



## 2015 Provincial Prebudget Submission

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*Submitted to:*

Katch Kotch

Clerk, Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

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## **Introduction**

The Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) shares the government's commitment to building a strong economy and understands that a key aspect of doing so is by developing a comprehensive approach that includes providing opportunities for all Ontarians to play a role in our local economies and labour markets.

We understand this begins with a strong early learning and child care strategy, through to post-secondary opportunities, skills development and employment supports and access to safe, affordable housing. And, that individuals and families are provided the resources needed to realize their potential and enjoy the opportunity to thrive in the communities where they live.

We commend the government on staying the course in its commitment to reduce poverty. This is no easy task in a time of fiscal constraint.

OMSSA represents Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) across Ontario. We support leadership in integrated human services through strong local service system management in all municipalities. OMSSA members plan, manage, fund, and deliver services including early learning and child care, employment and income supports, and affordable housing and homelessness prevention programs in Ontario.

OMSSA and its members play an important role in helping Ontario's most vulnerable and offer the following in support of the government's cornerstone policy and efforts.

## **Planning ahead**

With a strong mandate to move ahead on initiatives such as improving access and opportunities to employment, child care and affordable housing, at the front line of these program areas and as key funders, it will be important that we work in partnership as policies and programs are developed and move to implementation.

It is in both of our best interests that sound policy ideas not lose their intention and impact upon implementation.

While a great deal of work lies before us, the following are key considerations on a number of initiatives, some that are rolling out and others that are under consideration.

*Early Years Programs and Child Care.*

### Wage Enhancement

There is no doubt that the government's commitment to wage enhancement for front line workers in licensed child care was a good news story. Providing 100% provincial funding of eligible costs for implementation in 2015 was welcomed given this is a new administrative responsibility for CMSMs and DSSABs and broadens their current engagement with providers.

Wage enhancement is not a onetime initiative. Operation and administration of this funding will continue year over year. For CMSMs and DSSABs to manage this new responsibility, they must continue to receive full funding for the administration of wage enhancement.

We request that the Ministry of Education work with OMSSA, CMSMs and DSSABs to understand the true costs of administering wage enhancement on behalf of the province and to ensure that any new or additional costs incurred by CMSMs and DSSABs be fully funded by the province.

#### Integrating supports and service for children and families

The province of Ontario has made important commitments to supporting Ontario's families and children in the areas of special needs and mental health. The new Child Care Modernization Act places CMSMs and DSSABs as key agents to ensuring families and children have coordinated and integrated access to services they need in the communities where they live.

OMSSA is aware the government, through the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, is working with key partners and ministries in moving forward on *Moving on Mental Health*, its special needs strategy and the changes to the Child and Family Centres. OMSSA has been engaged in a number of consultations and discussions in most of these areas.

But it is on the ground where key discussions and planning needs to occur. The provincial government and CMSMs and DSSABs both fund and manage programs that align with these strategies. To ensure that available funding is maximized to serve families and children, the province must work with its partner CMSMs and DSSABs for this to happen.

We ask the government to ensure that CMSMs and DSSABs are engaged in local processes, consultations and planning as new strategies and initiatives are considered, developed and implemented.

#### *Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy*

Housing stability and affordability is a primary factor in determining the economic, social, health and well-being of Ontario's families and sustainability of Ontario's communities. Housing is more than just shelter, it is the interrelated system of services, supports, funding and policies that enable Ontario's citizens to live well in their community.

OMSSA and its members are pleased that the government's poverty reduction strategy reflects the above understanding and that efforts will be made through the renewal of the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy to realize this vision.

We understand that a significant focus of the government's attention is on maximizing resources already in the system and engaging with new partners, such as the private sector, in a more purposeful way.

This approach makes sense and as service system managers of affordable housing and homelessness prevention, many CMSMs and DSSABs have made considerable progress in these areas and in modernizing and streamlining their efforts.

Challenges, however, remain.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has made great progress in recognizing that CMSMs and DSSABS as principle funders of housing and homelessness prevention services in Ontario must logically also be engaged as principle policy makers.

To realize this role and more importantly to ensure that policies and programs are mutually supportive and do not prevent local innovation and flexibility to provide both affordable housing and the supports that are often necessary for the people being housed, engagement across ministries is necessary. This must happen across ministries and on the ground.

CMSMs, DSSABS, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, and the Ministry of Community and Social Services all contribute significant funding to get and keep people housed with supports they need. With the renewal of the Long Term Housing Strategy it is time for all key partners to work together, both at the provincial level and locally, with committed engagement from Local Health Integration Networks in communities across the province.

Working in a planned, purposeful and committed way towards the same objectives will prevent duplication of efforts, an ability to identify what is and is not working and ensure that public resources will be focused on the best, and most cost-effective solutions, such as supportive housing in the community to help address the demand for long-term care beds.

With the focus on innovation and maximizing resources it is also an opportunity for the government and its key ministries to work with OMSSA and its members to understand the costs of not funding affordable housing. The role and costs of using housing alternatives such as jail, long-term care, hospitals, emergency shelters as substitutes for affordable, supported housing must be taken into account in any policy or program decisions, to ensure the most cost-effective solutions are being developed and sustained.

It is well known that Ontario's housing system is underfunded. But we agree with the government that there are opportunities through regulation and program changes to better use the funding that is available.

