

Interim Report

Monitoring Ontario Works Action Research Project

« All I need is a job »

Presented by the Project Team for
Monitoring Ontario Works

to the Community Services Committee of
Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton

October 1, 1998

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Introduction

This report presents the *preliminary findings* of a research study conducted with the purpose of finding out and documenting the experience of social assistance recipients in the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton. A second phase of the research will be undertaken in November 1998, with a final report to be completed in January 1999.

The original mandate for the study comes from the Regional Council (Ottawa-Carleton), in a motion dated April 1997, that agreed upon the need for « an independent panel to evaluate how successful the Region's Ontario Works Program has been and report at the one-year and two-year marks to Regional Council... ».

A Project Team, comprised of representatives from various sectors of the community : social service agencies, academia, labour, business, the broader community, and social assistance recipients, was formed early in 1998 to oversee the research study, and to report its findings to the Community Services Committee. Funding for the project was obtained from the Social Services Department (RMOC); and from additional sources including the Public Service Alliance of Canada, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, Carleton University, and the Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa. The Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton is coordinating the work of the Project team, and contributing staff time.

Goals of the Project (as established by the Project Team in its initial proposal)

To provide an independent view of the Ontario Works Program, through :

- Documenting and examining the impact of Ontario Works on social assistance recipients and the effects on the broader community¹.
- Bringing forward research findings to the Community Services Committee and to the broader community.
- Presenting an analysis which compares the experiences of recipients to the quantitative data collected on Ontario Works by the RMOC Social Services Department.
- Identifying issues as they arise; making recommendations on how to respond to these issues.

¹ The effects on the broader community is part of a longer-term vision -- not the first year of the research.

Profile of the Participants

Seventy-two out of the seventy-five individuals contacted through the focus groups and individual interviews provided personal information on their backgrounds. Not all individuals responded to all questions. From the information gathered, we were able to develop a profile of the individuals whom we met. Here are some highlights (the final report will include more information and analysis)

- 70% of the participants were 36-55 years of age ($n=71$)
- 55% of the participants were men; 45% were women ($n=71$)
- 23% of the participants described their household as 2 adults with one or more children :17% as single parent : 11% as 2 adult households and 49% as one adult (single person) ($n=70$)
- 53% of the participants had completed a high school diploma or less ; 47% had some college education, college diploma, university degree or post graduate level ($n=70$)
- Of the 55 individuals who chose to respond regarding their employment before receiving social assistance :
 - 34% reported an occupation in the service sector, 22% reported occupations in a managerial or professional category; and 20% reported occupations in a clerical and related category.
- Of the 61 people who indicated the circumstances which caused them to end their jobs :
 - 67% ended their jobs because of labour market related issues (end of contract, downsizing, laid off); 30% ended their jobs because of personal reasons (health & family related) and 3% indicated a return to school or educational upgrading
- Of the 68 individuals responding, 54% reported that they were volunteering with a community agency before participating in the Ontario Works Program

Background

Three focus groups were held during May 1998, as part of the Monitoring Ontario Works Research Project, two were conducted in English and one in French. Thirty two people participated in these sessions, most of whom were in the community placement component of Ontario Works.

In June 1998 individual interviews were held with a further 43 Ontario Works participants; 24 of those interviewed were participating in the Employment Support component of Ontario Works and 19 were participating in Community Placements. Interviews were held at three Employment Resource Centres (ERC's), a Community Centre, a Community House and with participants in a Community Day program.

The length of time that people had been participating in the Ontario Works program varied. Some had been involved since the Fall of 1997 (and in some cases had completed their first Ontario Works placement). Others had just recently signed participation agreements or been active in their particular Ontario Works component for a few months.

The participation rate of the people contacted was extremely high and almost all participants expressed a desire to participate in follow up focus groups and interviews in November 1998. For most of the participants, this was their first opportunity to hear and exchange information on Ontario Works.

The information gathered and the issues raised in the focus groups and the individual interviews were remarkably consistent regardless of the different format.

