



# **Plain Speaking: Hope and Reality**

## *Participants` Experience of Ontario Works*



Report of the Project Team for Monitoring Ontario Works  
April 1999

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**We thank all of the individuals who shared their insights and experiences about the Ontario Works Program with us. It is their voices that give this research and report a human face. 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.**

**Fred Sadori and Barbara Carroll** were actively involved in all aspects of the research, initially as MSW students on placement at the Social Planning Council, and later as researchers on contract. Fred developed and organized the initial and follow-up interviews. Barbara summarized and analysed data from both the initial and follow-up interviews, and wrote the Interim Report (October 1, 1998). Both Fred and Barb brought considerable enthusiasm and initiative, and in addition, contributed many volunteer hours.

**Danna Campbell**, under the supervision of Jeffrey Roy, Centre on Governance, Ottawa University, researched and prepared a literature review on workfare-style programs in Canada and elsewhere.

The Community Health and Resource Centres assisted in the identification of participants and organization of focus groups; and the Regional Employment Resource Centre staff assisted us in identifying participants and provided a place for conducting many of the individual interviews.

**Members of the Project Team**, contributed numerous hours of their time; offered considerable advice and feedback that shaped the project; and brought the perspective of different sectors of the community to the task at hand. We especially thank **Karen Graham** who chaired the Project Team.

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The research project was coordinated by **Susan Learoyd** of the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton.

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## Section One: Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a qualitative research study conducted over a one year period with social assistance recipients in the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton. It sets out recommendations for action based on the findings.

The 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...*” .

Recognizing that Ontario Works exists as a mandatory program in Ontario and in the Ottawa-Carleton Region, the purpose of our study was to find out and document the experience of participants in the Ontario Works Program. The need for information on participants` experience of Ontario Works, is echoed in the 1998 Annual Report of the Provincial Auditor General :

*“We found that the Ministry (Community & Social Services) did not have the necessary management information to assess the effectiveness of the Ontario Works Program. Instead, the information collected and reported regularly measured program activity levels only, such as the number of registrants with completed participation agreements and the number of participants in Employment Support, Community Participation, and Employment Placement activities.”*

A Project Team, comprised of volunteer 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. (See *Appendix I*, Project Team Members).

Funding for the project was obtained from the Social Services Department (RMOC); and from additional sources including the Public Service Alliance of Canada, and the United Steelworkers of America. Support in the way of student assistance was provided by Carleton University, and the Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa. The Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton coordinated the work of the Project Team, and contributed human resources.

## Goals of the Project

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 community.
- 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.

Our study measures outcomes of the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton against the stated objectives of the Program as set out by the Ontario Government.

*The objective of the Ontario Works Program is to make sure welfare is truly the last resort and to help people find the fastest route to a paying job. (Ontario Government, Welfare Reform : Making Welfare Work.)*

On October 1, 1998, the Project Team presented an Interim Report of the research study (*All I Need is a Job*) to the Regional Community Services Committee. Copies of this report were also distributed within the community. Preliminary findings reported on a number of issues arising from the implementation of the program, the effects of the program as designed, and perceptions from participants about major barriers to their participation in the labour force (See *Appendix II*, Summary of Preliminary Findings).

## Summary Findings

Many of the findings in the research reflect the complexity of the Ontario Works Program itself. While certain components of the Program, such as Community Placements are new and more controversial, other aspects of the Program (e.g., Employment Supports) have existed in some form or another for a long time in Ottawa-Carleton.

There was some recognition on the part of participants in our study that the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton (Social Services Department) has taken an approach to the implementation of the Ontario Works Program which is different from that of the provincial government.

*The approach in the RMOC is gentler and more flexible than in other areas of the Province.*

The people to whom we spoke clearly wanted more opportunities to gain skills and experience, a chance for greater independence, and a more direct link to employment. Many people hoped that the Ontario Works Program would help. Provincial government and media coverage of workfare as the fastest route to a job appeared to contribute to a high level of expectation among individuals. At the same time, participants expressed a certain skepticism about the government program :

*The government has their own agenda.  
I am very angry with the government, they degrade the poor.*

Participants, at the outset and throughout the study, identified a great variety of barriers they experienced in gaining employment and independence. Many of these barriers were not or could not be addressed within the design of the Ontario Works Program.

It appeared that for a number of individuals, participation in OntarioWorks (particularly in community placements) actually compromised their choices and further hindered their ability to move forward. For most participants, there was very little gained. While they appreciated the opportunity to be out in the community and around other people, they told us that they did not, for the most part, learn new skills, gain new contacts, or see themselves as being closer to work.

There were additional consequences of participation in the Ontario Works Program, which related to the added stress and fear experienced by individuals. *These are hard economic times in which people are struggling to survive... being forced to participate in Ontario Works is another burden.*

All of the individuals in our study who found work felt they did so through their own efforts. They told us that their participation in the Ontario Works Program had nothing to do with their finding work.

## **The Need for Integrative Solutions**

*I have a positive attitude for a real job but I don't know how to find it. A job is my chance for normal living.*

*I'm going to be working this time next year!*

Our effort to document participants' experience of Ontario Works in Ottawa-Carleton has generated a number of specific recommendations that, if acted upon, could improve the environment for employment placement and assistance. Nonetheless, we also underline that if any significant portion of these recommended actions were adopted, the result would be a program differing substantially from the provincially-designed program now in place.

