

Report to Community and Protective Services Committee

To: Chair and Members
Community and Protective Services Committee
From: Kevin Dickins, Deputy City Manager, Social and Health
Development
Subject: 2021 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile
Date: November 29, 2022

Recommendation

That, on the recommendation of the Deputy City Manager, Social and Health Development, the following report on the 2021 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile **BE RECEIVED** for information purposes.

Executive Summary

City of London Life Stabilization administers the Ontario Works program on behalf of the Province 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) priority to achieve improved employment outcomes for Ontario Works participants, City of London Life Stabilization applies a local perspective when seeking ways to increase sustainable employment and assist clients in achieving financial independence. Strategic and operational planning involves understanding client experiences, evaluation of performance data, review of service delivery pathways and consideration of economic opportunities, in order to prioritize supports for the City's most vulnerable as well as effectively equip frontline staff delivering the services.

COVID-19 continued to impact service delivery throughout 2021 requiring flexibility and adaptability in response to public health measures and implemented policies at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Services were predominantly delivered via telephone and virtual platforms, with in person services offered at front counters across all Life Stabilization offices.

In February 2021, the Ministry of Community, Children and Social Services (MCCSS) introduced a Working Vision for Social Assistance roadmap, outlining a phased approach for working towards an integrated human services model and commitment to co-designing the new system with Municipal service delivery partners. MCCSS has reinforced the importance of effectively connecting people to supports and increasing capacity for Caseworkers to spend more time working directly with clients as key foundational goals of service delivery model changes. Application of continuous improvement practices throughout 2021 along with provincial program updates and associated service delivery adjustments, led to enhanced internal approaches and positive impacts to the client experience.

Linkage to Community Recovery

The City of London is committed to working in partnership with the community to identify solutions that will drive a strong, deep, and inclusive community recovery for London as we move out of and beyond the global COVID-19 pandemic. The Ontario Works program continues to provide financial assistance for eligible clients as well as employment and life stabilization supports. Discretionary Benefits provides financial assistance for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program recipients and low-income Londoners with health related and essential items as access to healthcare and community services expand during COVID-19 recovery.

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

- 2020 Ontario Works Participant and Service Delivery Profile (CPSC May 11, 2021)
- 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 MCCSS program updates, 2021 service delivery outcomes and employment supports information, including performance indicators and participant demographics.

Included in Schedule 1 are key highlights from the MCCSS Working Vision for Social Assistance and the Life Stabilization Framework. A synopsis of MCCSS co-design opportunities that took place between May-October 2021 is also provided. Categories in the co-design approach included staff feedback, client focus groups, municipal surveys, and community partner engagement. From a service delivery perspective, summaries related to modernization initiatives, caseload demographics, Discretionary Benefits and time on assistance are presented. In terms of employment supports provided throughout 2021, specifics related to client communications, access to technology, partnerships and the *Employment Supports Refocus* are summarized in the attached Schedule 1. Employment metrics associated with the City of London *Strategic Plan* are included and illustrate the outcomes attained.

The information attached in Schedule 1 is inclusive of six Life Stabilization offices that provided client service in 2021. 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 2021 averaging 344 benefit units.

3.0 Financial Impact/Considerations

3.1 2021 Caseload Expenditures

	2021	2021	
	Budget	Actual	Variance
Average Monthly Caseload	11,170	8,616	2,554
Total Expenditures	\$ 109,020,000.00	\$ 80,109,607.00	\$ 28,910,393.00
Average Case Cost	\$ 813	\$ 775	\$ 38

Note: Expenditures and Average Case cost exclude Discretionary Benefits, Repayments and Reimbursements, and Transition Child Benefit.

Conclusion

Throughout 2021, client access to services and supports was prioritized, as well as ensuring policies and processes were updated in accordance COVID-19 public health measures. City of London Life Stabilization remained committed to advancing service delivery modernization by embracing provincial opportunities to expand communication channels and partnering with local service providers to offer access to technology as well as training. Despite ongoing challenges resulting from COVID-19, Ontario Works employment exit targets for both MCCSS and the City of London Strategic Priorities were exceeded. Combined local context and MCCSS program updates were fundamental elements for service delivery and systems planning to guide approaches related to Life Stabilization and employment supports. Partnership with internal and external stakeholders continue to be important priorities as the provincial vision for Social Assistance evolves.

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Schedule 1

Ontario Works Participant & Service Delivery Profile

City of London Life Stabilization 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 MCCSS priorities to achieve improved employment outcomes for Ontario Works participants, City of London Life Stabilization applies a local perspective when seeking ways to increase sustainable employment and assist clients in achieving financial independence. Ultimately, Life Stabilization 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.

In supporting an individual’s path to life stabilization, partnerships are in place with the Housing Stability Services (HSS) and Child Care and Early Years (CCEY) teams to ensure alignment across services and create connections to reduce barriers for clients. This includes direct referrals to CCEY for formal childcare, assisting those participating in employment activities or requiring therapeutic accommodations. Active partnerships are also in place with HSS to streamline the income verification process for housing supports, support individuals in “paper readiness”, and make connections to community wrap-around supports.

Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services (MCCSS)

In response to COVID-19, MCCSS announced in 2020 a recovery and renewal plan for Social Assistance in 2020 that continued to evolve throughout 2021 with intentions to address socio-economic realities experienced throughout the province. The first phase of the plan was built on learnings gathered during the COVID-19 response, as well as the need to fundamentally change ways services are delivered. The plan focused on four key areas:

• Accelerated digital delivery solutions • Centralized and automated delivery	• Risk-based eligibility review • Access to employment and training
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These changes aim to improve the effectiveness of connecting people to supports to achieve greater independence and actively participate in local communities.

The MCCSS Life Stabilization Framework (released in 2020) 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 in addressing barriers to employment. Additionally, the lack of tools and resources to determine life stabilization needs as well as inconsistencies in local and system partnerships (provincial & federal) to support social assistance outcomes were identified. The proposed future state within the life stabilization framework seeks to improve client access to employment services, improve readiness for employment and improve client navigation to other services that support life stabilization.

In February 2021, MCCSS outlined a Working Vision for Social Assistance in Ontario (Figure 1). Key elements of the vision include maintaining person-centred services, a shift in services provided, identification of responsibilities at the provincial and municipal levels, working towards an integrated human services model and commitments to co-designing the new system with Municipal service delivery partners. Associated timelines include work that began in 2020 up until 2024 for full implementation of the vision as outlined in Table 1 below. Phases 1 and 2 of the plan aim to realign functions and service

delivery responsibilities, in order to streamline social services systems and create an effective integrated human services model.

Figure 1



Working Vision for Social Assistance

Table 1

Working Vision for Social Assistance Timelines
Phase 1
2020-2022 - Focus on realigning functions - Distinguish centralized provincial functions and person-centred municipal supports
Phase 2
2022-2024 - Focus on realigning service delivery at the local level - Municipally delivered life stabilization for OW & ODSP
Human Services Model
2024 & beyond - Broaden community access to caseworkers - Municipally delivered life stabilization for social assistance clients, people in crisis & other municipal programs

As part of building a framework for the future state, MCCSS conducted several co-design engagement opportunities between May-October 2021 for staff, clients, and community partners. Table 2 below summarizes the types of engagement opportunities offered as well as highlights from the sessions.

Table 2 Summary of Co-Design Engagement Opportunities		
Engagement Type	Time Frame	Highlights
Staff Feedback	May-September 2021	• Review of co-design approach and methodologies • Insights and feedback regarding how to improve client experience • Opportunities to work better together across the system • Considerations for a seamless client experience, including clear and coordinated case management
Client Focus Groups	August 2021	• Clients are seeking dynamic relationships with Caseworkers • Caseworker availability and engagement is important to clients • Need for relevant resources • Choice of communication channels • Caseworker support can be life changing • Navigation of resources and self-directed information can be improved
Municipal Surveys	August 2021	Life Stabilization provided feedback for the following categories: • Administrative Funding Model • Overpayment Recovery • Centralized Payments • Audit & Fraud Investigations
Community Partner Engagement	October 2021	• Explored opportunities and challenges for new Social Assistance model • Discussed how local services can be partners in the vision • Identified the importance of the Caseworker role • Highlighted importance of coordinated navigation and clear expectations for local partners

Caseload

Life Stabilization delivers the Ontario Works program through a decentralized service delivery model. Service delivery design and resourcing decisions are informed by data, local context, and community needs. Continual evaluation and review of service delivery approaches 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.

Yearly caseload average decreased by 16.47% (Table 3 below), which corresponds to availability of federal COVID-19 benefits for those clients experiencing job loss resulting from the pandemic. Caseload size is expected to steadily increase in 2022, with provincial estimations of 15.4% from 2021 caseload figures¹.

¹ MCCSS Provincial Social Assistance Caseload Forecast (May 2022)

Table 3
Caseload Averages²

2021	8,616
2020	10,137
2019	11,170
2018	11,699
2017	11,952

Figure 2 below provides an overall summary of benefit unit types when combining all Life Stabilization locations. The 2021 caseload composition continued to reflect a greater proportion of singles without children on the City of London’s caseload. Figure 3 summarizes benefit unit size in relation to caseload, where percentages remained relatively unchanged from 2020.

