills. The ministry recognized that current policies do not define life stabilization, nor reflect the supports that are needed for clients to address barriers to employment. Additionally, the lack of tools and resources to determine life stabilization needs as well as inconsistencies in local and system (ministry, federal) partnerships to support social assistance outcomes were identified. The proposed future state within the life stabilization framework seeks to improve client access to employment services, improved readiness for employment and improve client access to other services that support life stabilization.

### Service Delivery

Overall, 2020 presented unique challenges for service delivery due to COVID-19 that required operational shifts and pivoting client service approaches. Within a very short timeframe, Social Services went from daily in person services within a deskside model, to predominantly telephone and online supports as of late March 2020 onward. Additionally, federal, provincial and municipal policies and direction were rapidly changing and evolving, which required flexibility and responsiveness from Social Services staff to ensure service delivery approaches remained current. In response to determining critical

service needs, London’s most vulnerable clients were able to access monthly benefit cheques and cheque encashment stamps at the Citi Plaza Social Services office where limited essential counter service was provided during provincial lock downs and emergency orders.

Aligning with MCCSS Recovery and Renewal efforts, City of London Social Services continued to explore and prioritize digital delivery solutions throughout 2020. Promotion of the MyBenefits platform was integrated into external messaging for clients as part of the COVID-19 response and provided self-service options for clients to view file information and report a select number of changes without having to contact a Caseworker. Uptake in registrations for MyBenefits increased steadily throughout 2020 with approximately 20% of the caseload subscribed by year end. Encouraging clients to register for MyBenefits will continue to be a priority in 2021 as communication enhancements, such as two-way messaging, are implemented. Additionally, in November 2020 Electronic Document Management (EDM) functionalities in were enabled through a MCCSS modernization initiative, which provided the foundation to implement digitization of incoming mail as of January 2021. London Social Services is committed to continuously improving communication and digital options available for clients in order to maximize omni-channel support and services that can be provided.

Over the course of 2020, 5416 intake appointments were conducted to complete Ontario Works applications. Compared to 2019, this reflects a 21.6% decrease in completed intake appointments, which aligns with an overall reduction in yearly caseload average of 9.2 % (Table 1 below). 2020 trends indicate within the first quarter, monthly caseload averages were similar to 2019 figures, fluctuating most between March and April with an increase of 365 cases. From April onward, cases steadily decreased with a difference of approximately 2000 cases between January and December 2020. These decreases correspond to availability of federal COVID-19 benefits for those clients experiencing job loss as a result of the pandemic. It is expected that once federal COVID-19 benefits end, service delivery agents could potentially experience an increase in caseload size, which overall provincially is estimated at 21% from current caseload figures<sup>1</sup>.

Table 1: Caseload Averages<sup>2</sup>

<b>2016</b>	11,885
<b>2017</b>	11,952
<b>2018</b>	11,699
<b>2019</b>	11,170
<b>2020</b>	10,137

Figure 1 below provides an overall summary of benefit unit types when combining all Social Services locations. The 2020 caseload composition continued to reflect a greater proportion of singles without children on the City of London’s caseload. Figure 2 summarizes benefit unit size in relation to caseload, where percentages remained relatively unchanged from 2019.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services (MCCSS) Provincial Social Assistance Caseload Forecast (September 2020)