The discussion must be widened. Although our findings will serve as feedback to the province on the impacts of their decisions in Ottawa-Carleton, we must also look towards local solutions. We believe that Ontario Works is one element of an increasingly complex equation with respect to social assistance, training, employment, poverty-reduction, and community-building.

We believe that much of the difficulty with the Ontario Works Program is the need for a more integrative approach to labour market development in Ottawa-Carleton. Along with the challenging, and often painful transitions of the recent past, there have been a growing number of signs pointing to recognition of this view. A few examples include: the *People Hearings Report*; the *Hidden Workforce Report*, and most recently the *Ottawa Training Board Environmental Scan*.

The challenge for Ottawa-Carleton is to weave together these elements into an integrative strategy encompassing the efforts of all stakeholders. For the participants of Ontario Works we spoke with whom displayed a clear desire to live as productive and engaged citizens in their communities, this need for collective action is key to addressing many of the barriers presently limiting their opportunities to become more independent.

Finally, we note that while Ottawa-Carleton enjoys a reputation as one of the most innovative and prosperous regions in the country, certain sectors of the community are falling further behind. An integrative approach to labour market and employment strategy requires a view of innovation and prosperity that is inclusive of all citizens – joining traditionally separate economic and social policies.

Placing Ontario Works in this broad context, and realizing a successful local strategy to meet these challenges is a strategic investment that we cannot afford to miss.



## Monitoring Ontario Works: Action Plan

### *Recommendation*

### **Action Taken** ✓

- 1** Allowances for basic needs and shelter be increased to reflect the actual costs of a nutritious diet and adequate housing.
- 2** Clients retain the full amount of the National Child Benefit to allow them to meet the additional needs of their children.
- 3** Clients be allowed to retain a greater amount of their earnings from part-time or full time work.
- 4** Clients continue to receive supplementary benefits (e.g., drug card) for a period of time after leaving social assistance, so they can sustain employment during the initial transition.
- 5** Time and resource restraints in the Ontario Works Program be relaxed and the system be made more flexible, to recognize and value the variety of individual experiences and needs.
- 6** Current options available in the Ontario Works Program be expanded and more streams be created. The definition of “work” must be widened to recognize such activities as co-operative ventures and community economic development.
- 7** The time allotted for the initial assessment for Ontario Works be increased to allow for appropriate selection of options and clarity of roles and responsibilities.
- 8** Comprehensive information about education, training, placements and supports be provided to all participants at the initial assessment regardless of which option clients have chosen. Clients should also be informed on an on-going basis of policy and other changes that may affect them.

## *Recommendation*

## **Action Taken** ✓

- | <i>Recommendation</i>  | <b>Action Taken</b> ✓    |
|--|--------------------------|
| <b>9</b> All documents be written in plain language and clients be provided with copies of any documents they are asked to sign.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>10</b> Benefits (e.g., bus passes) be improved and clients be provided with information about eligibility for benefits.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>11</b> Licensed and/or informal childcare, as chosen by the parent, be provided as needed to all participants.  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>12</b> Training and educational opportunities under Ontario Works be expanded to include education at the post-secondary level.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>13</b> The RMOC engage in a proactive campaign to directly challenge stereotypes of people on social assistance and to make employers aware of the skills and abilities of people on social assistance. Such a campaign must demonstrate that most recipients genuinely want to work. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>14</b> Existing practices be modified and/or eliminated which require individuals to identify as social assistance recipients when they present themselves for employment.  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>15</b> The Social Services Department work with employers in the Region to identify specific training that is geared to current labour market needs; and to develop partnerships for training in the workplace.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>16</b> A mechanism or forum be created outside the Social Services Department, with appropriate funding, where clients can talk to a safe third party about their individual concerns, and get information and assistance without fear of jeopardizing their benefits.                | <input type="checkbox"/> |

	<i>Recommendation</i>	<b>Action Taken</b> ✓
<b>17</b>	That on-going mechanisms be put in place so that clients can give feedback, in a group setting, on their experiences in the Ontario Works Program, and be given the means to influence the system without prejudice.	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section Two : Context for the Implementation of Ontario Works

This Section summarizes key findings from a literature review of workfare-style programs in Canada and elsewhere, and presents an overview of the political, economic, and social reality in which Ontario Works has been introduced in Ontario.

### Summary of Key Findings: Literature Review

A review of literature on workfare-style programs in Canada and elsewhere provides a framework from which we can identify similarities and differences with respect to the objectives and outcomes of Ontario Works.

As follows are the main sets of issues emerging from the literature review on workfare-style programs (see *Appendix III*, Summary of Regional Findings) :

- Objectives
- Resources
- Information
- Stakeholders; and
- Labour Market Conditions

#### Objectives

The objectives of any workfare-style program are crucial to its impacts on individuals. Many program initiatives in North America have been driven mainly by fiscal pressures to reduce welfare costs – in which case reducing caseloads becomes the key priority.

In such reportings, the results focus largely on numbers, and quantitative trends, rather than clients and their experiences. Of interest should be certain employment strategies (Quebec and the U.K.) focused on placements and the recognition of new forms of work.

#### Resources

A key determinant reported in many program outcomes is the extent to which new resources are deployed. Workfare, of any variant, requires new procedures and policies, new staff competencies for those delivering services, and new processes to manage and interact with clients.

Costs associated with such changes are significant, as demonstrated by program initiatives in both New Brunswick and Wisconsin. Notwithstanding very different political environments, both jurisdictions invested significantly into a new infrastructure of service delivery. Many other North American experiments have been abandoned due to excessive administrative costs.