Why qualitative analysis?

1. There is a practical need for information and analysis of the impact of Ontario Works in the lives of those who are required to participate

2. Qualitative analysis allows the experiences and feelings of those who are directly affected by Ontario Works to be expressed as authentically as possible

3. Moreover it values the experience and feelings of those participating in Ontario Works within their own terms of reference

4. It is research and analysis conducted within the context of the social, political and lived reality of the participants

5. The process of research and analysis provides an opportunity to work collectively, strengthen connections and increase awareness

6. The research is undertaken not as an end in itself but as a tool or strategy that can inform social policy development

The format

Interviewers and facilitators of the focus groups told us that for many participants, talking about the Ontario Works program had been highly emotional. All of those who participated in the data gathering were profoundly affected by the openness that people showed in sharing their hopes, frustrations and experiences as Ontario Works participants. The format of this report is our way of bringing to you the 75 people who participated.

This preliminary report will look at the following key findings with regard to the Ontario Works Program

a) Information

b) Consistency of supports and services

c) Perceptions of the Ontario Works Program

d) The personal impact to participants in the Ontario Works program

These are the major themes that have emerged from the findings at this time.

a) Information

The rights and obligations of participants in Ontario Works, of welfare workers and of the Social Services Department was not clearly understood. Little or no information appeared to have been provided to the people that we spoke to. One person brought their Ontario Works participation agreement with them to the interview, but in general participants could only recall signing a paper (papers) but not specifically what the papers were about. Beyond this one person, no one spoke of having received or being offered a copy of their participation agreement.

Participants expressed frustration at not knowing what was expected of them or what opportunities and services were available to them through Ontario Works.

The lack of information led to confusion about the nature, duration and component parts of Ontario Works.

It was interesting to note that while many participants were aware of signing participation agreements almost none could recall clearly what they had signed or agreed to.

Well I didn't know anything about workfare until I went to welfare one day, I needed to get some stuff straightened out and they made me sign some work forms. That's all I know about it.

Il ne m'a pas rien expliqué. Il m'a dit "signe ça, signe ça, signe ça, puis t'emmènes ça au contracteur et tu lui fais signer ça et puis, tu lui fais signer ça, puis that's it, that's all. Pas d'information, rien de ça.

Non, pas d'information du tout, du tout, du tout.

I understand that it must be amazing to try and keep them (workers) updated on all of this, it's moving so fast, but you know, not to be in denial and try to ignore it as if it's going to go away. To make the proper reference that's going to make a difference, to take the guess work out of it.

WHAT INFORMATION !!!!

Consistency of supports and services

The confusion appears to have led to a lack of consistency in the application of the program and across the program components, especially with services and supports that are available through Ontario Works.

Through discussion, particularly in the focus groups, people were surprised and concerned with the variation in what had been allocated and received

Specific examples given to us by participants were :

Bus passes

This was consistently raised as an issue with participants.

People in community placements who had been allocated bus passes by their Placement Coordinator had trouble getting the bus pass as this had to be processed by their regular worker (Case Coordinator). People told us that there appeared to be a lack of cooperation and dialogue between the two workers.

Even though placements are for a period of months, it appeared that people had to re-apply to their worker each month to keep getting the bus pass.

Almost all of those who were eligible for bus passes said that the passes arrived late, so that people had to budget out of the rest of their welfare money to be able to pay for the new bus pass at the beginning of each month.

Participants told us (and this has been confirmed by the Department) that bus passes are only available for Community Placements and Training but not for individuals involved in the Independent Job Search.

The rules are different. Some social workers ask for receipts and some give extra cash.

It should be the same for everybody.

You're in the same class as somebody and they can get a bus pass and the other person can't – that doesn't make sense.

I have to call all the time. They should have a separate program. You have to remind workers all the time to get the bus pass.

It comes late, so sometimes I have to buy it with my own money.

Once in six months I got a bus pass. I should have one for the whole six months.