Figure 2
2021 Benefit Unit Size by Caseload Percentage Summary³

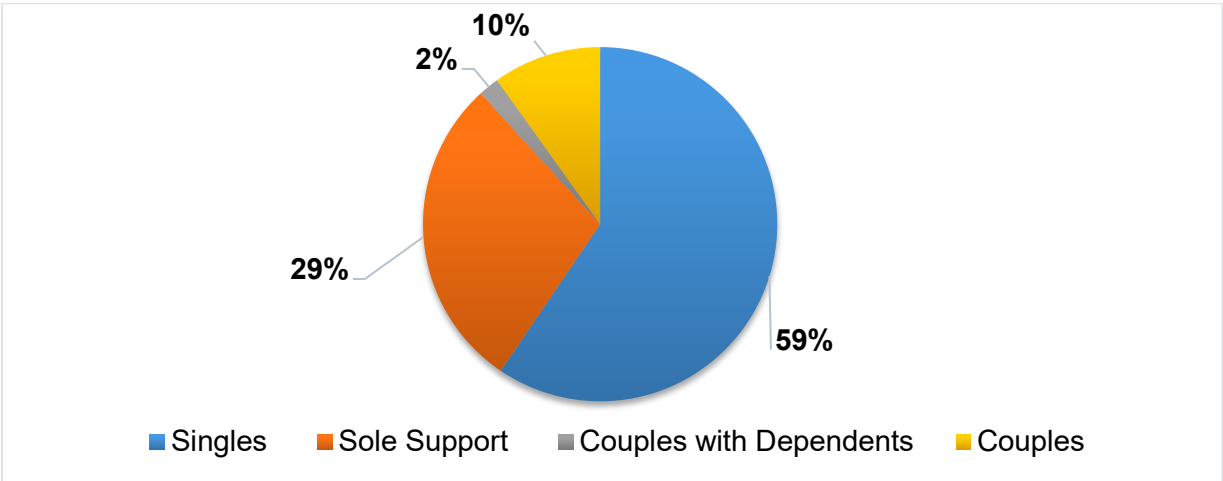
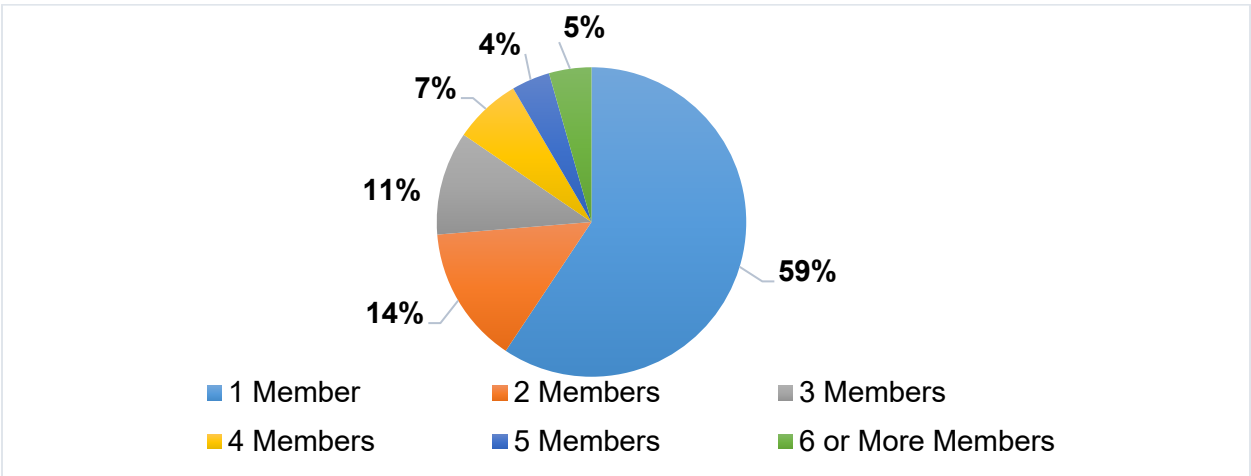


Figure 3
Overall 2021 Caseload Composition⁴



Five community-based offices and one satellite office are situated across the city providing access to employment services and financial supports (Figure 4). The Ontario Works client caseload is calculated by the number of benefit units, which are categorized based on membership demographics. Table 4 below provides an overview of benefit unit demographics for each Life Stabilization office by percentage of caseload at each location.

² City of London Ontario Works Quarterly Dashboard Summary 2021
³ MCCSS Performance Report December 2021 & Caseload at a Glance Report 2021
⁴ MCCSS Performance Report December 2021