The challenges with access to affordable housing and appropriate homelessness prevention resources is a risk and liability to Ontarians, and CMSMs and DSSABS alike. We must work together, effectively, purposefully with shared outcomes to reduce these risks.

Finally, we understand the importance of and need for sustained and active participation by all orders of government in addressing affordable housing and homelessness prevention. The need for affordable housing is not diminishing. OMSSA and its members support the province in its efforts for engagement with the federal government.

## *Social Assistance and Employment Programs and Services*

### Social Assistance Maintenance System (SAMS)

Our members are in agreement: the provincially mandated critical infrastructure (SAMS) has created a crisis for CMSMs and DSSABs.

SAMS implementation is having far reaching, and by all accounts, will have long term impacts and implications for CMSMs and DSSABs. Impacts that will affect the well-being of clients, staff and their organizations.

At this point it is unclear what and when achieving “stability” will mean to the Ontario Works system and the business recovery of CMSMs and DSSABs.

What our members need is a plan and critical timeframes by which SAMS will operate more effectively and efficiently than SDMT. We understand the Ministry of Community and Social Services is in agreement with working as partners on this effort.

In the meantime, to manage the mounting pressures, work back log and impact on clients, immediate action is needed.

Our members have identified the following as immediate considerations and first steps:

- CMSMs and DSSABs must be reimbursed 100% for the extra staff (including corporate administrative staff and resources) that have and will be needed to support clients at least at levels they were previously supported.
- CMSMs and DSSABs need a realistic understanding of the expectations and demands on their staff and organizations of ongoing SAMS implementation in order to budget and allocate resources effectively for 2016. In an effort to work towards a more stable state, the province must work with OMSSA, CMSMs and DSSABs on its plan forward and commit to a schedule which includes dates for fixes as well as centralized clean-up of data. Achieving this in the first quarter is important.
- No other provincial systems, initiatives or expectations should be placed on CMSMs and DSSABs until SAMS is stabilized.
- The province must work with CMSMs and DSSABs on what 2015 reports and data will be required, if any at all, until SAMS is fully stabilized. If this is not possible, we ask that provisions be made for training including the cost of new staff and overtime that are needed to meet provincial reporting requirements and obligations.
- The province must provide and resource training environments for the retraining of current staff and new staff. As well, program, IT and training staff working on SAMS should be available to travel to all CMSMs and DSSABs until the system is stable.

The above represent immediate considerations and actions that OMSSA, CMSMs and DSSABs recommend to bring some stability to the current situation.

This current state created by SAMS implementation is counterintuitive not only to the requirements of CMSMs and DSSABs under legislation, regulations and directives, but fundamentally, to the provinces poverty reduction commitments.

OMSSA and its members look forward to system stability beginning with what has been outlined above, and for the long term.

### Employment Programs and Services

OMSSA and its members recognize that the current economic and political realities are preventing the real changes that are needed in Ontario's social assistance system from moving ahead. Changes such as the integration of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, reforming assistance rate structures, and others.

But this does not preclude us from continuing to explore and finding new and better ways forward in our efforts to improve lives. Transformation generally requires upfront investments and time to get things right.

And we know at this time, this is challenging. But opportunities do exist as we wait for the right time to make bigger changes. One area we know the government is working on is the integration of employment services across government.

OMSSA encourages the government to consider the following in decision making:

- CMSMs and DSSABs are open to new possibilities but under the right conditions and should retain the ability to continue providing Ontario Works employment supports to persons on social assistance.
- It makes sense for CMSMs and DSSABs to continue their role for the following reasons:
  - The human and social services needed to support employment outcomes are integrated at the local level including social assistance, child care and housing;
  - There are years of accumulated expertise at serving clients with multiple-barriers requiring intensive wrap around supports including life skills development;
  - There are connections to local employers through municipal economic development arms;
  - It enhances the ability of CMSMs and DSSABs to work with employers and achieve their economic development objectives;
  - Many CMSMs and DSSABs invest additional property tax dollars into employment programming, which might not continue if the municipalities and DSSABs role in employment programming was reduced.
- Many municipalities and DSSABs favour a greater role in employment programs and would like to see the following:

- CMSMs and DSSABs should be provided the first right of refusal to deliver employment programs in their communities as designated Employment Ontario providers where capacity and interest exists; and,
- CMSMs and DSSABs should be provided an opportunity to propose the CMSM or DSSAB as local service system manager of employment services and programs, where capacity and interest exists. Service System Management responsibilities would include the planning and management of employment programs but not necessarily the direct delivery of services.
- The options above should be considered as viable outcomes of the Employment and Training Services Initiative (ETSI).

If, on the other hand, the government is considering eliminating the CMSM and DSSAB role in employment programs and services, CMSMs and DSSABs must be advised in a manner and timeframe that will provide appropriate opportunity to wind down operations and minimize their risk and liability from a fiscal and human resource aspect.

### **Conclusion**

It is both an exciting and difficult time to be forging new ground on addressing some of Ontario's most pressing issues. Nonetheless, the province has a strong mandate and willing partners in OMSSA, CMSMs and DSSABs to take this on.

The province is well positioned to make significant inroads to improving services, programs, opportunities for Ontarians and the effective use of public dollars.

Moving ahead in a planned, purposeful and effective way, we can achieve greater health, wellbeing and sustainable communities and lives for all Ontarians.