

Ministry of Community and Social Services Employment-Focused Roundtables: Summary Report

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The Process and Objectives

In October 2012, the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario published its final report, *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*. The report contains a comprehensive set of recommendations for reforming Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

Between January and May 2013, the Ministry of Community and Social Services held six roundtable meetings in Toronto with a group of some 30 stakeholders and clients from across the social assistance and disability communities. The Ministry proposed two basic objectives for the process:

- Improve social assistance employment services and supports
- Work with employers to better connect clients to the workforce

These roundtables were convened to provide officials with an opportunity to hear the different perspectives of stakeholders and clients on employment services and to discuss with them the options for reform. The ministry wants input from folks who are directly involved in the system and have hands-on experience.

The roundtables were not intended as a forum for discussion of all the issues raised by the report, such as special benefits and rates. Participants agreed to put these concerns aside during the discussions and concentrate on the two objectives. For their part, officials assured participants that there is a clear willingness within government to move quickly on employment. The government is keenly interested in getting people back to work—something it feels everyone can agree upon.

But employment is a big policy issue and real progress is going to require new forms of collaboration. This is a departure from how things are normally done. Government feels it hasn't had enough of these conversations in the past with key stakeholders. Hopefully, these roundtables mark the start of a new conversation that will redefine the working relationships between government and stakeholders, as well as between the various stakeholders in the field.

Overview of Social Assistance and ODSP

Ministry officials opened the roundtables with a presentation on the current state of social assistance and ODSP, including identification of some key challenges for the future:

- Social assistance is a very complicated system.

- Ontario Works caseload is approximately 260,000 cases, about 10,000 of which are First Nations. Ontario Works caseload tends to fluctuate with levels of unemployment.
- ODSP caseload has been growing since 2006 at a rate of around 4-5% annually, and is now about 300,000 cases, of which around 2,000 are First Nations. In part, this may relate to Ontario's definition of disability, which is one of the broadest in Canada.
- Last year, 62 per cent of people who were granted ODSP had a mental health condition. The proportion of the caseload with mental health conditions, such as neurosis or psychosis, has increased relative to the proportion with physical disabilities.
- Ontario Works clients are more likely to have children than ODSP clients, but a majority in both programs are singles. The number of single men on the Ontario Works caseload is growing faster than women. Couples have decreased on the Ontario Works caseload, possibly because they have access to the Ontario Child Benefit and other child supports. The perception could be that the Ministry now runs a disability program and a small welfare program.
- Social assistance clients have a wide variety of backgrounds. Many are educated, single people without child care obligations who are able to work at least some of the time and would likely benefit from it.
- With ODSP, once people enter the program, they rarely leave. The exit rates for employment are extremely low. When people do leave the program, it is usually because they begin receiving old age benefits or have passed away.
- Popular wisdom suggests that people often go from Employment Insurance to social assistance, but data shows no clear pathway from one to the other. The two programs are largely distinct. Many people on Ontario Works have had little substantial attachment to the labour force.
- Over the last decade, the ministry has made many improvements to Ontario Works and ODSP programs, but much more needs to be done to help people move into the labour force.
- Employers, who need to play a more engaged role in achieving this goal, say they find the existing system of employment programs confusing, unnecessarily complex and extremely difficult to navigate.

How can we make the system better?

With this profile of Ontario Works and ODSP on the table, participants turned to a discussion of the following question:

- What should be the highest priorities in reforming the employment system?

Participants broke into small groups to discuss the question, after which they reassembled to report back to the group as a whole on their findings. A number of themes surfaced from this session that proved to be central to the discussion throughout the six roundtables:

- **Is the System Punitive?** There is a widespread perception among clients and other stakeholders that social assistance is punitive because they believe clients who take employment will be worse off for working. Perhaps they will receive proportionately less money or lose other benefits, such as dental or medical.

According to ministry officials, this view is a major obstacle to getting clients into the labour force. Officials were at pains to show that this view is mistaken and is based on misconceptions of how the system actually works. Benefits are structured to ensure that taking employment will reward rather than penalize clients. The belief that the reverse is true is a myth that, unfortunately, is often perpetuated by the wider sector. Participants agreed that dispelling this myth should be an important goal of reform.