<sup>2</sup> MCCSS Performance Report December 2020

Figure 1  
**Overall 2020 Caseload Composition**<sup>3</sup>

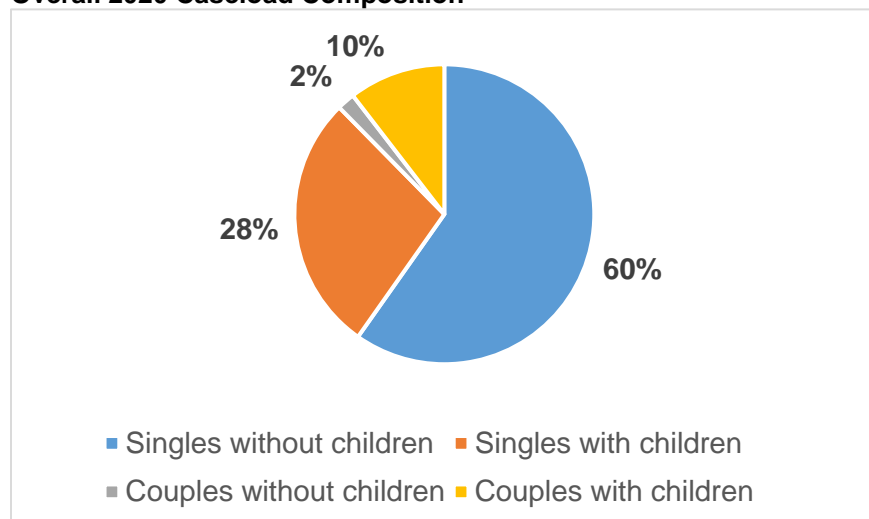
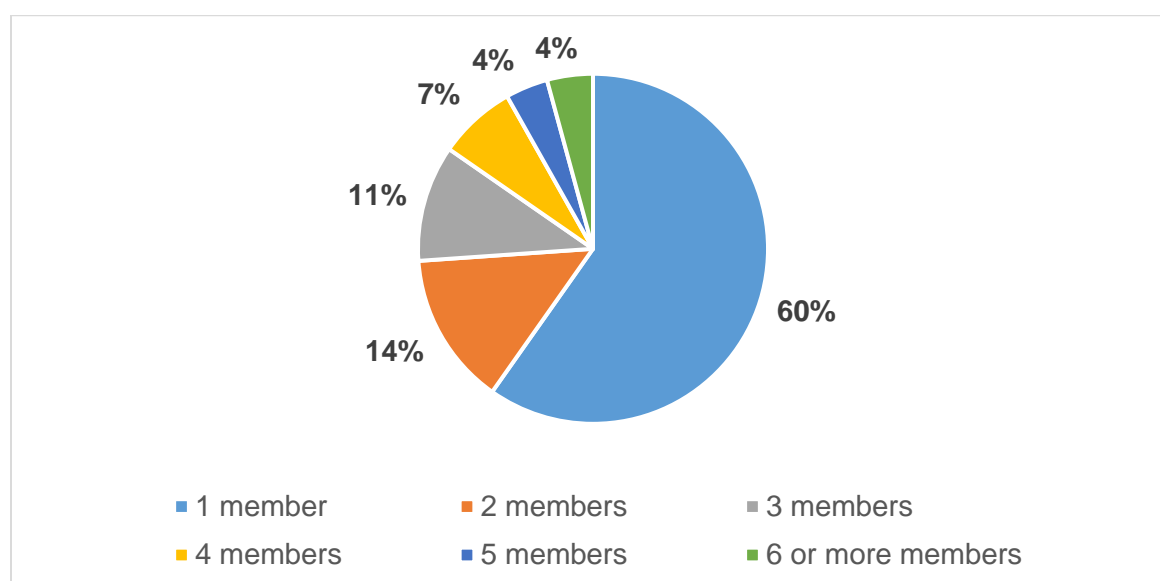


Figure 2  
**2020 Benefit Unit Size by Caseload Percentage Summary**<sup>4</sup>



### Client Services

Despite many changes and amendments to the way services were delivered in response to COVID-19, the percentage of applications processed within four days still managed to average 75% for 2020, meeting the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan target. This metric is part of the strategy to streamline customer intake and follow-up across the corporation, intended to improve responsiveness and ensure eligible clients receive benefits in a timely manner. Additionally, the percentage of intake calls answered within 5 minutes averaged 92% for 2020, exceeding the established Strategic Plan target of 80%.

To better understand the client experience and journey in accessing services during the COVID-19 response, a participant survey was conducted throughout November and December 2020. Each Social Service office contacted 50 clients to ask for their participation in the survey and mailed 100 letters containing the survey link. In total, 144 clients agreed to participate. The majority of respondents fell within the range of 25-44 years of age (62.24%) and were primarily single participants (36.62%) or sole support parents (34.51%). Responses indicated that overall, preferred methods of communication were telephone and email correspondence.

Table 2 below provides a summary of information gathered regarding preferred communication methods, noting the ask was to select all that apply.

<sup>3</sup> MCCSS Performance Report December 2020

<sup>4</sup> MCCSS Performance Report December 2020 & Caseload at a Glance Report 2020

**Table 2: Client Survey Communication Methods Results<sup>5</sup>**

Category	Telephone	Email	Mail
Method Used	48.95%	66.43%	9.09%
Preferred Method	36.81%	56.25%	2.08%
Future Methods	39.44%	50.00%	0.70%

Specifically related to Future Methods of communication, text message and in-person were also identified at 2.82% and 7.04% respectively. When clients were able to communicate directly with a Caseworker during the COVID-19 response, email was the method most frequently selected followed by drop boxes and telephone correspondence. A small number of clients also identified the MyBenefits platform to communicate with their Caseworker, which as part of provincial modernization efforts mentioned above, will be further enhanced and expanded throughout 2021 to improve communication options.