I think anybody who is on workfare, because there's three parts to it right? I think it doesn't matter which one you're on you should be entitled to a bus pass either way. Why would only two out of the three be qualified for a bus pass?

I would love to go pounding the pavement while the kids are off at school two days a week, but I can't afford it if it's not in walking distance.

Clothing Allowance \Start Up Allowance

There was a lack of consistency and some confusion about what was available. Some people told us that they had received a clothing allowance for community placements while others did not know that it was available or had not been given it.

For those in Independent Job Searches, people told us that a clothing allowance was only available once they had a job.

People were uncertain whether they had to produce or keep receipts. Instructions and information from workers varied.

Child Care and other supports

There were only a few participants that we spoke to who said that they required child care for their children. However they raised several concerns about the issue and stressed that it is a critical factor both in their participation in the Ontario Works program and in participating in the workforce.

As well as the need for child care, participants also raised the question of the amount allowed for babysitting/childminding, while participating in Ontario Works. There was little consensus on the dollar amount available or whether this would be adequate to ensure quality daycare.

Other issues raised by participants was the provision of safety equipment and course materials. While participants were receiving funding for courses, it was not clear if they had enough resources for books and supplies. Participants who needed safety equipment said that there appeared to be confusion over what was available and the criteria for the replacement of safety equipment.

I'm on a community placement. I knew that there was a bus pass but I didn't know that there was a start up for clothing.

Does that mean it's two times? So that if I do my community placement I will be eligible for \$250.00 and then when I find a job or start a job I get \$250.00.

To go for interviews I would need better clothing. They don't give you a clothing allowance until you find a job. To me that has always been a handicap.

I was told that once the \$250.00 was gone there's nothing else.

My child care has been a major factor in my not getting off welfare.

I have very small children and was promised childcare but it was never provided not in two months. I take my children to a friend. I'm not sure how I will pay for the sitter, I will have to find a way.

I got construction boots.

I need extra money for safety clothes.

They are going to pay me for the course, the course is paid for, but the material is only for a few months and we still got six months to go, so where is the rest of the money coming from?

Accessing supports and services

The decisions of the worker appeared to be a critical issue in the allocation of supports rather than people being made aware of what is available to them as participants in Ontario Works. In a few cases participants felt that they had been directed to a specific program component by their worker even though they felt that other strategies would have been more useful to them.

Participants in community placements were not clear on which worker (Placement Coordinator or their Case Coordinator) they were supposed to contact for which services.

People told us that in some cases requests approved by one worker were denied by the other.

For some participants in the employment support component similar issues had arisen in dealing with Employment Coordinators and their Case Coordinators

Some people raised the issue that even if they were aware of what was available they might be reluctant to ask for it.

Some participants did note that where workers were helpful and supportive they felt it made a difference.

This was mentioned several times in connection to the Employment Resource Centre staff and services.

On several occasions there was frustration expressed due to the constant change of workers and people's inability to get in touch with their worker.

Have a separate sheet that tells everything. So people don't have to guess, so people don't have to try to pump it out of their workers.

Case workers have been wonderful. I got what I asked for, on time, it was awesome.

Well this is just it, anything I wanted or anything I needed I had to fight for.

I shouldn't have two workers. I don't have a lot of faith in a process when I have to clear it with three people.

To some people they (workers) are like Gods and to ask for something they would scare you.

What's the point? I ask them something and they....just....you know.

Les travailleurs devraient être moins bureaucrates et plus humains. (certains sont OK).

Excellent place (ERC) counsellors nice, caring people, they're wonderful here.

I have had three different workers in the last five months and none of them seem to know, and then it seems as soon as I get to know them I have been moved on to someone else. The one I have now I can't get a hold of them. I wanted to ask them about this, but every time I call or go down there they are not available, may be one of these times I'll get a hold of them.