## **Information**

Information on client outcomes is scarce, due to fiscally-driven focus on numbers (above) and communications efforts by various groups either for or against workfare as an appropriate approach. There is every reason to believe that as experimentation widens, information from objective monitoring sources will become an important tool to shape future program development.

## **Stakeholders**

Social service delivery has always relied on a set of stakeholders coordinating their efforts. In every experience reported, workfare is reshaping relations between all sectors. Programs focused on client outcomes (e.g., job placements or new experiences) require collaborative efforts from all sectors (public, social, private). When programs are focused on costs and reducing caseloads, stakeholder relations suffer (though such impacts are rarely measured).

Presently, many North American examples of programs are being driven by costs and reducing caseloads (particularly in the US and Ontario). Nonetheless some Canadian provinces, and the British government are more attentive to effective partnerships with social groups and business, a change which will likely carry important repercussions for clients. Business involvement in workfare is a contentious but increasingly common trait.

## **Labour Market Conditions**

The presentation of workfare results always weighs various trends in both recipient levels and job creation. The difficulty is that the connection between both is unclear – with respect to the performance of workfare programs. For instance, people will be more likely to leave any welfare/workfare system when the job market is relatively strong. In a period of high unemployment, caseloads will rise.

The main point is that there is very little precise information on whether or not workfare programs are facilitating successful job searches and continued employability. There is also a growing consensus that a significant number of people are simply not recorded by current measures. As a result, tracking systems on client experiences are required, as is a better integration of workfare (or any form of social assistance) with all aspects of workforce development such as training, education and job creation.

## Setting the Context for Ontario Works in Ottawa-Carleton

<p><b>Political Context</b></p> <p><i>“Structural changes must be made quickly to end the cycle of dependency and ensure recipients are given a hand up and not a hand-out.”<sup>1</sup></i></p> <p><i>“The first and best cure for Ontario’s current welfare programs is increased employment opportunity.”<sup>2</sup></i></p>	<p>The Conservative Government in Ontario was elected in 1995 with an election platform outlining welfare “reform”. Central to this plan was the introduction of <i>workfare</i>, requiring “able-bodied participants to do “something” in exchange for their benefits”.</p> <p>The Government of Ontario states that the <i>Ontario Works Act</i> is based on four key objectives<sup>3</sup> :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) to help people in financial need become employed and achieve self-reliance through a program of mutual responsibilities;</li> <li>(ii) to ensure that assistance is directed to those most in need, and as a last resort, through fairer eligibility requirements;</li> <li>(iii) to improve fraud prevention and control, and increase accountability for taxpayers` dollars;</li> <li>(iv) to streamline the delivery system and reduce waste and duplication</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>Ontario Works Act</i> was proclaimed on May 1, 1998, enshrining in legislation the government “reform plan” including mandatory workfare. The new regulations also came into effect at this time, bringing massive change to the welfare system and introducing many rule changes directly affecting people on welfare.</li> <li>• In practical terms (impact on clients), aspects of government “reform” included cuts to welfare rates (21.6%); tightening of eligibility criteria; increased targetting of fraud; and the separation of benefit systems for persons with disabilities (<i>Ontario Disability Support Program Act</i>), from single parents and persons on welfare (<i>Ontario Works Act</i>).</li> <li>• New rules make it more difficult for people in need to obtain financial assistance, restrict the rights of those who do receive benefits, and increase the powers of government to enforce and change the system.</li> </ul>
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<sup>1</sup> Mike Harris, *Welfare Should Offer a Hand Up not a Hand-Out*. POLICY OPTIONS. May 1995.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, Policy Directives. Ontario Works. June 1, 1998.

<p><b>Economic Context</b></p> <p><i>Although unemployment in the region is declining, the official unemployment figures mask some important workforce trends:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>real unemployment is higher than reported</i></li> <li>• <i>labour force participation is declining</i></li> <li>• <i>official statistics count as “employed” many people who are inappropriately or inadequately employed.</i><sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<p><i>“The preservation and enhancement of the quality of life for all residents in Ottawa-Carleton will be measured by our ability to include those marginalized by economic and social restructuring.”</i><sup>5</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In Ottawa-Carleton, more than half of all the jobs created over 1991-96 (total of 34,528) were in the high technology sector. Jobs in the high tech sector require, for the most part, highly specialized skills and training.</i></li> <li>• <i>78% of the new jobs (20,196) in this period were part-time jobs<sup>6</sup>. Part-time work usually equates with lower earnings, and limited benefits and job security.</i></li> <li>• <i>Approximately half of part-time jobs created since 1981 in the region were filled by persons who were seeking full-time work.</i><sup>7</sup></li> <li>• <i>The numbers of unemployed individuals eligible for employment insurance is declining (from 54% in 1990 in O-C to 17.7% in 1997).</i><sup>8</sup></li> <li>• <i>Almost half of new social assistance recipients in 1997<sup>9</sup> had not completed high school. At the same time, levels of education in the region as a whole are significantly higher than elsewhere in Ontario or Canada, and levels of achieved education are steadily increasing.</i></li> <li>• <i>The Volunteer Centre of Ottawa-Carleton<sup>10</sup> reports that the numbers of unemployed individuals seeking to volunteer is increasing (38% of prospective volunteers in the first seven months of 1998 indicated they were unemployed).</i></li> </ul> <p><i>Employment strategies must focus on both job creation, and on ensuring that the available workforce has the skills and training to be matched with the available jobs.</i></p>
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<sup>4</sup> Ottawa Economic Development Corporation, Ottawa’s Hidden Workforce, July 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton, A Tale of Two Cities : Socio-Demographic and Economic Trends in Ottawa-Carleton (Draft 1998).