Overall 56.62% of respondents experienced no impact to service as a result of office and front counter closures, 24.28% indicated they were somewhat impacted and 14.71% identified direct impact from the closures. For those who indicated they were impacted by the closures, comments included confusion with communication channels available, difficulty connecting to correct contact over email, uncertainty of what email addresses to use, challenges with telephone correspondence and requests to improve electronic options. The information and comments collected from the survey are extremely valuable and will be considered as part of ongoing business continuity planning, along with client service and communication strategies going forward.

### Emergency Assistance

During the Covid-19 response, MCCSS expanded access to Emergency Assistance for those facing a crisis or emergency who had no access to other supports, including those who were pending federal COVID-19 benefits. Those already in receipt of Ontario Works or ODSP were not eligible. Eligibility for Emergency Assistance continued to be based on an assessment of the applicant's ability to access other resources and meet basic living expenses and the danger to health if assistance was not issued, providing financial assistance for a period of not more than 48 days.

The provincial changes to Emergency Assistance were intended to increase flexibility for Administrators and expand access to emergency assistance in response to evolving circumstances and based on determination of need. These changes also recognized that low-income individuals and families may face multiple, discrete episodes of financial crises in a six-month period, due to evolving or unexpected circumstances, such as loss of earnings during the COVID-19 public health emergency. In addition to existing provincial Directives, the following considerations continue to be included in eligibility determination for Emergency Assistance as part of responding to impacts of the pandemic:

- How the applicant is affected by COVID-19
- Application status for Employment Insurance (EI) and Federal COVID-19 benefits
- Employment status in the past 6 months
- Unearned income

Locally in 2020, 80 Emergency Assistance cases were issued with a total of 122 beneficiaries. Peak periods occurred throughout March and April, which corresponded to the time period where many community members were awaiting eligibility determinations for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

### Interpreter Services

As part of the COVID-19 response, interpreter services moved from mainly in-person to telephone and virtual formats. A total of 2,707 client appointments (across all types) were completed with an interpreter. Table 3 below illustrates the top five languages requiring interpreter services from 2016-2020. Additionally, City of London Social Services maintained compliance with the provincial French Language Services Directives by

<sup>5</sup> City of London Social Services Client Experience Survey 2020



providing bilingual services through the customer service representative and Caseworker roles (1 bilingual complement for each position).

**Table 3: Interpreter Services Top 5 Languages 2016-2020** <sup>6</sup>

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Arabic	Arabic	Arabic	Arabic	Arabic
Nepal	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish
Spanish	Nepal	Nepal	Nepal	Kurdish
Vietnamese	French	Kurdish	Kurdish	Nepal
Persian	Assyrian	Assyrian	Urdu	Farsi

### Discretionary Benefits

The Discretionary Benefits Program is in place to provide financial assistance to those in receipt of OW and ODSP as well as low-income Londoners who meet established income eligibility criteria for items and services related to health, safety and physical well being. Services include assistance with emergency dental, dentures, eyeglasses, beds, appliances, moving costs, baby needs (cribs/car set/stroller) and utility assistance for those who have exhausted the Housing Stability Bank or other programs. Discretionary Benefits also aids with the cost of funerals, a significant community support to ensure individuals without financial means receive quality end of life services. Tables 4-6 below highlight examples and summaries of assistance that was provided in 2020:

<b>Emergency Dental Program</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Individual client dental services	3,192	2,143
Number of procedures completed	13,994	7,850
Purchase vouchers issued for dentures	2,276	1,452

Emergency dental includes dental services which are necessary to relieve pain or for medical or therapeutic reasons.

<b>Purchase Vouchers</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Non-Social Assistance Recipients	505	321
ODSP Clients	2,557	1,734
Ontario Works Clients	6,398	3,321
<b>Total issued</b>	<b>9,460</b>	<b>5,376</b>

The top three categories for purchase vouchers issued include Beds and Appliances (1906), Dentures (1452) and Eye Glasses (1161).