- **Should Participation in Training Programs or employment-related activities be Mandatory?** There were several lengthy exchanges on whether mandatory participation in training or employment-related activities (e.g. active job search) was an effective or even a fair approach to promoting employment. Currently it is not mandatory for disabled recipients. While most participants at first said it was wrong, further discussion led to a more nuanced view.

The Ministry reported that, while there is some evidence that mandatory requirements help, the results are not vastly better than voluntary programs. A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report found that there are measurable benefits, but that they are limited. So far, the research suggests that no one has the ideal solution.

Most participants eventually agreed that there should be an obligation to participate in what they called an “opportunity session,” that is, a session designed to help clients define their needs and consider opportunities to meet them. However, they also felt that such sessions could and should be designed more as a carrot than a stick.

- **Trust:** Many participants saw lack of trust in government and service providers as a major obstacle to promoting employment. Before clients will seek advice or help to find jobs, they often need to feel they are speaking with someone they can trust. Too often this is not the case. Their level of trust in government and/or service providers, who are seen to work for

government, is very low. Clients fear that the main goal of these officials is not to help clients, but to get them off the caseload. As a result, clients are inclined to avoid such meetings or hesitate to answer questions, provide information, or participate fully in them. Participants felt that a high priority for reform should be to build trust between clients and service providers and government. The questions we need to focus on here, they said, are who is in the best position to build such relationships and how can they do it?

- **Assessment:** Questions around the assessment of clients' needs and skills surfaced repeatedly throughout the roundtables. Very early on, some participants argued for better assessment tools and, possibly, a whole new approach to assessment to find out more about clients' needs and skills. At present, they felt that not nearly enough was done to identify barriers that prevent clients from getting the services they need to help them find permanent employment. We will return to this below.
- **Support a business-to-business marketing model:** Another recurring theme in the discussions was that businesses need to play a more engaged role in moving Ontario Works and ODSP clients into the labour force. We were told that employers are often not aware of the range of services available to help them find such clients; nor do they appreciate the benefits that such employees can bring to the work environment. A key strategy for changing this was to encourage businesses who have hired Ontario Works and ODSP clients to share their experience with other businesses and to offer support and guidance to them on how to navigate the system.
- **System Navigation:** According to participants, the complexity of the income, employment and social support systems is one of the biggest barriers to employment. Clients are unable to find their way through and quickly become discouraged. Some kind of peer support function should be put in place to help clients find their way. Clients should have access to someone they trust who has been through the system and can provide advice, guidance and help in the process.
- **Cultural Awareness:** When it comes to Ontario Works and ODSP clients, stereotypes abound. Participants stressed the need to ensure that service providers understand and are sensitive to the different cultural perspectives and backgrounds of clients.
- **Intra-Governmental Collaboration:** Participants thought the Ministry of Community and Social Services should take a leadership role in coordinating action among a variety of key ministries within government, such as Economic Development, Trade and Employment, Training, Colleges and Universities and Children and Youth Services. Participants believe government ministries need to work together more closely to address a number of systemic challenges, including:
 - Developing new criteria to take people out of poverty;
 - Creating a funding model that encourages community agencies to hire people with lived experience;

- Facilitating workforce planning at the local level to develop a customized, coordinated planning approach that responds to variation across communities, such as the differences between urban and rural communities; and
- Providing meaningful incentives for clients to seek employment.
- **Flexibility to Personalize Support:** Participants called for a more individualized approach to providing employment support. A key issue here, they said, is the current “results-based” funding model, which creates disincentives for service providers to take the time and provide the supports needed to deal with difficult cases and, instead, rewards them for selecting the easiest clients to place. There should be more incentives for service providers to take on the more complex cases.

Delivery of Employment Services and Partnerships

The last section of the first roundtable contained a range of options for improving the employment system, including changes to the structure of employment services. Roundtable 2 went more deeply into the subject of services by asking participants to discuss ways to improve how these services are delivered. The session produced several key ideas that played a central role in the overall discussion:

- **No Wrong Door:** Participants said the existing system is unnecessarily complex and discourages clients and other stakeholders from seeking answers to questions or solutions to issues. When it comes to accessing services, there was broad support for the “no wrong door” approach. The service system should be redesigned to place the responsibility on government to ensure clients and other stakeholders are guided through the system to find the contacts they need.
- **Service Standards:** Participants also liked the idea of setting basic service standards, although there was some uncertainty around who would set them and what they would include.
- **Improve Communication:** Participants called for better communication between caseworkers and other service providers. They said that events such as an open house would facilitate understanding and could be very useful in building better working relationships between key players in the system. More tools like this could greatly improve the information flow between them.
- **“High-Touch” Case Management:** Several participants suggested this solution to some of the deeper issues around Ontario Works and ODSP. “High-touch management” involves a close working relationship between the service provider and the client. In such a relationship, the client is far more likely to view the service provider as someone who is genuinely concerned about his/her needs and well-being—someone they can trust. Participants generally liked the idea. They felt that this kind of case management would

allow service providers to nudge clients toward action or to take more ownership of a plan to find employment. They also recognized that this kind of management is time consuming and therefore costly, but argued that, if it is an effective way of getting clients into the workforce, it could be seen as a money-saving investment in the longer term.

- **Local Government as Service Managers:** Traditionally, municipalities have been service providers, but their role has been shifting so that more and more are becoming managers of “service systems.” Some municipalities are coordinating how services are managed and funded in a holistic way, with input from the community. For example, social services departments are coordinating closely with community services and child care, to target funding to programs most needed in a particular community. Participants thought this was a very important development that deserves closer attention. Local governments may be well-positioned to facilitate coordination between community service providers. This, in turn, could greatly improve the quality and effectiveness of services at the local level. We need to focus the reform discussion more directly on this new and emerging level of local service systems, they said, rather than just the delivery of individual services.
- **A Community Forum:** At one point, participants stood back from their discussion to get the big picture around service improvement. They argued the need for much better sharing of information on the state of the local labour market, the concerns and issues facing clients within the local community, the level of awareness and involvement of employers, and the degree of coordination between service providers. In effect, they thought every community should be engaged in an ongoing dialogue on how factors such as these are shaping its employment system. Participants called this dialogue a “community forum” because it had to be carried out by community members. The Province, they said, is not well positioned to lead such a dialogue. It must involve local people and organizations and occur within a context of familiarity and trust. Some participants thought local governments might be able to play a leadership role here.
- **Flexibility for Services:** In their discussion of the community forum, participants made clear their belief that many issues facing the employment system can only be solved at the local level. This in turn requires a rethinking of the relationship between policy and service delivery. On one hand, policy must set clear program objectives and define where consistency is required. Clients and service providers alike agreed on the need to maintain key standards across jurisdictions.

On the other hand, they also agreed that the delivery of services needs to adjust to local circumstances, such as the labour market. Flexibility is extremely important here, as communities often have very different circumstances and challenges to deal with in helping clients get into the labour force.

The employment system as a whole needs a highly responsive feedback loop that allows policy-makers to recognize where service providers need flexibility to adjust to local circumstances. The working relationships between government, service providers and the

community need to be realigned to provide this kind of flexibility and community engagement at the local level.

Relationships between the Stakeholders

A key reason for assembling a multi-stakeholder group in these roundtables was to encourage them to talk to each other, rather than just to government. Their relationships with each other are as important to making the system work as their relationship to government and, indeed, employers, clients and service providers had lots to say to each other about their respective roles in helping clients find employment, how well they were or weren't working together to achieve the goal, and what they could do to improve the situation.

Employers and Preconceptions: Many participants felt employers attach a stigma to people with disabilities or who are on social assistance. While participants recognized that employers must make a business case for the people they hire, when it comes to Ontario Works and ODSP clients, they felt too often this case was based on misinformation and false preconceptions. As a result, employers often have misplaced concerns about clients' readiness to take on a job.

For example, they may fear that hiring people with disabilities or other barriers adds burdens in terms of costs, time or relationship management when, in fact, this is rarely the case. Employers who have hired such people bear this out. They say that if an employer is clear on his/her needs and a proper recruitment process is used to match needs with skills, these fears usually prove unfounded. Indeed, clients from these groups often turn out to be committed, reliable and hard-working employees.

Our participants called for a culture shift within the business community. They said employers need to become better informed on the real costs and opportunities associated with hiring people on Ontario Works or ODSP. They also need to become better acquainted with the services that exist to help them find candidates from these groups who will meet their needs. Indeed, most employers likely don't even know which services are available to help them.