Figure 4
Ontario Works Caseload Distribution by Geographic Service Area ⁵

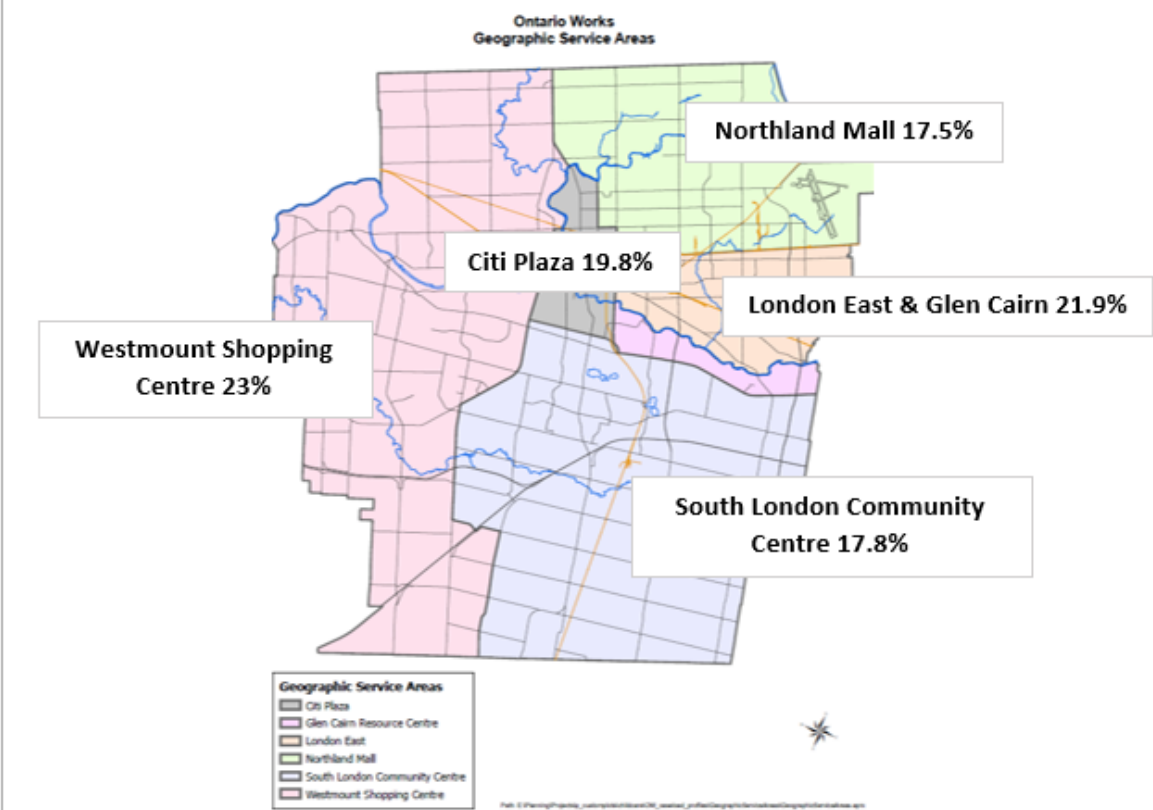


Table 4
Life Stabilization Benefit Unit Demographics by Office ⁵

Office	Benefit Unit Category	
Citi Plaza	Couple	1%
	Couple with Dependents	2%
	Single	87%
	Sole Support	10%
London East	Couple	2%
	Couple with Dependents	4%
	Single	61%
	Sole Support	33%
Northland Mall	Couple	3%
	Couple with Dependents	11%
	Single	56%
	Sole Support	30%
SLCC	Couple	2%
	Couple with Dependents	19%
	Single	47%
	Sole Support	32%
Westmount Mall	Couple	3%
	Couple with Dependents	17%
	Single	55%
	Sole Support	25%

Service Delivery

2021 service delivery included adaptability and flexibility in response to ongoing COVID-19 measures, requiring operational shifts to ensure client service approaches met local needs. Life Stabilization continued to provide services predominantly via telephone and online channels, with in-person front counter service available across all locations

effective June 2021. Critical service delivery supports for London’s most vulnerable, including access to monthly benefit cheques and cheque encashment stamps, was maintained as part of limited counter service during provincial emergency orders.

Aligning with the MCCSS Working Vision for Social Assistance, City of London Life Stabilization continued to explore and prioritize digital delivery solutions throughout 2021. The MyBenefits platform is an online service available to residents of Ontario who are active Ontario Works or ODSP recipients. It allows clients (24 hours a day) to see their payments and letters, and to report changes through their desktop, tablet or mobile phone. MyBenefits has been co-designed with clients and staff to ensure it is simple, easy to use, and meets people’s needs. It gives clients more choice and flexibility in how they get, manage, and report information to the ministry without replacing existing service channels (e.g. in office, over the phone). The MyBenefits platform intends to provide staff more time to focus on high-impact work with recipients by spending less time manually inputting information, processing changes, opening/sorting mail and handling incoming phone calls. In 2021, promotion of MyBenefits was added to the City of London website in three languages (French, Spanish & Arabic), reviewed at meetings with community stakeholders and incorporated into internal email & voicemail messaging. Uptake in registrations for MyBenefits continued to increase throughout 2021 with approximately 32% of the caseload subscribed by year end, which is an increase of 12% compared to 2020. Encouraging clients to register for MyBenefits will continue to be a priority as communication enhancements, such as two-way messaging, provide options for how clients connect with their Caseworker.

As part of Electronic Document Management (EDM) implementation and associated functionalities enabled through MCCSS, digitization of incoming mail commenced in January 2021 as well as active file digitization during September 2021. Active file digitalization involved participation from all Life Stabilization teams to prepare client files (approximately 8,100) for scanning with Nimble Information Strategies Inc. and uploaded in SAMS. In mid-late 2021, Reloadable Payment Cards (RPCs) were implemented to provide an alternative payment option for clients who are unable to receive benefits through direct bank deposit (DBD). By the end of 2021, electronic payments (DBD & RPC combined) were 91% of payments issued, with the remainder issued by cheque. The provincial target for electronic payment is 95%, recognizing there remains a need for cheques to be available when specific circumstances exist. Life Stabilization is committed to continuously improving and modernizing service delivery approaches including communication and digital options available for clients to maximize omni-channel access and supports.

In October 2021, a survey link was added to Life Stabilization staff email signature blocks, as well as our Ontario Works website, offering clients the opportunity to share feedback regarding their experience. By the end of the year, 70 responses were received and the following feedback regarding services was provided:

How would you rate the quality of service you received today?	56% Exceptional 33% Great 6% Good 1% Okay 4% Not Good
Did you receive the information or services you were looking for today?	97% Yes 3% No
Was the service provided in a friendly, respectful way?	97% Yes 3% No

Comments provided by clients within the survey also included:

“I felt very comfortable and not judged- felt really informed it was a good experience”.

“I just want to say that during a very stressful and trying time my Caseworker made the application experience easy and comfortable. Very friendly and professional and just wanted to say thank you”.

“Great service and happy and very polite person”.

“My Caseworker was exceptionally helpful. I believe they went out of their way to make sure my needs will be met to the best of their ability. They made me feel like someone actually cares. It was nice. Thank You again for all your help”.