<b>Funerals</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Social Assistance Recipients	168	230
Non-Social Assistance Recipients	98	110
Warrants to Bury (*included in SAR & Non-SAR counts)	15*	26*
<b>Total</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>340</b>

Funeral coverage includes funeral service, burial or cremation and interment as chosen by the next of kin. Warrants to bury are provincially legislated.

As part of the Covid-19 response in late March 2020, a provincially driven Emergency Benefit was available to ODSP and Ontario Works recipients as a monthly discretionary benefit for those not in receipt of CERB who were seeking assistance for exceptional COVID-19 costs. The benefit was initially created as a one-time benefit for March/April and subsequently extended for May, June & July 2020. A flat monthly rate of \$100 for single person households and \$200 for couples or families was provided to all eligible benefit units.

<sup>6</sup> Social Services CMS Booking System, 2020

<sup>7</sup> Financial & Business Supports DB Monitoring Report 2020

<sup>8</sup> Financial & Business Supports DB Monitoring Report 2020

<sup>9</sup> Financial & Business Supports DB Monitoring Report 2020

Examples of expenses included:

- Personal Protective Equipment
- Cleaning supplies
- Non-medical transportation
- Food & groceries
- Transportation and delivery costs

City of London Social Services issued a total of 3,589<sup>10</sup> provincial Emergency Benefits between March and July 2020. This included 1,934 benefits for single person households and 1,655 benefits for couples or families.

In December 2020, City of London Social Services implemented a Covid-19 Additional Benefit for Social Assistance recipients in recognition of the additional costs incurred due to a positive COVID diagnosis, self-isolation, caring for family members or other COVID-19 related needs. The eligibility period was December 1<sup>st</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> for the one-time benefit. Maximum amounts were \$100 for single person households and \$200 for couples or families. In total, 2,177<sup>11</sup> benefits were issued for the month of December with 1,103 issued for single person households and 1,074 issued for couples or families.

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### **Time on Assistance**

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The Provincial vision for the Ontario Works program is “to achieve improved employment outcomes for Ontario Works participants by increasing individual employability with the goal of sustainable employment and increased financial independence <sup>12</sup>.” As noted above, towards the end of 2020 MCCSS released a life stabilization framework acknowledging the importance of addressing barriers to employment readiness and independence from a local perspective. Part of understanding the local context is identifying the barriers that exist to develop appropriate strategies and approaches factoring in labour market trends as well as the community supports that are available. For many clients, significant barriers exist along the employment continuum which may, impact the ability to acquire skills and training, successfully gain employment or sustain and maintain employment. Length of time on assistance is one of many indicators utilized to determine how best to support clients facing multiple and complex barriers impacting life stabilization efforts and employment options.

Figure 3 below provides a summary of time on assistance by percentage of the yearly average caseload from 2016-2020. Also provided in Table 7 below, is a summary of the average time on assistance by year from 2016-2020, which illustrates the overall percentage of caseload on assistance for greater than 12 and 24 months.

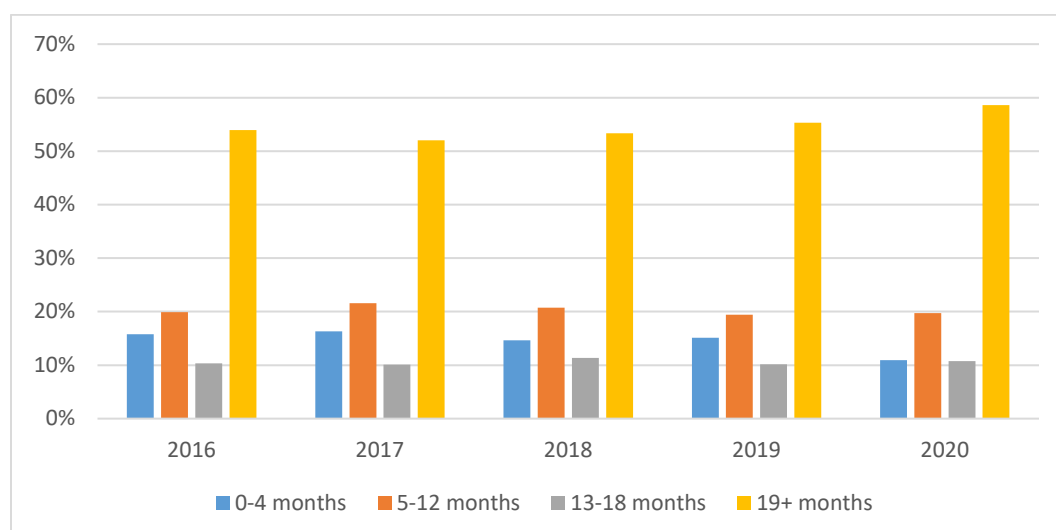
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<sup>10</sup> Financial & Business Supports Emergency Benefit Monitoring Report 2020