Clients and Essential Skills: When it comes to assessing and training clients, there is often a mismatch between clients' needs and the opportunities that are available. Clients want to develop an employment plan that is meaningful to them and that aligns with their own priorities and aspirations, but often this is not possible. For example, many Ontario Works and ODSP clients are well-educated or have considerable experience or special skills, but are unable to find commensurate work, which can be particularly frustrating.

At the same time, other Ontario Works or ODSP clients lack basic or essential skills they need to develop more specialized skills. Participants discussed how difficult it is to develop "soft skills" (e.g. personal attributes like dependability, conscientiousness that are applicable in and outside the workplace) in a short period of time. Because of this, they said, it is often easier for service providers to focus on training for "hard skills" (e.g. a person's skill set and ability to perform a

certain task or activity). In the end, this can prove very frustrating for clients, who lack the foundation on which to build. They may end up feeling that they are simply unable to travel the path toward employment. Participants were worried about how best to deal with the challenge of building basic skills or finding better opportunities for clients with special experience and skills.

In relation to the former, volunteerism was suggested as one avenue. It builds up resilience and confidence when funding doesn't allow that extra work with clients. The need to ensure that clients can build the foundation they need for future learning is essential, but participants felt the current system often fails on this level. Another participant talked about a First Nation's "Let's all live well" program, which aims at the development of pre-employment skills. It allows isolated communities to help clients build confidence and self-esteem and overcome shyness and depression.

With regard to clients who have special experience and skills, the question of self-employment was raised on several occasions. Participants felt this could be a viable option for some clients, but they felt the current programs do little to support or encourage this.

Service Providers: Assessment was a key topic in the discussion around service providers. We heard that there is a danger in having an approach that is too formulaic. It tends to gloss over the complexity around skills. Participants also emphasized the importance of understanding both the client's and the employer's needs.

Regarding the first, it is especially difficult to try and assess clients' soft skills with a formulaic approach. As the last section suggests, soft skills can be personal and complex so that assessing them requires time and subtlety. Some people need little more than screening and referral; others need a more comprehensive assessment of their skills; and others still need long-term help and attention to develop basic skills, such as self-presentation. The ability to carry out such assessment is also highly dependent on the skill of the service provider.

Several times during the roundtables participants called for a fundamental rethinking of skills and needs assessment. They favoured moving toward a model based more on what they called "opportunity planning." They stressed that the types of questions and the way they are asked are important: What could someone be working towards? Are we assessing them for the skills for certain types of jobs? What's the right career path? What things motivate them? What kind of soft and hard skills do they need? Are they suitable for specific careers? If the service provider is to provide effective advice and support to the client, he/she needs to be able to answer such questions and this, in turn, requires a flexible approach. There is no single formula.

On the second point, the training needs of a client must be aligned with the needs of employers. If the broader context isn't right, we won't have the right outcomes. But this can be difficult. Service providers rarely have the data they need to identify where the gaps in the local labour market lie. Small- and medium-sized employers need to work together with service providers to ensure such information is available.

One municipal representative reported that that his/her jurisdiction was already working with businesses to meet this condition. Ideally, this municipal representative said, service providers in the community would be in regular contact with businesses and with each other to report on where job opportunities exist, what clients are available to fill them, and how the local labour market is changing. Local communications networks to support this kind of information exchange need to evolve in all communities.

Finally, closing the gap between the labour supply and demand means that employers need to turn to service providers to help them assess their needs more accurately. Many small employers don't really know what they need or how to find it. The tendency is to ask if anyone knows someone they can hire – a brother, a cousin, etc. Service providers need to let employers know they are there and can help them define and meet their real needs. This, in turn, may lead to service providers helping them create a job that a recipient of Ontario Works or ODSP can fill.

The Community Dialogue Approach

We've seen that stakeholders often don't understand each other's roles well and that misunderstandings between them can impact on the overall effectiveness of the employment system. The idea of a "community forum" or a "community dialogue" was proposed as a way to deal with these issues and quickly became a central theme in the discussion. So what would such a forum or dialogue involve and which issues would it be well-suited to address? In Roundtable 3, the facilitator drew on the discussions to sketch a model for community dialogues, based on three elements:

- Issues
- Approach
- Dialogue strategy

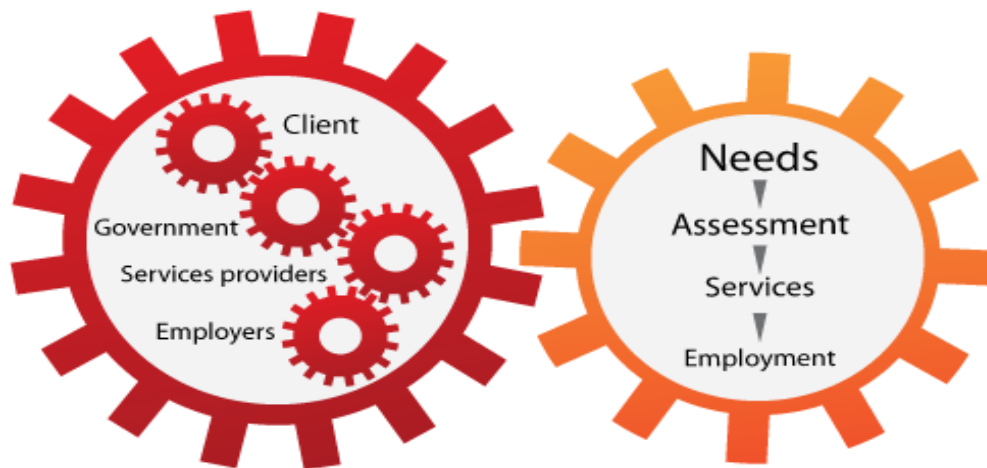
Issues: For the purposes of a community dialogue to improve employment services, an "issue" was defined as a problem in the relationship between two or more stakeholders that prevents the employment system from working effectively and efficiently.

For example, if employers have certain preconceived ideas about ODSP clients—such as that hiring them would increase cost and risk for employers—this discourages employers from hiring people with disabilities. This preconception thus is an obstacle to be overcome. Similarly, if clients believe that they will be penalized for accepting employment opportunities, this misplaced view will discourage them from seeking employment. Correcting these views should lead to better outcomes.

Of course, these “relationship issues” are not the only issues facing the employment system. There are lots of others, such as the lack of adequate resources for training. These “relationship issues” were singled out by the facilitator for two reasons:

1. Many of them appeared relatively easy to fix; and
2. Fixing them might result in a significant improvement in the overall effectiveness of the employment system.

Approach: The community dialogue provides the basic approach to solving such issues and is illustrated in the following diagram:



The orange gearwheel represents the employment system. Simply conceived, this system has several basic stages. It begins with an assessment of needs, then moves into services that help the client meet these needs, and, finally, terminates in employment.

The red gearwheel contains the various stakeholder groups that exist within the employment system and who interact within it. They include clients, service providers, government and employers. The working assumption of the community dialogue approach is that the quality of these relationships has a major impact on how well the system (orange gearwheel) functions.

For example, if there are misunderstandings between employers and clients, it creates friction in the system, which then prevents the gears from “meshing.” This reduces the effectiveness of the system. If these misunderstandings are cleared up, the gear wheels should mesh and the system should work better.

Dialogue Strategy: This term refers to the way that specific issues are resolved through community dialogue, which, in turn, improves the effectiveness of the employment system, as the diagram below illustrates:

Approach

Community Dialogue (Gears Diagram)



The green gearwheel represents a particular dialogue between some stakeholders within the community. For example, this may be between clients and service providers to dispel the belief that clients who accept work will be penalized for it. If this dialogue clears up misunderstandings and solves the issue, the red and orange gearwheels should mesh better, thus improving the effectiveness of the employment system.

Culture is a common theme underlying the issues that have been raised. Participants generally agree that to improve outcomes, we must first change the culture. The dialogue that the green gearwheel represents is where the culture shift will begin to take place.

Participants agreed that community dialogues may help to shift culture. These dialogues would take place at the community level and be led by community leaders. This could involve clients, service providers, employers, community workers, and local/municipal offices. They would build on some of the issues that had been identified by the working group:

- Need to change perception of the abilities of people with barriers to employment — within communities, organizations, individuals and their families.
- Employers need to understand the benefits of having a diverse workforce, how to reach untapped labour pools, and what's required to create an accommodating environment.

- For people with disabilities and other barriers, fear of starting employment is common. Need to explore how clients are influenced, and discover the credible, trusted sources.
- Look at success stories, where clients transitioned to employment, and identify what worked for them.

Demonstration Projects

Participants went on to consider whether this model provides an effective way of actioning key points they had raised in their discussions; and, if so, whether it would be appropriate to test it through a number of “demonstration projects.”