Intakes

Over the course of 2021, 6,713 intake appointments were conducted to complete Ontario Works applications. Compared to 2020 this reflects a 24% increase in completed intake appointments.

Percentage of applications processed within four days averaged 87% for 2021, exceeding the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan target of 75%. 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 96.7% for 2021, exceeding the established Strategic Plan target of 85%.

Interpreter Services

In 2021, interpreter services continued to be offered via telephone and virtual formats. A total of 4,540 client appointments (across all appointment types) were booked with an interpreter. Table 5 below illustrates the top five languages requiring interpreter services from 2017-2021. Additionally, City of London Life Stabilization maintained compliance with the provincial French Language Services Directives by providing bilingual services through the Client Services Representative and Caseworker roles.

Table 5
Interpreter Services Top 5 Languages 2017-2021 ⁵

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arabic	Arabic	Arabic	Arabic	Arabic
Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish
Nepal	Nepal	Nepal	Kurdish	Kurdish
French	Kurdish	Kurdish	Nepal	Nepal
Assyrian	Assyrian	Urdu	Farsi	Assyrian

Discretionary Benefits

The Discretionary Benefits Program provides financial assistance to those in receipt of Ontario Works 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

⁵ Social Services CMS Booking System, 2021

individuals without financial means receive quality end-of-life services. Tables 6-8 below highlight examples and summaries of Discretionary Benefits assistance provided in 2021:

Table 6 ⁶⁷		
Emergency Dental Program	2020	2021
Individual client dental services	2,143	2,035
Number of procedures completed	7,850	7,989
Purchase vouchers issued for dentures	1,452	1,641

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

Table 7 ⁸		
Purchase Vouchers	2020	2021
Non-Social Assistance Recipients	321	249
ODSP Clients	1,734	1,875
Ontario Works Clients	3,321	2,604
Total issued	5,376	4,728

The top categories for purchase vouchers issued include Dentures (1,641), Eyeglasses (1,131), Furniture & Appliances (1,064) and Prosthetics (538).

Table 8 ⁹		
Funerals	2020	2021
Social Assistance Recipients (SAR)	230	211
Non-Social Assistance Recipients (Non-SAR)	110	109
Warrants to Bury (provincially legislated) (*included in SAR & Non-SAR counts)	26*	33*
Total	340	320

Funeral coverage includes funeral service, burial or cremation and interment as chosen by the next of kin.

Time on Assistance

The Provincial vision for the Ontario Works program is “to create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on people, providing them with a range of services and supports to respond to their unique needs and address barriers to success so they can move towards employment and independence”¹⁰. In moving towards a life stabilization framework and operational model, acknowledging the importance of local perspective in addressing barriers to employment readiness and independence is imperative. 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 5 below provides a summary of time on assistance by percentage of the yearly average caseload from 2017-2021. Also provided in Table 9 below, is a summary of the average time on assistance by year from 2017-2021, which illustrates the overall percentage of caseload on assistance for greater than 12 and 24 months.

⁶ Social Services Portal: Purchase Voucher Report 2021
⁷ Accerta Annual Summary Report 2021
⁸ Financial & Business Supports DB Monitoring Report 2021
⁹ Financial & Business Supports DB Monitoring Report 2021
¹⁰ MCCSS 2021-2022 Service Plan

Figure 5
Time on Assistance by Percentage of Caseload¹¹

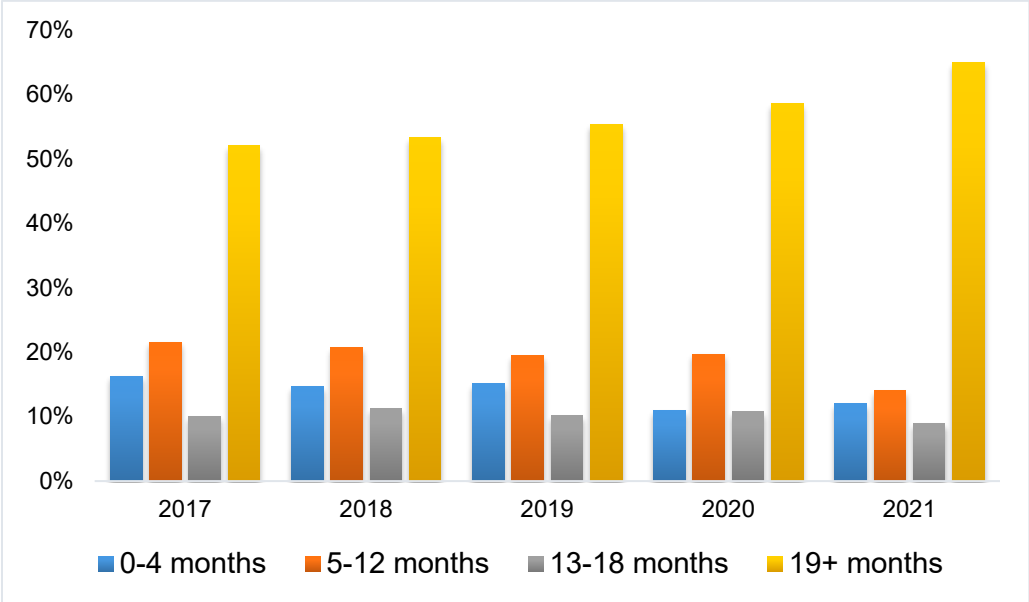


Table 9
Length of Time Assistance¹²

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
More than 12 months (% of caseload)	62%	65%	65%	69%	74%
More than 24 months (% of caseload)	45%	45%	47%	50%	56%
Average time on Assistance (years)	2.9	3.0	3.1	3.4	3.8

Overall between 2017-2021, average time on assistance (Table 9) has increased by 10.8 months. Factors influencing time on assistance included eligibility for federal benefits such as CERB and labour market conditions, where benefit units with a recent connection to the work force were more likely to exit Ontario Works quickly.