<sup>11</sup> Financial & Business Supports Emergency Benefit Monitoring Report 2020

<sup>12</sup> MCCSS 2019-2020 Service Plan

Figure 3  
**Time on Assistance by Percentage of Caseload**<sup>13</sup>



**Table 7 Length of Time Assistance**<sup>14</sup>

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
More than 12 months (% of caseload)	64%	62%	65%	65%	69%
More than 24 months (% of caseload)	45%	45%	45%	47%	50%
Average time on Assistance (years)	2.8	2.9	3.0	3.1	3.4

As evident in Figure 3 above, a significant number of clients have been on assistance for greater than 19 months with little fluctuation or decrease since 2016. Overall, between 2016-2020, average time on assistance (Table 7) has increased by 7 months with the most significant increase happening from 2019 to 2020. This increase can be mainly attributed to the impact of COVID-19 where the local labour market conditions impeded job search activities. The percentage of persons that have been on Ontario Works for less than 4 months also decreased, perhaps due to COVID-19 related financial assistance (other than Ontario Works) such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) for individuals displaced from the labour market. The compounding and unique impacts experienced throughout 2020 resulted in an increase to the average time on assistance.

Throughout 2020, Social Services placed an emphasis on sharing information regarding job and training opportunities, interventions, and innovative ways to support clients. Examples include issuing regular electronic newsletters, email blasts, cheque inserts and social media campaigns. Virtual employment information sessions were introduced as a creative and alternative method to share opportunities and provide links to services. Where required, clients were provided the necessary supports to ensure connectivity and access to technology, facilitating options for virtual services and supports.

In an effort to address the increasing number of clients on Ontario Works for beyond 24 months, Employment Support Specialists (ESS) along with Caseworkers, engaged with clients who have remained on assistance for 4 continuous years or greater. The goal was to support and assist participants in removing obstacles affecting life stabilization and the path to employment. Some of the strategies implemented include:

- Psycho-vocational assessments to provide insight into barriers to employment and/or learning success.

<sup>13</sup> MCCSS Caseload at a Glance Report 2016-2020

<sup>14</sup> MCCSS Caseload at a Glance Report 2016-2020

- Wrap around supports for clients who have been medically deferred including assistance in moving toward ODSP supports.
- “Getting Ahead” workshops designed to help participants set personal goals and establishing a plan to attain the goals. Graduates of Getting Ahead were eligible to participate in Circles London, a program developed to help participants build confidence, self-efficacy, and social capital.

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## **Employment Supports & Outcomes**

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City of London Social Services responded to the shifting and ever-changing demands of 2020 by adapting services to new realities, while ensuring community connections were maintained. Similar to many fellow community members, Ontario Works clients struggled with access to childcare, home schooling, remote learning and managing the work-life balance; all of which impacted the ability to look for work and/or remain actively engaged in employment. Central to maintaining connections with employment supports, was developing new tools and strategies to actively assist individuals and families in recognizing the value of sustained participation and engagement. The changes, adaptations and newly formed strategies that emerged throughout 2020 are outlined in the four themed areas highlighted below.

### **Client Communications**

It is important that participants in the Ontario Works program receive timely and current communication regarding monthly financial assistance and employment resources that are available. In the absence of regular in-person services during the COVID-19 response, it became increasingly important to find effective channels to communicate updates for clients. Several strategies for direct client communications were implemented in 2020 to meet this need.

A bi-weekly email-based newsletter was created (Appendix A) and distributed to over 6,000 individual addresses. Each issue profiled a client employment success story to spotlight available services and shared updated service changes, along with upcoming employment related events. Uptake of the newsletter was strong with 20-30% of recipients reading the newsletter each week. Also, purchase of service partners appreciated the opportunity to market their supports and services in such a widely distributed and positively framed way.