<sup>6</sup> RMOC, Employment in Ottawa-Carleton: Results of the 1996 Employment Survey, Planning & Development Approval Department, September 1997.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<p><b>Social Context</b></p> <p><i>“I was dropped into a world you never want to be in, by circumstances beyond my control... I was not prepared for the community reaction to my status; they gave me no help. People who were poor would offer what little they had. But the people I knew were no longer there....”<sup>11</sup></i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Ontario Government approach to social policy is premised on the belief that individuals are for the most part, responsible for their own circumstances (e.g, for being poor).</li> <li>• In this approach, government sees itself as playing a very minimal role in “levelling the playing field” for its citizens through redistribution of wealth and investment in a range of social programs.</li> <li>• The objectives of government thus become focused on the reduction of costs spent directly supporting individuals; the transfer of responsibility for caring for individuals to families and communities, and the introduction of measures requiring people on assistance to comply to certain activities and face sanctions if they do not participate (e.g., mandatory workfare).</li> <li>• Continuing myths, misconceptions and stereotypes about welfare and people on welfare, combined with government policy that reinforces these myths, have contributed to an environment where recipients of social assistance are viewed and treated as less than citizens, and are perceived as a burden to society (e.g., tax-payers).</li> </ul>
<p><b>FACTS :</b> Local Implementation</p> <p><i>In 1998 an estimated 22,000 social assistance recipients were required to participate in one of the three components of Ontario Works.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In May 1997, Ottawa-Carleton Regional Council approved motions advising the Ontario Government that <i>workfare</i> must fulfill a number of minimum expectations, including that it : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Not interfere with education and job-seeking</i></li> <li>• <i>Provide training that is actually useful</i></li> <li>• <i>Compensate community agencies for their administrative and management costs for being involved in this program</i></li> <li>• <i>Not be a substitute for paid employment or lead to the displacement of paid workers</i></li> <li>• <i>Include enough discretion to allow municipalities to tailor the program to meet local needs</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> RMOC Social Services, *New Applicants Survey*, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Volunteer Centre of Ottawa-Carleton, Report of Registration, 01/01/98 to 31/07/98.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the Organizing Committee, *People First/les gens d'abord. People's Hearings on Poverty*, Ottawa. March 1998.



<p><i>As of December 1998, there were:</i></p> <p><b>21,026</b> participants in Employment Supports;</p> <p><b>251</b> persons having participated in Community Placements in 149 agencies;</p> <p><b>289</b> persons registered in 6 Job Placement agencies, with 62 persons placed in jobs and;</p> <p><b>86</b> persons registered with self-employment agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Ontario Works Program was officially introduced in Ottawa-Carleton on September 30, 1997. The Program consists of three components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Employment Supports (job search help, basic education, and or job-specific skills training).</li> <li>(ii) Community Placement (unpaid work in the community).</li> <li>(iii) Job Placement (registration with a job placement agency to help find a paid job or start a business).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Participation in one of the three components is required for all persons on welfare, with the exception of sole support parents with very young children; persons over 65 years; persons taking care of a family member with a disability; persons on pregnancy or parental leave; and persons unable to find suitable child care.</li> <li>• The Business Plan for Ontario Works in Ottawa-Carleton (1997) was initially rejected by the provincial government because the estimated targets for the number of participants were considered too low. These targets were consequently raised to meet provincial expectations. The target for community placement was raised from <b>250</b> (1998 and 1999) to <b>825</b> (in 1998) and <b>1,375</b> (in 1999).</li> <li>• Similar to other municipalities across Ontario, implementation of the Ontario Works Program has been slow due to a number of factors, including : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the difficulty in obtaining participation of potential community organizations and job placement agencies (e.g., because they did not support the principles behind the government program; or because of limited financial and human resources to participate);</li> <li>• the commitment by the Regional Social Services Department and resulting time demands in finding best matches between individuals and placements;</li> <li>• the massive change and overhaul required of the system, and resulting need to inform individuals and community agencies, and to train front-line staff.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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## Summary Comments

Similar to other experiences in Canada and elsewhere, the implementation of Ontario Works in Ontario has been driven by fiscal pressures to reduce welfare caseloads and costs. Across Ontario, 148,000 people dropped from welfare rolls between 1995 and 1997. In Ottawa-Carleton, the changes were less pronounced, with a decrease of 5,587 caseloads (8,589 people) during the same period of time.

Information on client experiences and outcomes in workfare-style programs is scarce. The Government of Ontario (Office of the Provincial Auditor General) notes that information collected on the Ontario Works Program was not sufficient to assess program effectiveness. It measured only the numbers of participants in various components of the Program. The report goes on to say that “*the Ministry needs to enhance its tracking of the number of people leaving these rolls (welfare) and the specific reasons for their leaving on an on-going basis*”. There is no provincial information on the number of people finding employment who attribute their success to their participation in the Ontario Works Program.

Labour market conditions in Ottawa-Carleton, while healthy for some sectors of the population, have not appeared to translate into increased opportunities for good jobs for individuals with low levels of education and skills, and/or limited Canadian experience.

## Section Three : Methodology

**T**he study undertaken is qualitative in nature. The data for the report is collected from primary and secondary sources, including a literature review, individual interviews and focus groups. The study involves an initial contact (May/June 1998) and then a six-month follow-up (November 1998 – January 1999) with participants in the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton.