Throughout 2021, Life Stabilization 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 continued as a 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.

To address the increasing number of clients on Ontario Works longer than 24 months, Employment Support Specialists (ESS) along with Caseworkers, engaged with clients who have remained on assistance for four 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.
- Linking clients to additional professional and specialized services and supports, person directed planning and employment supports through Developmental Supports Ontario (DSO) 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

¹¹ MCCSS Caseload at a Glance Report 2017-2021

¹² MCCSS Caseload at a Glance Report 2017-2021

to participate in Circles London, a program developed to help participants build confidence, self-efficacy, and social capital.

Employment Supports & Outcomes

City of London Life Stabilization responded to the shifting and ever-changing demands during 2021 by adapting services to new realities and challenges of the pandemic, while ensuring community connections were maintained. Similar to broader community challenges, Ontario Works clients struggled with access to childcare, 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. Many community service providers were able to offer virtual services while providing limited in-person supports which compounded the impact of the pandemic on job seekers. Central to maintaining connections with employment supports during 2021 was developing new tools and strategies to actively assist individuals and families in recognizing the value of sustained participation and engagement. Adaptations, changes and newly formed strategies that emerged throughout 2021 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 community resources as well as employment and training opportunities 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 to meet this need.

A bi-weekly email-based newsletter, created in 2020, continued to be distributed to over 7,000 individual email addresses. Each newsletter profiled an employment success story to spotlight available services and shared updated service changes, along with upcoming employment related events and opportunities. Uptake of the newsletter in 2021 continued to be strong with over 30% of recipients opening the newsletter each week and 1.3% selecting options for more information.

In addition to the bi-weekly newsletter, weekly virtual Labour Market Information sessions were provided to both clients and staff. These sessions highlighted various industry sectors such as construction, healthcare, landscaping, food, hospitality and were led by community partners and subject area experts. The information sessions helped emphasize many available opportunities for employment and training in the local labour market.

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. Additionally, service partners appreciated the opportunity to market their supports and services in a widely distributed and positively framed way.

Access to Technology

Throughout 2020 and 2021, service provision across the community shifted to online, virtual and telephone methods. Access to technologically dependent methods was identified as an ongoing barrier for many Ontario Works clients. The Employment Related Expense (ERE) benefit was utilized as a tool to address accessibility barriers with technology. Devices such as tablets, chrome books, laptops 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.

A digital literacy pilot project was launched in October 2021 to help address needed skills to utilize technology. The Literacy and Basic skills pilot, led by Literacy Link South Central provided 15 participants with basic, hands-on computer literacy training and a laptop upon completion of the week-long course. Pathways Employment Help Centre also launched a computer literacy program to help address this basic computer skills gap.

Supporting Community Partnerships

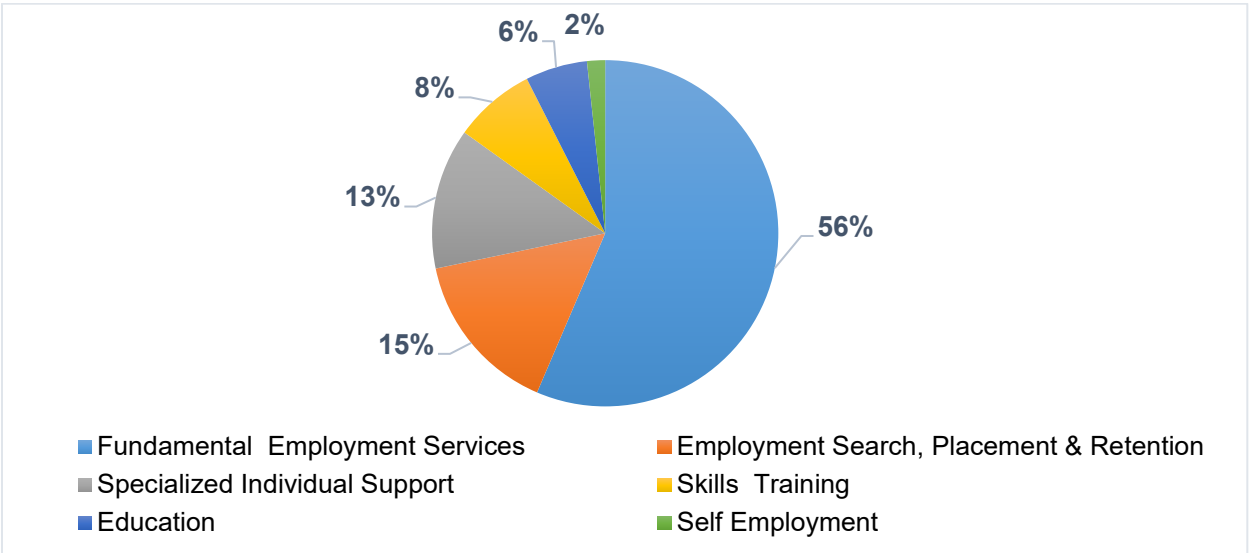
London’s unique purchase of service employment model allowed City of London Life Stabilization to play a central role in supporting a pivot for employment services during the continued COVID-19 response. The local employment service system (purchase of service and non-purchases of service agencies) responded in client-centred ways by continuing to develop virtual workshops, adapting training programs, and meeting clients online and over the phone for employment counselling.