In addition to the bi-weekly newsletter, monthly cheque inserts, robo-calls and email blasts were utilized at various points throughout 2020 to share specific employment and participation information. As well, these communication channels were leveraged to advertise events such as virtual job fairs and training programs to all participants on Ontario Works, along with offering words of encouragement meant to promote optimism and momentum throughout the year.

### **Access to Technology**

Throughout 2020, service provision across the community shifted to online, virtual and telephone methods. Access to these technologically dependent methods was identified early in the year as a barrier for many Ontario Works clients. The Employment Related Expense (ERE) benefit was utilized as a tool to address accessibility barriers with technology. Approximately 450 devices such as tablets, chrome books and internet service were provided through ERE assistance so individuals and families could continue to participate in employment related activities such as English as a second language classes, skilled training programs, purchase of service employment supports and job search, along with maintaining contact with Caseworkers.

### **Supporting Community Partnerships**

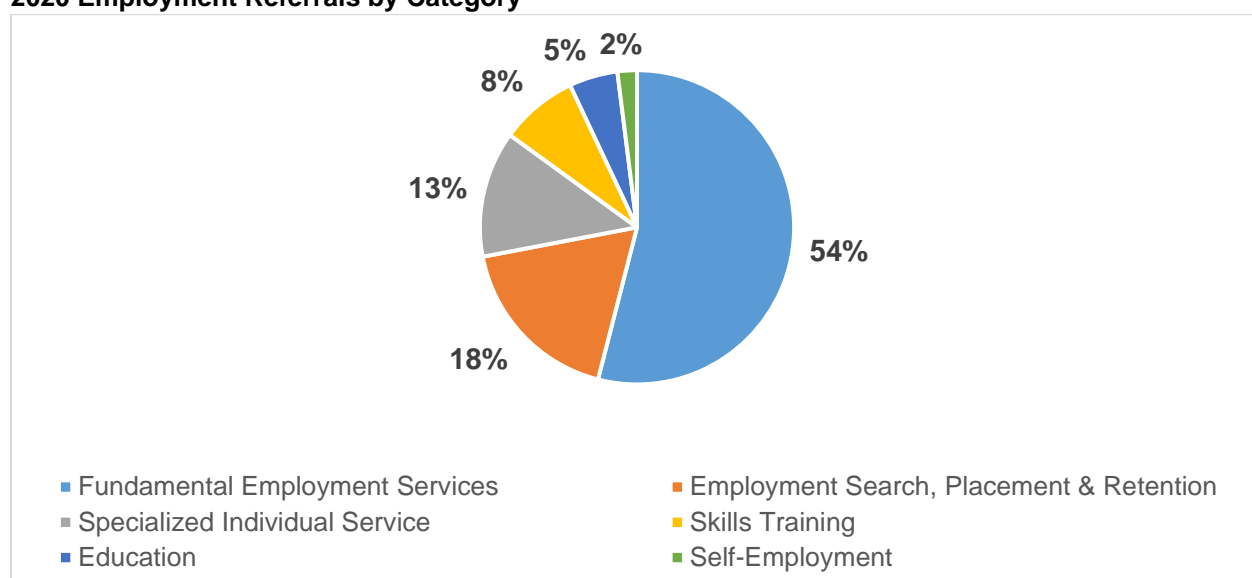
London’s unique purchase of service employment model meant City of London Social Services played a central role in supporting a pivot for employment services during the COVID-19 response. In order to share the burden of system fluctuations and ensure staffing levels were maintained to meet service capacity demands (access for clients), provisional financial agreements with purchase of service partners were implemented. The goal in doing so was to reinforce a collective commitment to providing the best

services possible throughout such an unprecedented and unpredictable time, and to ensure that if there was a surge in demand for services, those services would be there to support the clients.

The local employment service system (purchase of service and non-purchases of service agencies) responded in client-centred ways by developing virtual workshops, adapting training programs, and meeting clients online and over the phone for employment counselling sessions. Health and safety was consistently reviewed and adapted to align with public health measures and guidelines when assessing individual client needs. Employment service agencies had to limit the options for in-person supports throughout 2020, but by providing virtual services, participants in Ontario Works had access to the vital resources needed to find employment.

In terms of overall employment referrals, Figure 4 below provides a summary of over 5,000 individual referrals made in 2020 to employment service agencies by category. Introductory Fundamental Employment Services accounted for the greatest percentage of overall referrals at 54% (close to 3,000). This category of referral included common assessments, resume workshops, interview skills and career exploration. Employment Search Placement and Retention services focused on assisting employment ready individuals to take that final step to finding and retaining employment and represented 18% of referrals made in 2020. Skills Training referrals for job-specific training through employment services agencies made up 8% of referrals and Specialized Individual Services (13%) examined unique challenges, barriers, and solutions for clients, which included counselling, in-depth assessments, and evaluations.