Actually I think I go through a different worker every three months. First the worker told me about it and had me fill out an assessment. My next worker said why don't you get into a community placement?

c) Perceptions of the OntarioWorks Program

As the purpose of Ontario Works has been described as « a new program to help you get off welfare and into a job » (Ontario Works Information Pamphlet, RMOC) participants were asked how they thought the Ontario Works program would help them get training or find a job.

The in depth analysis from the individual interviews combined with the general feedback from the focus groups assisted us in understanding people's perceptions of the Ontario Works program and its potential to reintegrate people back into the workforce.

Participants were asked to define -

- Their initial expectations in regards to the Ontario Works program
- How they felt their participation in Ontario Works had affected their job search and job possibilities
- Whether they expected to find a job quicker due to their participation in Ontario Works
- What, if anything, they felt was preventing them from getting work in the Region.
- Where participants saw themselves in a few months

The responses of the 43 individual interviewees were consistent with the themes and issues raised in the focus groups.

What is the point of Ontario Works? What is the main purpose?

Je me force – mais il n'y a pas d'emploi.

All I need is a job.

What is the future, what is the end result? You can spend ages doing it. What is the next step to get chances for a job that is more real?

If it gets me some employment then it will have been a success. Otherwise it will have been a "bust"

Participants initial expectations of the Ontario Works Program

Some participants had little or no expectations of the program. Others hoped for skills, training and assistance with practical needs such as bus passes, clothing, child care and safety equipment. The most consistent response was the desire or hope for a paying job. Participants said that they wanted job contacts, work and reintegration into the workforce.

Not a lot of expectations I don't think it will help me get back in the work force.

Un travail rémunéré – mon but et mon espoir.

I hope that it would lead to work a "foot in the door".

I have some help but it's not enough. I need direct contact with employers.

The effect of participation in Ontario Works on interviewee's job search or job possibilities

Responses of participants who felt that their participation in Ontario Works had helped in their job search or with job possibilities were focused on the supports that they had received. Participants noted that they felt that having access to the internet, fax machines, help with resumes and support and encouragement from counsellors were positive factors for them.

Encouragement très positif, une bonne disponibilité des outils ex. Internet – emploi en dehors de la ville.

Oui – pour mon C.V. Avant mon C.V. n'était pas à la mesure, mais maintenant le C.V. me valorise beaucoup. En plus la lettre d'accompagnement est meilleure. Ça me donne confiance en moi-même.

The majority of responses were less positive in their assessment of whether their participation in Ontario Works would assist with job possibilities or their job search. Many expressed frustration that there was not more contact with employers and more direct help to get a job.

I expected Ontario Works to match jobs available with skilled people. Ontario Works would find what skills companies were looking for and then pay for training so that they can get these jobs.

I expected better job listings, better idea where the jobs were.

Very little, - new coping skills, workshops, assertiveness etc. – losing what I've gained because its not being used.

Do you expect to find a job any quicker due to your participation in Ontario Works?

Positive responses to this question reinforced earlier comments that people felt that their access to tools and the possibility to network might help. Others were more ambivalent in their response.

The largest number of responses to this question were negative. There appeared to be a lack of confidence in the Ontario Works Program's ability to link people to work opportunities.

Barriers preventing participants getting work in the Region.

The barriers that participants felt were preventing them from getting work in the Region were almost equally divided between skills related issues and labour market issues.

The most critical skills issue for many was not being bilingual. Both French and English speaking participants raised this as an issue.

Others felt that they needed better computer skills to get a job yet one person who had worked in the computer field said that they were unemployed because there was a lack of demand for the skills that they had.

The state of the labour market was seen as a significant barrier for many people. They felt that there was a general lack of work with too many candidates for one job. Some had found that there was no work in their field, and many (see profile of participants) had personal experience of losing their jobs due to restructuring and downsizing.

Age, gender and childcare issues were also raised as significant barriers to getting work.

Possible – because I have access to a phone, fax and bus pass and appropriate clothing.

Une partie de ce programme m'aide à me ré-intégrer dans le monde du travail et me fournit des outils, cependant, il me force à occuper un emploi non-rénuméré et réduit mes chances d'obtenir un emploi rémunéré– selon mes qualifications personnelles.

