



December 22, 2017

Janet Menard
Deputy Minister
Ministry Community and Social Services
Hepburn Block 6th Floor,
80 Grosvenor St,
Toronto, ON M7A 1E9

Dear Deputy Minister Menard,

In 2016, Ontario asked three working groups to examine the income security system and make recommendations on how to improve it. OMSSA members were consulted and had the opportunity to contribute to the recommendations outlined in the working groups' report, *"Income Security: A Roadmap for Change"*. Poverty and homelessness are important issues in all 47 service manager jurisdictions. Service managers are committed to supporting systems and processes that can alleviate these issues. Poverty is found in all parts of the province impacting large, small, urban and rural municipalities. OMSSA is ready to partner with the provincial government to address this crucial issue at the local level. OMSSA members have voiced support for the Income Security Reform recommendations. Erin Hannah (ADM, Social Policy Development) briefed our 47 leadership table on the proposed changes. Richard Steele (ADM, Social Assistance Operations) presented to our 47 Leadership meeting and to the OMSSA Employment & Income Issues Network. The topic was also discussed at our Policy Conference. The Ministry has conducted extensive information and engagement sessions throughout the process. OMSSA members were part of the working group and participated through the PMSAEC table. OMSSA appreciates the strong working relationship between the Ministry and our membership.

There appears to be universal agreement that there is a need to fundamentally reform the income security system. Minor tweaks will not address the goals towards providing an adequate level of financial assistance and promoting economic and social inclusion. Ontario Works today does not currently meet the goal of adequacy. OMSSA shares this position and agrees we must ensure a client-centred approach where all individuals are treated with respect and dignity. OMSSA also supports truth and reconciliation and inclusion of culturally sensitive policies to address the indigenous population in Ontario, on and off reserve. OMSSA applauds

the provincial government engagement of both the First Nations Income Security delegates and the Urban Indigenous representatives during the consultation process.

OMSSA is supportive of provincial efforts to reduce poverty within the province of Ontario, however we encourage implementation of the 98 recommendations outlined as soon as possible. Providing resources to the 47 service managers and reducing barriers in the system-directive changes would allow them to start to adjust to these transformations and move forward towards the vision outlined in the recommendations. The report outlines aggressive goals for the first year of implementation and OMSSA supports reflecting these recommendations in the 2018 provincial budget. The report calls for a 10% improvement to Ontario Works benefits and a 5% hike increase to ODSP benefits in the first year of the ten-year plan. OMSSA also supports the expansion of dental and drug coverage for all social assistance recipients. While also investing in increasing the supply of social and affordable housing in Ontario, OMSSA supports an enhanced portable housing benefit. The sector and our members broadly support human services transformation, modernization and integration, but would like to see a focus on implementation that has a tangible benefit to vulnerable individuals in need of support immediately. We know that the current system does not provide for adequacy and does not address today's labour market realities. Precarious employment, contract work and new technology has made it difficult for the unemployed to find quality work. The time for action is now. We cannot afford to wait for more studies and future reports and recommendations.

The Income Security Working Group recommendations led by George Thompson are thoughtful, detailed and comprehensive. The 98 recommendations focus on four themes:

- Achieving Income Adequacy
- Engaging the Whole Income Security System
- Transforming Social Assistance
- Helping Those in Deepest Poverty

OMSSA fully supports all four themes that led to the recommendations outlined in the report and the sequenced recommendations outlined over the 10 years covered by the plan for Income Security Reform. It is our hope that this plan remains in place regardless of the government of the day.

Cost neutrality to the municipal level of government and the bold proposed investment being considered by the provincial government to address these key issues is appreciated by our members. \$3.2 billion to increase Ontario Works rates 22% will change lives. OMSSA is hopeful that a co-design approach with the local level of government and all interested stakeholders will be included as part of the implementation process. OMSSA also encourages the government to work closely with the Office of Human Services Integration and consider complementary investments in transportation, recreation facilities, affordable housing stock, child care, employment training, mental health, education, public health and meeting the accessibility needs of persons with disabilities to further achieve the poverty reduction

objectives outlined in the report. Reducing cost pressures and also the administrative and reporting burdens would allow service managers to focus on meeting the needs of individuals with a client-centred, wraparound approach that promotes dignity and respect for the individual. We also call on the provincial government to remove the privacy barriers that prevents internal information sharing and working in the best interests of individuals requiring support. Fair access to the system is an important goal and clients should be aware of all programs to which they are entitled. We all share a goal of simplifying a system that is often confusing, and focusing on improving the quality of life for those supported by the system.

OMSSA members are interested in the Portable Housing Benefit component outlined in the report. Consideration should be given to developing a Provincial housing measure, in consultation with service managers, to include in the proposed Minimum Income Standard. The proposed Ontario Housing Benefit should be harmonized with the proposed National Housing Strategy Housing Benefit, as well as municipally-funded benefits issued under the HSA Portable Housing Benefit framework and municipally-developed programs. The Ontario Housing Benefit should be 100% provincially-funded. Federal investments promised within the National Housing Strategy is appreciated by service managers. CMHC average market rent is not necessarily the best measure to incorporate as it is inaccurate in some service areas. Addressing the outdated social assistance rent and utility scales for social housing should be included as part of the roadmap. The cost to municipal governments estimated in 2012 at approximately \$200 million province wide. Income stacking of benefits should ensure that any municipally-funded housing benefits issued under the HSA (including RGI) are only a supplement to Provincial and Federal benefits. Provincial benefits should be maximized to ensure that income security for people with disabilities living in social or supportive housing is not effectively downloaded to municipalities. Coordination should also be considered with the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy (LTAHS) and plans for housing modernization in the province. OMSSA supports the simplification of RGI.

OMSSA wants to see all Ontarians reach their full potential. We appreciate the movement away from a policing and punitive approach that negatively impacts dignity and respect for the individual. Front-line staff and delivery partners are empowered to make a positive difference in people's lives. This new approach though, will require support as OMSSA members address the culture change required at the local level. We call on the provincial government to consider local flexibility as a "one size fits all" approach will not work. Experiences in urban, rural and Northern communities are often different and require unique creative solutions to find success in every region of the province. OMSSA members are well positioned to address issues within their local communities. The made in Ontario Market Basket Measure (MBM) with regional considerations is a positive step in that direction.

The 98 recommendations outlined in the Income Security Reform Recommendations have been well received by OMSSA service managers. OMSSA fully endorses these recommendations and looks forward to working with our provincial partners towards implementation. We understand that the provincial government must make tough decisions and has many

competing priorities and recognize that all levels of governments have limited taxpayer funds and that these funds must come with accountability.

The cost of doing nothing has a very high price tag when it comes to poverty. In 2008, it was estimated that poverty costs \$32 to \$38 billion a year in Ontario. This translates to around \$2,300 a year for every household in the province. For those living in poverty, it negatively impacts the quality of life indicators including: economic well-being; social inclusion and equity; physical and emotional well-being; relationships; skill development. Further it has an impact on an individual's social indicators of health. We must act now on all 98 recommendations. A piece-meal or watered-down approach will not provide income security for all residents of Ontario.

Thank you for considering the views of OMSSA and its membership as part of the consultation process. OMSSA also endorses submissions from AMO, NOSDA, Central East Service Managers Group, the Urban Commissioners and all individual service managers who have made submissions on Income Security Reform. OMSSA congratulates the work done by the Income Security Working Group and strongly encourages the provincial government to move forward with income security reform in the province of Ontario.

Sincerely,

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