Figure 4  
2020 Employment Referrals by Category<sup>15</sup>



### City of London Social Services Employment Supports Refocus

Within City of London Social Services, the Employment Supports Team also responded to changing participant needs in 2020 and shifted how service was provided. Services became more focused on direct client engagement. Employment Support Specialists (ESSs) identified a variety of strategies to support the understanding of unique client needs as well as employ a strengths-based approach.

Weekly virtual Employment Information Sessions were developed using an online platform to allow individuals participating in Ontario Works an opportunity to learn about employment benefits, local services and training opportunities available. Client feedback was generally positive and highlighted appreciation for the opportunity to ask questions, as well as speak about unique experiences with an Employment Support Specialists.

<sup>15</sup> Social Service EA Referral Summary Report 2020

**Table 8: Assessment Outcomes**

<b>Total Assessments Completed</b>	<b>72</b>
ODSP Granted	54
In Appeal	6
Denied/Withdrawn	6

Tools such as psychological and vocational assessments assisted individuals, Caseworkers and purchase of service agencies to provide the correct level of assistance and support. In 2020, 72 individuals were assessed by a qualified Psychologist. As outlined in Table 8, 54 individuals (or 75%) were successfully granted eligibility for the Ontario Disability Assistance Program (ODSP).

### Employment Strategic Priorities

Under the City of London’s strategic area of focus to grow the economy, two employment specific metrics are identified (Table 9 below). Both metrics were developed to support increased client participation in employment activities and exceeded the targets set for 2020. Notably, during a year where responding to a pandemic presented many unknowns and adjustments for service delivery, clients were still able to exit Ontario Works as a result of successfully finding employment. In total, 1,256 files were closed due to employment, and active files with employment earnings averaged \$899.00 monthly per case.

**Table 9: Strategic Plan Employment Metrics<sup>16</sup>**

Strategy	Metric	2020 Actual	2020 Target
Strategy Increase Ontario Works client participation within employment activities.	Metric % of Ontario Works cases terminated as a result of participants exiting to employment (HSSDH)	22.88%	20%
Strategy Increase Ontario Works client participation within employment activities.	% of eligible clients that have an active outcome plan (HSSDH)	91.5%	87%

### Circles London

Circles London has been a key contributor to the City of London’s response to long term poverty. The primary intervention approach is to increase social capital and sense of community, with a focus on support and referrals for life stabilization. Ultimately, the goal is that every Circles Leader will move forward into economic self-sufficiency.

In 2020, Circles London pivoted service delivery in response to COVID-19 and supported a total of 75 families, including 16 new Leaders. All community-based programs were moved online for Leaders and volunteers. Training and supports were provided to 85 volunteer allies who partnered with Leaders to increase networks and assist with life stabilization. Community meals (an integral part of in-person Circles meetings), were delivered to Circles families at home by 20 volunteers. Although many families struggled throughout 2020 with obtaining basic needs as well as personal mental health, the Circles team continued to see many Leaders maintain momentum in working towards goals and milestones. This included maintaining participation in educational endeavours, online skills training, and obtaining part-time and full-time employment. The continued successes can be attributed to life stabilization strategies, and incredible commitment by Circles Leaders. Examples of successes in 2020 include:

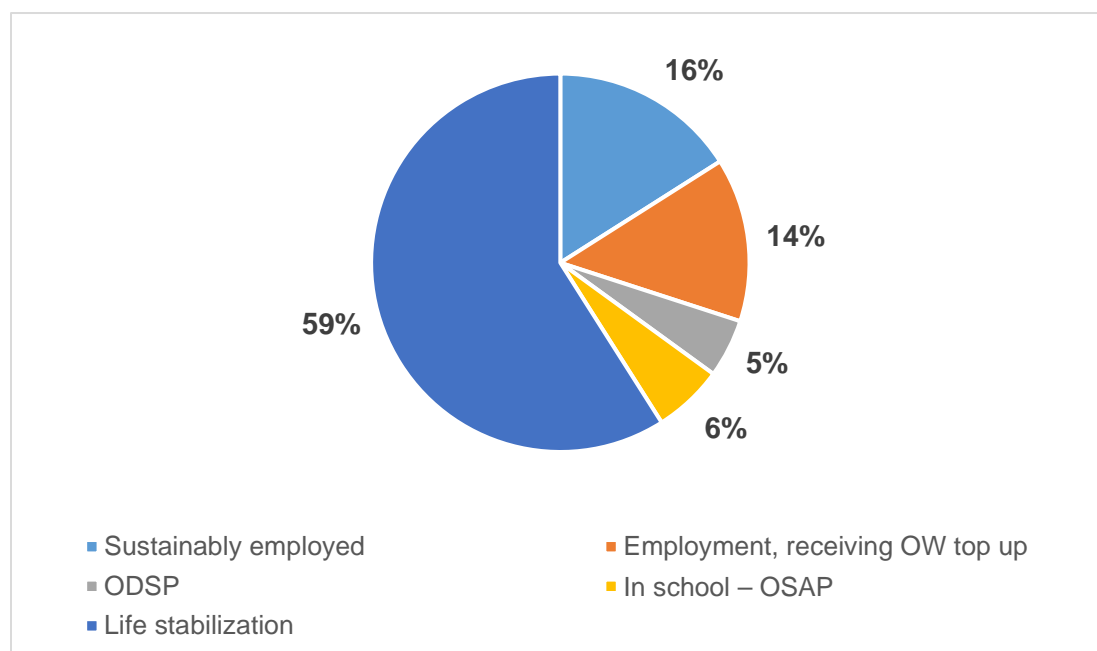
- Hiring a new Circles Youth Coach with lived experience and a previous participation in the Circles program.
- Circles Leaders attaining employment.

<sup>16</sup> 2019-2023 Strategic Plan for the City of London: 2019 Performance Report Appendix A

- Circles Leaders graduating post-secondary education during the pandemic.
- Partnership with Purple Hands (Western student club) to continue children’s programming online for all Circles families to access.
- Circles Leaders independently preparing tax returns utilizing online volunteer clinics.
- Providing micro loans to Circles Leaders to avoid the use of predatory lenders.

In 2020, 10 Leaders graduated circles and fully transitioned off Ontario Works. Participant outcomes in Figure 5 below indicate 30% had employment earnings and either no longer required Ontario works or received a partial top up as part of continued eligibility. 59% of participants continued to work on life stabilizing activities such as skills development, employment related activities, mental health support, and addictions programming. Figure 5

**2020 Circles Initiative Participant Outcomes<sup>17</sup>**




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**Conclusion**

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Overall, 2020 presented both opportunities and challenges, as well as unpredictability associated with the impacts of COVID-19. Business continuity planning prioritized client access to services and supports along with equipping frontline staff delivering services with required resources and guidelines. The COVID-19 response required flexibility and adaptability with ongoing changes to federal, provincial and municipal policies and public health measures. Provincially, the Recovery and Renewal Plan for Social Assistance was introduced to address the economic realities being experienced in the province, recognizing that existing policies do not reflect the supports that are needed for clients to address barriers to employment, including life stabilization.

As a result of federal COVID-19 benefits that were available for those experiencing job loss related to the pandemic, the Ontario Works caseload experienced a steady reduction from April 2020 onward. While the average yearly caseload was reduced, those relying on supports from Ontario Works to maintain life stabilization and employment supports experienced challenges and barriers due to the impacts of COVID-19. To address associated challenges and barriers, City of London Social Services implemented a number of supports to address individual needs. This included providing digital devices to tackle accessibility barriers with technology, aimed at maintaining connection capabilities and engagement in employment activities. Despite many unknowns and adjustments for service delivery throughout 2020, clients were still able to exit Ontario Works as a result of successfully finding employment.

For City of London Social Services, 2020 demonstrated a collective ability to recognize the significant challenges faced by Ontario Works clients during the pandemic and ensure

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<sup>17</sup> City of London Circles Evaluation 2020

individualized supports and services continued to be available and adapted. Looking ahead, commitment to providing basic needs, connections to community and health supports, and life skills will be maintained, as well as evolve with MCCSS Recovery and Renewal priorities. Local context will remain a crucial element for service delivery and systems planning, including future co-design opportunities with MCCSS. Responsiveness to the needs of Ontario Works clients in partnership with both internal and external stakeholders will continue to be the priority of City of London Social Services in 2021.