They say they create jobs but I don't see them.

Experience, language (bilingualism) I can't speak French. Most jobs ask for bilingualism.

Le langage – dans le plupart des emplois on demande l'anglais.

High unemployment, a lot of people out of work, I know its not me.

They need to invest money. There is no job creation happening.

Age – government cutbacks, reorganization and competition with younger candidates.

Mon âge – discrimination dans certains domaines, je suis une femme.

Where participants saw themselves in a few months.

While a few of the participants were pessimistic about their immediate future, the overwhelming response was the hope for a paying job. This was a consistent theme throughout the interviews and focus groups. People showed a strong desire to be working and paid for that work. However there appeared to be little confidence that the Ontario Works program could facilitate this or act as a bridge into the workforce.

Out of the seventy five people that participated in the interviews, one person spoke of starting work in the Fall but they were clear that this had come about through their own initiative and not through their involvement in the Ontario Works program.

Hopefully with a job, a better life.

Hopefully off of assistance with a job.

Hopefully employed without the Ontario Works program.

Community Placements

There were many issues raised from participants who were involved in the community placement component of the Ontario Works program.

Most of the participants expressed limited hope that the program would provide them with new skills, an opportunity to use existing skills, or a job.

Excellent people, human beings, but the organization has a limited budget. They are not able to hire anyone. What is the future of my placement?

For some who had changed their regular volunteering into an Ontario Works placement it had lead to negative consequences. They had lost privileges and responsibilities that they had previously had and were restricted in what they were allowed to do.

My volunteer experience changed when it became an Ontario Works Placement. Everything is changed and there is less responsibility.

..... Community Placements

Many individuals said that their skills were being under utilized and they were often involved in repetitive, low skilled and unstimulating tasks.

At first I was happy. I worked for an organization doing -----(repetitive, low skill work). My friend told me to ask my supervisor if this has any relevance? I'm not refusing, but how long do I do the same thing. After six months, no experience. They are wasting government money and my time. I want another placement to meet my needs.

A few individuals were pleased to have the opportunity to gain some experience in a Canadian workplace\agency, however other new Canadians expressed their frustration at not being able to use their training and skills in Canada or to work towards accreditation.

I was over qualified. There was not enough stimulation for one week let alone one month.

Most participants did not believe that their placement would lead to a job within the particular placement agency.

I have volunteered at service agencies and never been offered paid work. It's more for the benefit of the agency \$50.00 , not the participant.

Some participants expressed a feeling of being stigmatized as the « workfare placement ».

I won't get any experience. They don't want anyone to come in. They've closed the door to new hiring. I bite my tongue all the time in my placement. I am no better than slave labour. They say "I've got the perfect job for you" Other people are asking me to work. I feel like I cannot speak out for fear that I will get cut off.

Concern was raised by some individuals who felt intimidated in their placement but did not know the best way to address this without jeopardizing their welfare cheque.

I told my supervisor I felt confused. The supervisor said if I have any complaints just to take it up with my worker. They sure take full advantage of me working for free.

A significant number of the people interviewed were already volunteering in the community before they became Ontario Works participants.(see profile of participants).

They expressed frustration that this participation was now mandated through the program and also time limited.

They pull you out in six months, out too early – working there for nothing, you have to go through it all again.

The Personal Impact of Ontario Works

Some people that were interviewed told us that participating in the Ontario Works program had « got them out of the house » and that they had been stimulated by the interaction with others and felt useful doing something. However many of the people that we talked to expressed increased stress, fear, anxiety and frustration related to their participation in Ontario Works.

Many of those interviewed were very conscious that this was a mandated program and that they felt « forced » into participation. They were also aware of the possibility of being cut off from assistance for non-compliance, although they were less clear on how and under what conditions this might happen. Even where people felt that their participation was voluntary the resulting stress had made some fearful for their future. For some participants juggling their finances so that they could meet their Ontario Works commitment (having lunches or lunch money, money for bus tickets, additional photocopying costs for schoolwork) had proved stressful.