While the study uses quantitative data (e.g., #'s of participants of a certain age, gender, etc.) to describe the population surveyed, the qualitative data (peoples experiences and feelings) obtained from individual interviews and focus groups provides the primary basis for the study and the analysis.

A participatory research approach was employed through the involvement of social assistance recipients and students in the conducting of interviews; and through the involvement of interviewers in the analysis of the preliminary findings. Furthermore, participants in the research were invited to receive the interim report of the findings, and to attend the public presentation of these findings at the Community Services Committee in October 1998.

A qualitative analysis approach was chosen for a number of reasons:

- there is very little information of a qualitative nature available on people`s experiences in workfare-style programs;
- it allows the experiences and feelings of those who are directly affected by Ontario Works to be documented as authentically as possible;
- it values the experiences and feelings of those participating within their own terms of reference;
- it provides an opportunity to work collectively, strengthen connections and increase awareness;
- it is research undertaken not as an end it itself but as a tool or strategy that can inform social policy development.

### Objectives of the Research

The objective of the individual interviews and focus groups was to capture and examine the expectations, motivations, barriers, and experiences of individuals participating in the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton. The objective of the follow-up was to identify and examine the changes experienced by participants over a six-month period.

The review of literature, and collection of quantitative data on the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton provided a context from which the findings could be understood, and recommendations identified.

### **Research Methods and Tools**

Data was collected through forty-three individual interviews of approximately fifty minutes in duration, using an individual profile form (to collect personal data on the participants) and through a standard set of closed and open-ended questions (see *Appendix IV – A & B*). Interviews were conducted by three teams of interviewers who were provided with training as a part of the study. Interviews, conducted in both English and French, were held at Employment Resource Centres, and community agencies.

Focus groups were used as an additional method to capture the depth and richness of participant experiences in the Ontario Works Program. A standard set of eight open-ended questions was used in the focus groups (see *Appendix IV – C*). Three focus groups, led by trained facilitators, were conducted at Community Resource Centres.

Participants in both the individual interviews and the focus groups were provided with an information sheet on the research study, outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, ensuring anonymity of responses, and describing the intended use of the data. All participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a six-month follow-up survey.

The six-month follow-up involved twenty-four telephone interviews of approximately 35 minutes in duration, using a standard questionnaire (see *Appendix IV – D*). Interviews were conducted by seven, trained interviewers. Focus groups were reconvened at two of three Community Resource Centres.

All questionnaires were pre-tested and revised accordingly. Confidentiality forms were signed by all interviewers and researchers in the study.

### **Participants in the Research**

The intent in identifying research participants was to find as varied a sample as possible (e.g., on basis of age, gender, family status, language, etc.) as well as to ensure a balance of participants in the employment supports and community placement components of the Ontario Works Program.

Participants in the research were identified through the following sources:

- Letter sent out to 109 community agencies in Ottawa-Carleton
- Poster and sign-up at Employment Resource Centres
- Outreach by Community Health & Resource Centres

- Information provided by Social Services Department, through a research agreement with the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton

A total of seventy-five individuals participated in the initial interviews and focus groups. Out of seventy individuals who indicated a willingness to be part of a follow-up, forty individuals (57%) participated.

	<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Individual Interviews</b>	<b>Total Participants</b>
<b>Initial Contact:</b> May/June 1998	<b>32 participants</b> (3 focus groups: Somerset West, Vanier CRC, Sandy Hill CHC)	<b>43 individual interviews</b> (at ERC's and community agencies)	<b>75 individuals</b>
<b>Follow-up:</b> November 1998-January 1999	<b>16 participants</b> (2 focus groups: Somerset West, Sandy Hill CHC)	<b>24 telephone interviews</b>	<b>40 individuals</b>

### **Limitations of the Study**

Given the stage of implementation of the Ontario Works Program in Ottawa-Carleton at the time of our research it was not possible for this study to examine the employment placement component of the program.

The stage of the implementation of the program also made the identification of research participants more difficult (e.g., there were just over 100 participants in the community placement component of the program at the beginning stage of the research – May 1998). There was also some degree of confusion among individuals and agencies as to the difference between Ontario Works (the Program) and Ontario Works (the new legislation).

Also, given the need to put in place new information collection systems, very little quantitative data was available from the Social Services Department on the Ontario Works Program at the time of our study.

The rate of response (57%) in the follow-up interviews and focus groups was affected by some of the following reasons: telephone number no longer in service; individual moved; incomplete information provided on the original interview sheet.

## Section Four : What We Were Told : The Research Findings

This section provides a brief profile of the research participants, introduces the research questions, and highlights key themes which consistently appeared in the initial interviews and focus groups (with a total of 75 individuals) and in the six month follow-up where, through telephone interviews, and the reconvening of focus groups, we met with 40 of the original 75 participants.

### Profile of Participants

Seventy-two of the original seventy-five participants in the research provided information on their personal backgrounds. From this information, we were able to develop a profile of the individuals whom we met (see *Table A*).

In comparison to the profile of new applicants to social assistance in the RMOC (1997)<sup>12</sup>, participants in our study showed some similarities and some differences. Similar to new applicants to social assistance, our participants included more males (55%) than females; and the greatest number of people who had been employed before receiving assistance were in the service sector (34%). Our participants differed slightly from new applicants in that they were older, included more persons from two-parent families and less single persons, and comprised a higher percentage of individuals who had some post-secondary education.

In the follow-up interviews and focus groups, we asked individuals about their status (e.g., on or off assistance, activity in the Ontario Works program, etc.). This information is summarized in *Table B*.

