

Background

The Ministry of Community and Social Services (Ministry) has been working on a Social Assistance Modernization strategy which officially launched in 2017. The modernization strategy recognizes current realities that exist in the Social Assistance system, as defined by the Ministry, including:

- Complex caseloads
- Too much time spent on paper processes
- Too many calls and voicemails
- Lengthy intake process
- Limited resources
- Changing client needs

The Ministry, over the next 3 years, is planning to make several enhancements and modifications to the Social Assistance system to achieve the following goals:

- Improving experience and outcomes by making services better, easier, and more convenient for clients to access; and
- Realizing administrative efficiencies through automation and modernizing processes and changing the way work is done to allow staff to focus on high impact interactions with clients.

The Ministry is also shifting from an enforcement focus to a risk-based paradigm; meaning that enforcement based processes and functions will be changing. As part of the modernization process provincially, the Social Services Division embarked upon an operational review over the past summer to determine ways in which improvements could be made locally and in line with the Ministry's goals and objectives.

The operational review was also initiated as part of a Provincial change to child support exemption. A previous report was presented to the Community Services Committee in January 2017 and the report indicated that an "operational review will be conducted in early 2017 to determine the impact on the administration of the Family Support Unit." <https://agendasonline.greatersudbury.ca/index.cfm?pg=agenda&action=navigator&id=1150&itemid=12298&lang=en>

Process

Over the summer months, four different focus groups consisting of 31 staff were formed to review processes and make recommendations in line with the Ministry's vision in the following four areas:

- 1) Vulnerable Population
- 2) Service Delivery
- 3) Workload
- 4) Policy and Procedures

The focus groups met several times throughout the summer and reviewed data that was related to the Ministry objectives such as visit summaries for clients, geographic information system (GIS) data on where clients live, along with a review of current service standards.

As part of the process, a group of both front line staff and management from the focus groups conducted site visits of other Ontario Works offices to review best practices in the Province. Several of the best practices that were reviewed in other offices ultimately led to recommendations in the areas of service delivery and workload.

Recommendations

The recommendations that have come forward from the four focus groups can be organized into key themes, which will be implemented over the next 18 to 24 months. The key themes that came from the review are as follows:

- Developing consistent service standards for clients and hold staff accountable for achievement. Examples of service standards would be dealing with unscheduled clients, client communication protocols, caseload ratios and client coverage for staff absences;
- Reducing the number of client visits in the Social Services office. This theme relates to making forms and services easier to access for clients outside of the Social Service office. Given that there is only one service delivery location for Social Services at this time, clients should only need to access the office for high impact appointments and movement towards outcomes. The Social Services Division will also be engaging with other Divisions in Community Development to look at the possibility of delivering services in a decentralized model in outlying areas;
- Increasing training for staff in the areas of mental health, addictions, and other community resources. The Social Services Division is seeing a large number of clients that present with addictions and mental health issues, and the recommendation would be to give staff more tools and time to deal with these complex cases; and
- Reviewing of local policy and procedures to align with Ministry principles:
 - a. Less Paper Work/Administration/Reduction of Redundant Processes; and
 - b. Client Focused.

Overall, the next eighteen months will bring a shift in culture which will empower front line staff to make decisions that will be in the best interest of clients with proper supports in place.

Organizational and Office Structure

The final change that will be made in the Social Services Division will be to change the organizational structure for Social Services. The final theme that was brought out from the focus groups was to move towards more of a team based approach that would incorporate teams of different staff disciplines to focus and deliver on client outcomes.

Intensive case management would also be a focus of one team in particular to work with the most vulnerable case loads which include homelessness clients. A process is currently underway and administrative changes to the structure, including the Family Support Unit, will take place by the end of 2017.

Next Steps

While the overall operational review process has come to a close, the implementation of the recommendations will now be the focus of the Social Services Division over the next 18-24 months. Clients will be surveyed on an ongoing basis to gain insight and feedback on the changes. Relevant data will also be tracked to ensure achievement of intended goals of the review. Frontline staff, along with management, will continue to work with the Ministry on an ongoing basis to provide input and feedback on the modernization process as it continues to rollout across the Province.