Many expressed their frustration at being used as a free labour source and some felt vulnerable and unprotected in their placements. Those who had previously been active in the workforce told us that it was difficult to remain optimistic about job prospects or the program's ability to help them gain work.

The follow up interviews in November 1998 will provide an opportunity to see what has changed for the participants. Will individuals be closer to meeting their hopes for training or a job or will they, as one participant described it, be 'jumping through hoops'?

There's a lot of misinformation out there and people are scared and they're stressed and there's a lot of anxiety there too and maybe a lot of it's unnecessary

The message was You have to join or be cut off.

I was not forced. I decided I should do Ontario Works to keep my welfare cheques. I can't afford to be living on the streets this what I am so afraid of.

How can anyone work under fear?

I have to be very careful with money, to make allowances for lunches and so on.

They should pay us like a normal human being.

Tu sais, ça m'aide pas le "work program" parce que le "work program" c'est comme on est des esclaves. Ils nous forcent à faire quelque chose qu'on ne veut pas faire.

I've worked for thirty years, this shouldn't be happening.

Summary of Preliminary Findings

As we would expect with a new program, implemented with minimal lead time, there are clear problems with how the Ontario Works Program was administered in the early months. Key issues identified in the focus groups and interviews were :

- Little or no information was provided to participants – at least in a manner they were able to absorb, understand and use.
- Inconsistent application of rules – individuals in the same components of Ontario Works were given different descriptions and/or details of what supports were available to them and how to access them.
- Two workers – individuals in community placement were required to deal with two workers – their case coordinator, and their placement worker. This made getting information and assistance more confusing and difficult for individuals.

The second phase of our work (follow-up) will examine the extent to which the Department has been able to address these issues, and other issues that may arise during the course of the research.

Participants have the same goal as Ontario Works – they want to work. However, a number of concerns were raised with respect to the effects of the program as designed. It is not yet clear to what extent these issues are necessary consequences of the program and to what extent they can be dealt with in the delivery of the program.

- Perception of volunteers – individuals who were already volunteering reported that they were treated differently in a «workfare placement» than as a volunteer – they did not have the same choice as to their hours and activities; and in some cases, their responsibilities were reduced.
- « Free labour » issue – individuals in the program were quite aware that their participation in a community placement was « mandated » through the Ontario Works Program. Individuals expressed feelings of resentment (being taken advantage of); feelings of fear (loss of cheque if they did not behave in a certain way); and added stress (what if something doesn't work out).
- Hopes and expectations of employment – access to faxes and computers was of direct assistance to individuals in looking for employment but few individuals in community placements were hopeful that their placement would help them to get work.

The focus groups and interviews identified what participants perceive as being major barriers to their participation in the labour force. It is too early to determine how well the program is addressing these needs. This will be a focus for our further research.

- Bilingualism – many of the entry-level jobs available to individuals in this region require bilingualism (English and French). This was a barrier for individuals, regardless of whether their first language was English, French or other.
- Marketable skills – individuals did not feel they have the appropriate skills (e.g., computer skills) to obtain the employment that was available.
- Access to supports – child care, clothing, bus passes, work equipment – those individuals who were able to access these supports felt that their opportunities to find employment were far greater than if they did not have these supports.

Next Steps

During the month of November 1998, the focus groups will reconvene, and a telephone survey will be conducted with those persons who were interviewed in June 1998. The intent of the follow-up is to determine what has changed for the individuals whom we met with in the Spring.

Upon completion of the follow-up, a final report will be prepared for January 1999. The final report will compile the findings from the preliminary report and the follow-up. It will also include : further information on the profile of the people we spoke to (and how this profile compares to the profile of new applicants for social assistance); data on the numbers of people participating in the Ontario Works program in Ottawa-Carleton; and recommendations arising from the findings.

The final report will be presented to the Community Services Committee of the RMOC, and distributed to the wider community.