### Research Questions

Our study sought to find out:

- What were the barriers to employment and opportunities for participants in the Ontario Works Program?
- Were participants able to access the services and supports they needed in the Program?
- In what ways did participation in the Ontario Works program impact on participants (e.g., financially, impact on families, increased independence, skills, finding employment, etc.)?
- How did circumstances change for individuals over a six-month period (e.g., were they better off, closer to independence and employment, etc.)?

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<sup>12</sup> RMOC Planning and Review, Social Services Department, New Applicants Study, September 1997.

## Table A – Profile of Participants in Our Study : Highlights

*Seventy-two out of seventy-five individuals contacted through the initial focus groups and individual interviews provided personal information on their backgrounds. Not all individuals responded to all questions.*

- 70% of the participants were 36-55 years of age ( $n^{13}=71$ )
- 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

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<sup>13</sup> Note : n = # of participants who responded to a particular question.

**Table B – Summary of Participant Status in Follow-up**  
(Telephone Interviews and Focus Groups)

Information from Participant Comments

<b>Total # of Participants in Follow-up</b>	<b>40</b>
• # in the Ontario Works Program	31
• # off Social Assistance	8
• # transferred to ODSP	1

**Of the 8 Participants Indicating they Left Social Assistance :**

• # who obtained work	5
• # whose partners found work	2
• # entering college and receiving OSAP	1

**Of 31 individuals in the Ontario Works Program**<sup>14</sup> :

Total # indicating they were in Community Placements (19)

- # having completed first placement (16)
- # currently in community placement (2)
- # in extended community placement (beyond 6 mths.) (1)

Total # indicating they were in Employment Supports (finished, participating in or about to take some training) (11)

- # in job preparation courses (e.g., resume writing) (3)
- # in ESL courses (1)
- # in specialized training courses (e.g., courses that varied from ½ day to 3 mths.) (7)

**Total # indicating they were in Employment Placement** (e.g. referred to employment agencies and currently awaiting placement) (2)

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<sup>14</sup> The numbers in each of these component parts of Ontario Works are not mutually exclusive. Persons may have identified their participation in more than one area.



## Key Themes from the Findings

*Throughout this Section, the comments of participants appear in italics*

### Perceptions and Expectations of Ontario Works

It is not clear to what extent individual's perceptions and expectations of the Ontario Works Program were influenced by outside factors such as the way in which the provincial government program was publicized, particularly with the large amount of attention given to workfare as a fast-track to employment; and by other more individual factors such as the belief that not showing enthusiasm and interest would contribute further to the perception of being seen as "lazy".

The participants in the research consistently and strongly expressed their desire to be off the system and out of the cycle of poverty.

**At the outset**, it was clear that participants wanted to believe that Ontario Works would help them get off welfare and find a job. However, the level of enthusiasm among individuals varied; and the extent to which people were able to be concrete about how they saw the program helping them was limited. Some individuals were very hopeful of new possibilities, particularly those who had been out of the workforce for quite awhile, and those who saw the opportunity for Canadian work experience, while others were somewhat more skeptical.

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

*I hope that it (Ontario Works) will lead to a foot in the door.*

From a practical perspective, many participants appreciated having access to tools such as the internet, faxes, and help with resume preparation, as well as support and encouragement from counsellors at Employment Resource Centres. They also were quite keen to have the opportunity for additional supports such as bus passes, clothing allowances, child care, and safety equipment. There was, however, some initial awareness and frustration that while these supports and services were being provided, they would not, in themselves, lead people to work.

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

*Encouragement très positif, une bonne disponibilité des outils, ex. Internet.*

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

**In the follow-up**, participants in the research continued to express hope that their participation in Ontario Works would lead them to employment and independence. They hoped that community placements, in particular, would provide them with new contacts, skills, and an improved chance at finding work.

*It (Ontario Works) could be an opportunity... I have nothing to lose, it has possibilities.*

*If I do not have the experience, I would not get hired.*

*It's a start... an opportunity to get skills and training, achievement to reach a goal.*

However, there was clearly some disappointment among participants that they had not, in fact, improved their circumstances over the six months they had been participating in the Ontario Works Program.

*I wanted to learn a skill to get a job. I thought I'd learn more about using a computer.*

*I want, need, and would like job experience. I never got it. I work 40 hours a week on placement. (But) I have not lost hope.*

*I felt my chance would be much better to get a job – when you are out there you can see people, connect with people.*

## Information, Supports and Services

It is clear by many of the comments of participants, at both the outset and follow-up phase of the research, that there was a great deal of general confusion over just what Ontario Works is all about. Some individuals were not really sure whether they were actually in the program, and if so, what choices and options were available to them.

**In the initial interviews and focus groups**, participants expressed confusion and frustration at not knowing what was expected of them or what opportunities and services were available through Ontario Works. Little or no information appeared to have been provided to the people whom we spoke to, at least in a form that they were able to absorb, understand and use. The extent to which individuals were aware of the supports and services available to them appeared to reflect their relationship with their worker(s), and their contact with other people in the Ontario Works Program.

*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.*

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

**In the follow-up focus groups and interviews,** lack of information and consistency in accessing supports remained critical issues. While individuals appeared to know more about what was available to them than was the case in earlier interviews, there appeared to be continued confusion as to how, and in what way, supports (e.g., bus passes, child care, supplies for courses, money for clothing, etc.) could be obtained. Concern was expressed that getting supports meant being able to get a hold of your worker, and being able to advocate for yourself. A variety of stories were circulating among participants, some of which generated a certain level of stress. For example, there was confusion about whether bus passes would be cut-off after placements; what would happen on placement if your child was sick; and whether supplies were available or not for various courses.