According to the facilitator, a demonstration project is a small, focused initiative to test the validity of an idea or method. In this case, some demonstration projects would be used to test whether the community dialogue approach is a good way of resolving issues; and whether that, in turn, significantly enhances the effectiveness of the employment system.

The proposed projects would be carried out in several communities around the province. They would be closely monitored to see whether a solution of the issues led to real change in the system. If so, the lessons learned from the projects would provide the knowledge and experience for a more broad-based application of the approach to other communities.

These projects thus would focus on clearly defined “issues,” of the sort described above. The project would be designed to ensure that the dialogue remained focused, and that adjustments to the local employment system could be made easily to accommodate the learning.

Each issue would also have to be “generic” in the sense that a significant number of other communities around the province would have similar issues. Solving an issue that is unique to a community would be of little value to other communities. The whole point of the demonstration projects would be to build knowledge and experience that could be shared with and exported to other communities. This, in turn, raised the question of what key issues such pilots might test.

Community Dialogue Strategies

In Roundtable 4, participants were asked to identify issues that could serve as dialogue strategies or themes for the proposed demonstration projects. A number of suggestions were made, which are outlined below.

- A. Business-to-business networks:** Participants strongly favoured the idea of building networks between businesses to facilitate the hiring of people with disabilities or social assistance recipients. Networks could take a number of forms, but would be focused on sharing experience and providing support to change business culture by addressing some of the barriers that were identified during the roundtables:

- Employers don't always have a positive view of people with disabilities and social assistance clients, or don't focus on what they can offer
- Employers don't always appreciate the potential benefits of employing people with disabilities, and frequently overestimate the potential costs of accommodating a person's disability.

Networks could provide an opportunity for businesses that have experience and innovative practices to help other businesses understand both:

- *why* they should hire people with disabilities or social assistance recipients, and
- *how* to hire or bring people on board.

Further discussion of these options would be needed to shape possible opportunities and identify how this strategy could be implemented. Here are some possible approaches that were discussed:

- Increase the diversity of existing networks by ensuring that small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are represented, so that experience, innovative practice and tools can be shared across businesses
- Leverage existing bodies to help develop a strategy to further this concept
- Businesses with experience and leadership in this area could mentor other businesses on why and how to hire people with disabilities and social assistance recipients
- Create a mechanism for people with lived experience to engage with businesses to educate, inform and share their experience to break down the myths around hiring people with disabilities or social assistance recipients
- Provide a forum for businesses and service providers to engage, so that businesses know where to turn for advice and support, and service providers understand what businesses need
- Build on previous approaches to move beyond recognising best practices in SMEs by identifying or supporting business champions with a proactive and visible role on inclusive hiring
- A similar approach could be taken in relation to First Nations communities, whereby First Nations are included in business-to-business networks so that experience, innovative practice and tools can be shared.

B. Peer-to-peer networks for people with lived experience: People with lived experience could use their experience as former (or current) social assistance recipients to inform current practice in a wide range of areas. This could help to transform understanding and experience associated with social assistance in different ways, depending on the sector supported.

Potential approaches include supporting people with lived experience to:

- Become employed by service providers and work with social assistance clients to dispel some of the fears about moving towards employment through a mentoring and coaching approach
- Work with employers to demonstrate that social assistance recipients are employable and that accommodation needs are generally not expensive nor complex
- Teach employers about how to work with people who may have experienced mental health or addiction issues
- Help employers adjust their work culture to be more welcoming to and accommodating of people with disabilities.

C. Enhancing service provider assessment to improve client access to skills, education and training: Service providers have a critical role in assessing the skills and abilities of social assistance recipients. Some clients have complex needs and assessment can sometimes reflect a “moment in time,” and might not fully represent the individual’s positive attributes. This opens the door to further systemic challenges that some social assistance clients might face as they begin a path toward employment.

Some clients need access to training, skills and education that may not be available via the route by which they entered the system. For example, Ontario Works, ODSP and Employment Ontario each offer different employment services and supports. A client entering through one door may face challenges in accessing supports that are available through another program, which can represent a further barrier for clients in taking steps towards employment.

Service providers are incented, through the funding model, to deliver positive outcomes for clients. While this requires that service providers have relationships in place with employers and programs, it may not incent them to work in partnership with other service providers. This can lead to fragmentation within the system. In some cases, it may also mean that service providers may not have a full engagement with employers about their needs, thereby reducing the outcomes they could otherwise achieve.