Throughout the year, health and safety measures were consistently reviewed and adapted to align with public health guidelines when assessing individual client needs. For the first half of 2021, employment service agencies often had to limit the options for in-person supports, however virtual services were provided whenever possible to provide vital employment resources for Ontario Works participants. During the second half of 2021, many agencies began to offer increased in-person services as restrictions were lifted and service providers adjusted service delivery methods accordingly.

Due to the pandemic and related factors, referrals to employment services and supports were significantly lower in 2021. As the economy and services began to open in mid 2021, clients were encouraged to take advantage of employment and training opportunities. To encourage and increase referrals for employment services, Life Stabilization launched the “Kickstart” campaign, a concerted effort to encourage and incentivize participation in employment related activities. From the start of the campaign in October to December 2021, 468 clients successfully began new employment activities and were provided funds for the necessary tools, supplies and equipment they required to engage in these new activities.

In terms of overall employment referrals, Figure 6 below provides a summary of over 6,000 individual referrals made in 2021 to employment service agencies by category. Compared to 2020, referral percentages by category remain relatively the same. It is important to note that referral numbers may not fully reflect employment readiness as clients also have the ability to self-refer to programs (i.e. education) on their own accord. Introductory Fundamental Employment Services accounted for the greatest percentage of overall referrals at 56% (more than 3,400). 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 15% of referrals made in 2021. Skills Training referrals for job-specific training through employment services agencies made up 8% of referrals and Specialized Individual Support (13%) examined unique challenges, barriers, and solutions for clients, which included counselling, in-depth assessments, and evaluations.

Figure 6
2021 Employment Referrals by Category¹³



¹³ Social Service EA Referral Summary Report 2021

City of London Life Stabilization – Employment Supports Refocus

Within City of London Life Stabilization, the Employment Supports Team responded to changing participant needs in 2021 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 utilize a strengths-based approach.

Weekly virtual Employment Information Sessions continued 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 ESS.

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 2021, 193 individuals were assessed by a qualified Psychologist. As outlined in Table 10, 136 individuals (or 70%) were successfully granted eligibility for the Ontario Disability Assistance Program (ODSP). Of those that were granted ODSP, 124 were eligible for Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) supports including professional and specialized services and supports, person directed planning and employment supports.

Table 10
Assessment Outcomes ¹⁴

Total Assessments Completed	193
ODSP Granted	136
DSO Eligible	124
In Appeal/Pending	38
Denied/Withdrawn	19

Employment Strategic Priorities

Under the City of London’s strategic area of focus “Growing Our Economy”, two employment-specific metrics are identified (Table 11 below). Both metrics were developed to support increased client participation in employment activities and despite ongoing challenges related to Covid-19, exceeded the targets set for 2021. Total figures identify 1,236 files were closed due to employment¹⁵. Additionally, active files with employment earnings averaged \$893.68 monthly per case¹⁶.

Table 11
Strategic Plan Employment Metrics ¹⁷

Strategy	Metric	2021 Actual	2021 Target
Strategy Increase Ontario Works client participation within employment activities.	% of Ontario Works cases terminated as a result of participants exiting to employment (SHD)	24.53%	20%
Strategy Increase Ontario Works client participation within employment activities.	% of eligible clients that have an active outcome plan (SHD)	92%	85%

¹⁴ Social Services Portal: Employment Assistance Referrals Summary 2021
¹⁵ MCCSS Operations Performance Report January-December 2021
¹⁶ MCCSS Operations Performance Report January-December 2021
¹⁷ 2019-2023 Strategic Plan for the City of London: 2021 Performance Report

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 (the client) will move forward into economic self-sufficiency.