*I find out more from other people on workfare than I do from the Department.*

*I had to fight for extra dollars that I'm entitled to (e.g, work boots, bus pass, etc.).*

*Difficulty with two workers – one tells me I will get something, the other says no.*

## Experiences with Community Placements

**In our initial interviews and focus groups,** implementation of the Ontario Works program was in its early stages. Statistics from the RMOC Social Services Department show that, at the time of our original research (May 1998), one hundred and sixty-five individuals were on placement in community agencies in Ottawa-Carleton.

It appeared that most participants felt that community placements would not lead them to jobs, however they did hope to gain new skills and contacts that might be helpful in finding work. People's early experiences in placements were varied. Some individuals found that changing their regular volunteering into an Ontario Works placement had some negative consequences, including the loss of privileges and responsibilities previously held. Others felt that their skills were underutilized, and still others felt vulnerable knowing that receipt of their cheque was tied to doing well in their placement. Those who had positive experiences, identified the value of Canadian work experience as a factor. The timeframe of six months seemed arbitrary to individuals, especially if it meant having to leave a placement where they'd been previously volunteering for a long time.

*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?*

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

**In the follow-up part of our research,** nineteen participants with whom we spoke had completed, or were completing community placements with Ontario Works. When

participants were asked about the positive aspects of their experience in placements, nine individuals indicated that being in a community agency reduced some of their feelings of isolation. This did not necessarily mean that they obtained something tangible and concrete (e.g., skills, job, etc.) but spoke more of the value that participants placed on being included and being active. Participants felt very strongly about having the chance or opportunity to improve their lives, which runs counter to public and media portrayal of welfare recipients as lacking initiative.

*I feel better about myself going out everyday. It makes me feel important.*

*I didn't learn anything new. It kept me busy but that's about it. I like the idea of being productive.*

*Have to get up and do something, not just sitting around worrying.*

One of the most consistently raised positive comments about community placements was the receipt of a bus pass. Other positive comments came from individuals who appreciated having placements close to their home, who genuinely liked the people with whom they had contact, who got a reference letter to help them get a job, and from those who obtained some Canadian experience.

When asked about the negative aspects of doing community placements, fifteen participants made comments indicating that they had not gained anything useful or relevant from their community placement, which in some cases, left them feeling more discouraged after the completion of the placement.

*I did not feel that the time spent on placement was useful for me. I hoped/expected something good but it was not.*

*With placement, got into a regular routine... felt good getting out... just hoped it would lead to something... hoping they'd even take me temporarily. Disappointed. Tried not to take it on, don't want more stress.*

You lose self-esteem every time you finish something yet it doesn't lead to a job.

*After six months, it was like getting fired, that was how it felt.*

Other comments of a more negative nature came from individuals who had difficulty getting work-related expenses reimbursed; who did not feel they had been treated well in the agency; and from an individual who experienced conflict in the placement and was afraid of the consequences of being cut off (assistance).

Participants raised contradictions that they saw coming out of their experience in community placements.

*Some agencies just don't agree with the program, therefore it's difficult to get placements where you'd like.*

*A participant could have a placement looking after children – yet cannot stay home and look after their own children. After a six month placement, they should have people hire you. You get good experience, then they let you go. If you want people out of the system, need the system to find the real jobs, not to give false hope.*

*If a placement works out, the person should be paid to stay on... however, we have to be careful to not take jobs away from a union worker... the poor will get hit again in this case and won't be happy with us. It sets people against each other.*

*Placements are a way of keeping people on the system, instead of helping them to find jobs.*

## Experiences in Employment Supports

The Employment Supports component of Ontario Works refers to a range of activities, including structured job search, basic education (e.g., completion of grade 12, literacy courses, and ESL/FSL, etc.), and job specific skills training (which must be approved and monitored by a case coordinator)<sup>15</sup>. The provision of employment assistance is based on the policy directive to “support the shortest route to employment for any individual”<sup>16</sup>. Well over ninety percent of individuals in the Ontario Works Program are in the Employment Supports component.

**In our initial interviews and focus groups**, individuals spoke of the value of having access to the internet, faxes, and other services at the Employment Resource Centres (ERC). Few participants in the research, at that time, were in any job-specific training.

**In the follow-up**, eleven participants indicated that they had participated in or were about to take some form of training. The types of courses varied widely and included : resume course at the ERC; ESL course; job readiness training; data entry training; sewing course; Focus on Futures; and computer-related courses. It was not entirely clear whether participation in these courses was a result of personal preference or was at the suggestion of the worker.

Those individuals who had positive experiences, indicated that the support or training was appropriate to their needs, they appreciated having the financial assistance to attend the course, and they expected their chances of getting work were improved.

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<sup>15</sup> RMO Social Services Department. FACT SHEETS. “Steps Towards Working: Employment Supports”. 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. Policy Directives, Ontario Works. June 1, 1998.

*I'm getting useful training so that I can get a job when I'm out.*

*Ca ma aidé d'apprendre l'Internet, comment chercher des emplois. J'utilise les ressources au centre d'information.*

*My program was a good experience. This program is shorter than other programs, but excellent. There will be jobs in this area.*

*The government pays a lot of money to put people in these programs so they should help people get the jobs at the end. The cycle must be completed or the money is lost.*

Negative comments came primarily from participants who did not feel that their involvement in job search or training was improving their chances to get employment. It was clear that people wanted a more direct link to employment.