Potential approaches:

- Providing incentives for services providers to work in partnership with other providers, programs and employers to deliver their outcomes.
 - For example: At a community level, partner service providers with community agencies that have expertise with particular disabilities or mental health conditions. A service provider offering employment support for a client with a mental health condition could refer the client to an expert to ensure mental health needs are met.
- Reviewing approaches to assessment and assessment methodologies used in other settings, e.g., by employers for recruitment purposes, and in other jurisdictions, to identify if there is a best practice that could be tested. This could include identifying

models to ensure that the right skills are assessed e.g., cognitive/soft skills, or to help identify the inventory of skills and positive attributes a person brings into the process.

- At a community level, creating partnerships in the delivery of skills, education and training and breaking down hard program rules so that no matter which door clients enter, they have access to the opportunities that best meet their needs.
 - For example, helping ODSP, Ontario Works and Employment Ontario service providers work together at a local level to identify and meet a client's needs.
- Identify skills, training and education gaps of clients and develop capacity in the system for these gaps to be met.
 - For example: Service providers, municipal partners and employers in a particular sector could form a "thematic" network to address the particular needs of that sector, e.g., finance, customer service, or hospitality. Through this approach, identify areas where people who are social assistance recipients could close a gap in the labour market with targeted training, e.g., becoming personal support workers or hotel room attendants.

D. Pre-employment focus on youth employment: Some young people with disabilities will not have the same experience of employment as their peers who do not have disabilities. This can mean that young people with disabilities do not have early and positive experiences with the labour market, which can have a compounding impact. It can result in a lower expectation and confidence by the individual and their family that the young person will achieve employment or independence. It can also make it more challenging for young people to achieve employment when they finish school, since they may not have the early experience in the labour market that their non-disabled peers may have. For example, they may not experience summer jobs, after-school jobs, or taking first aid courses so they can baby-sit. This could reduce expectations of their potential to work (by employers, their parents and themselves). An approach could be developed to engage young people with disabilities in employment experiences while they are still in secondary education system.

Additionally, some young people will be in families where there is no working adult. To break the cycle of poverty and social assistance dependence, and to address the reduced employment opportunities currently available for younger adults, a focused approach that engages high school students would be helpful. These activities should develop students' interest in employment and labour market attachment and spur their creativity about how they can best engage.

Potential approaches:

- Targeting youth employment activities in an education setting to specific groups of young people, e.g., those with disabilities that have resulted in their being less engaged in employment, or those in specific high-needs neighbourhoods

- Businesses in different sectors that champion the employment of people with disabilities developing short seminars to take to high school students to demonstrate what they do and how students may have, or can easily gain the skills to do this, i.e., a marketing organisation sponsoring students to develop a new campaign
- Businesses providing work experience or apprenticeships for students targeted at young people with disabilities or those in high-needs neighbourhoods that align to the needs and opportunities in the local community
- Linking schools to business networks
- Creating a shared vision across ministries and programs that employment is a logical and achievable route for people with disabilities, and conveying the importance of working with young people with disabilities to realise their potential in alignment with this vision.

Employment-Related Benefits

In the sixth and final roundtable, Ministry officials discussed the employment benefits currently available to social assistance clients, and how these supports might be better targeted to suit the needs of clients, service providers and employers. Some key issues came out of the discussion:

- The most important issue for those helping clients transition to work is support for training, including access to training for clients to develop long-term and relevant skills.
- For employers, flexibility is key and the focus should be on providing whatever supports it takes to get a person to the door and into employment. Employers are responsible once the person is “inside the door.”
- For those facing barriers, support is needed for a wide range of expenses related to employment including child care, transportation, housing, medication support, peer support and so forth.
- An ongoing challenge for the government is to balance flexibility and accountability—this would also apply to a consolidated employment related benefit.
- Stakeholders were concerned that government make the best use of limited funds. For example, there were some observations that the work-related benefit in particular was not good value for money.

Conclusion

In the final roundtable, Ministry officials reviewed some of the key ideas discussed over the course of the roundtables. They committed to provide participants with this summary report on the discussions. Finally, over the summer months they will carry out the planning and other groundwork necessary for the proposed demonstration projects, which potentially could be launched in the early fall.