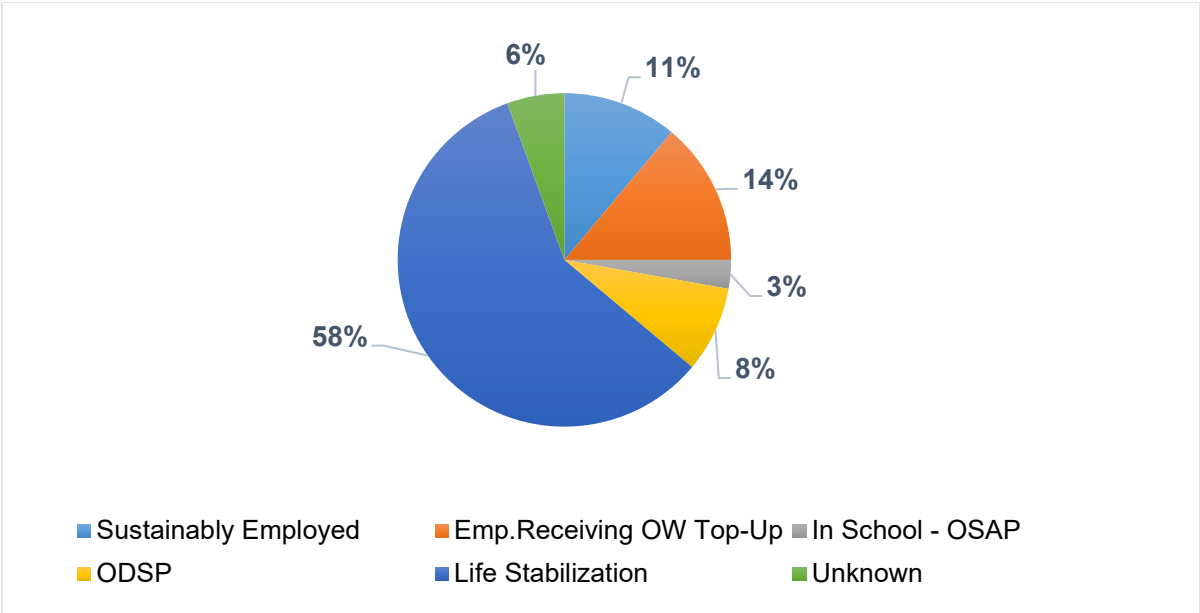
In 2021, the delivery of ReThink Poverty, Getting Ahead and Circles continued in a virtual format because of COVID-19 restrictions. During this time, 113 individuals were provided with technology through their involvement with Getting Ahead and Circles to specifically support their online participation, as well as to enable connection with local community and employment supports. ReThink Poverty training workshops were provided to 566 participants. Getting Ahead programs produced 41 new graduates, with 36 of those joining a Circle in the role of 'Leader'. Monthly Big View meetings engaged community leaders and continued as a forum for discussions around systemic barriers specific to escaping poverty and strategies required to remove them. Discussions included the following topics:

- **Civic and Political Engagement:** Mojdeh Cox (Executive Director, Pillar Non-profit), Sarah Emms-Pilona (Marketing Specialist with Sagecomm and Chair of Women and Politics), Skyler Franke (Executive Director, London Environmental Network and Vice President, Urban League of London).
- **COVID 19 & Vaccines and Vaccine Passports:** Abe Oudshoorn (Nursing Professor, Western University) and Nick Steinburg (Government Relations Specialist, City of London).
- **Provincial Paid Sick Days:** Local MPP Terence Kernaghan and Dani Bartlett (United Way)

Although many families struggled throughout 2021 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. Figure 7 below provides a high-level summary of participant outcomes for the Circles program. The continued successes can be attributed to life stabilization strategies and incredible commitment by Circles Leaders. Examples of successes in 2021 include:

- 7 Leaders graduated Circles and fully transitioned off Ontario Works.
- 25% of all leaders obtained employment earnings and either no longer required Ontario Works or received a partial top up as part of continued eligibility.
- 58% of participants continued to work on life stabilizing activities such as skills development, employment related activities, mental health support, and addictions programming.
- Regular connections between Coaches, Leaders and Allies to ensure all participants were connected with food resources and housing stability during lockdown periods.
- Circles Leaders were connected with employment and educational opportunities, through local labour market information, resume building workshops, job fairs, and connection with employment agencies.
- The Circles partnership with 'Purple Hands', a Western University student club, continued to provide virtual children's programming for all Circles families.
- Circles London provided three micro loans to Circles Leaders to support their housing and employment needs.
- Socially distanced summer events were held outdoors due to COVID-19 restrictions to facilitate group connections.

Figure 7



2021 Circles Initiative Participant Profile¹⁸

Conclusion

In 2021, City of London Life Stabilization demonstrated a collective ability to navigate continued challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure individualized supports and services for clients were maintained. Business continuity practices prioritized client access along with required resources and guidelines to ensure staff were able to effectively provide service. 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. Provincially, the Working Vision for Social Assistance was introduced, which included the ability to participate in co-design opportunities. Key elements of the MCCSS vision include maintaining person-centred services and working towards an integrated human services model. Local context will remain a crucial element for service delivery and systems planning along with provincial initiatives and updates to offer both Life Stabilization and employment supports. Partnership with internal and external stakeholders will also continue to be key priorities as the provincial model evolves.

From a service delivery modernization perspective, 2021 demonstrated advances in the areas of digital communications and electronic file management. Registrations for the MyBenefits platform increased 12% compared to 2020 and efforts to decrease paper copies of client information was achieved by implementing processes to digitize mail (January 2021) as well as active file contents (September 2021). Due to continued COVID-19 public health measures and the requirement to rely heavily on technology, many employment agencies were required to deliver service and curriculums virtually. City of London Life Stabilization 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. Despite ongoing challenges resulting from COVID-19, Ontario Works employment exit targets for both MCCSS and the City of London Strategic Priorities were exceeded.

As the vision for Social Assistance develops, City of London Life Stabilization remains committed to applying a continuous improvement approach during opportunities for change and aligning services with local needs. Improved system navigation and coordination of services will be critical areas of focus within the local context, as well as provincial service integration.

¹⁸ City of London Circles Evaluation 2021