*The ERC sent me to this company to work on my resume and teach interview skills. They register you and then you meet with them every two weeks. I know how to do resumes. It may be okay for younger workers but not for people who've done it lots of times. It's frustrating. Why is it necessary? I would love a program that helps (me) find a job.*

There appeared to be a lack of information on what was available for training possibilities and some confusion among participants about the maximum monies available under Ontario Works for participation in training programs. A few individuals expressed some frustration that they could not take the courses which they felt would really get them work because the courses were not on the *approved list*, or there were not sufficient dollars to cover the costs. Participants were aware of the greater variety of courses available to persons on Employment Insurance (EI) compared to what they had available to them on Ontario Works. Furthermore, some participants indicated that gaining access to education (at the College or University level) was a difficult or negative option due to the increased debt load that they would incur.

## Barriers to Access and Opportunities

**In our initial interviews and focus groups**, we asked participants to identify barriers that prevented them from getting work in the region. Barriers mentioned included : need to speak both English and French; skills that were out of date or not relevant for the current job market; and the labour market reality of too many candidates for the jobs that were available. Other barriers mentioned were age, gender, and the cost and availability of child care. Those individuals who had access to supports (child care, bus passes, clothing, work equipment) felt that their opportunities to find employment were far greater than if they did not have these supports.

*I can't speak French. Most jobs ask for bilingualism.*

La garde des enfants est très importante.

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

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

**In the follow-up**, participants spoke more about barriers within aspects of the Ontario Works program that made it difficult for them to get ahead (e.g., become more independent). The barriers most frequently mentioned (in order) included : lack of contact/support from workers or welfare office, bus passes, lack of information and inconsistency of information, and child care.

*There are lots of good workers – but they change every 2 or 3 months and have too many cases.*

Couldn't get a bus pass. I live a long way from the ERC and must walk – sometimes can get 2 bus tickets from the ERC but then I don't have the means to get to any employers or to job interviews.

*Worker discouraged me from taking a placement – said I was overqualified.*

*At the welfare office, you have to wait and wait, not respected. Treated like you don't exist, ordered around. If you get upset, they tell you to get out of the building or they call the police. Easy for them, they get their pay every two weeks, if you don't get your pay, there's big trouble for food, etc. They forget you're human.*

Similar to the initial interviews, ability in English or French, age, and overqualification were mentioned as issues. Participants agreed that the Program (Ontario Works) affects people differently, and that age and education were factors which needed to be addressed on an individual basis.

**Of the five individuals in the follow-up who indicated they found work**, all were consistent in mentioning that they had done so through their own efforts. Another four individuals indicated that they had found work but it was not sufficient to get them off the system (e.g., it was short-term or part-time). This may reflect the fact that it is normal for a percentage of individuals on assistance to cycle on and off the system, depending upon the availability of work (in 1997, 55% of new applicants to social assistance in the region were repeat applicants). Furthermore, a number of individuals (10% of new applicants in 1997) earn income from employment but are not able to get ahead (e.g., improve their situation, get off assistance), as a percentage of their earnings is deducted from their welfare cheque.

Most of the participants who indicated they were off social assistance were working in jobs that paid slightly more than what they had been receiving on social assistance.

*I have a graduate degree but I can't get work in my field.*

*Working now... did it entirely on my own.*

*I found a job myself. It's unrelated to my previous field and only slightly better than minimum wage, but I feel good about working and the increased income has given me a few more choices.*

*I found part-time midnight shift work. I did not get any help from OW or social worker in getting this work.*

One individual who was pleased about getting a job and working, offered the following insight :

*It is totally different than social assistance. After I paid rent I had \$80.00 left for everything. It was hell. All the effort in the world won't make any difference. If you don't have money to see it through. Transportation is really essential. You need money when looking for work, it uses up a lot of energy. You don't have enough money to feed yourself properly. You need a good balanced diet. This is really important.*



## Personal Impacts

Participants in the research consistently spoke about their struggle to survive, and the stress and fear involved in not being able to provide for themselves and their family.

**In the initial interviews and focus groups**, there was considerable stress, fear and anxiety associated with participation in Ontario Works. This appeared to be the result of limited information, being unaware of rights and responsibilities, and being unclear as to the circumstances under which they might be cut-off (welfare). There was fear of the future, and some concern about how to juggle finances to meet Ontario Works commitments (e.g., lunch money, money for bus tickets, supply costs, clothes, etc.), especially if they were not sure what would be reimbursed and when.

*How can anyone work under fear?*

*It's the clients who are suffering. Passing through such an ordeal... by now, everybody knows that if you don't do what's asked, you will lose your cheque.*

**In the follow-up**, participants spoke to a much greater extent about issues of survival. They clearly expressed the daily struggle and hardship of surviving on welfare, with benefits having been severely reduced by the Ontario Government in 1995. Individuals indicated they were starving, feeling degraded, worried about their children, and feeling put down by workers at the welfare office. For some, participation in Ontario Works, and the associated costs and changes, produced more stress in an already difficult situation.

*With \$100 to spend per month (after rent)  
I'm starving. I have three young kids  
(with ex-wife). I have tried for every job  
that is available, any work is okay.*

*No one can survive on the assistance  
without hardship. There is no allowance  
for any emergency. Even something as  
simple as the zipper on my coat getting  
fixed, I can't do it. It's necessary to visit  
food places all around the area and get  
help from church and friends to survive*

*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 that's unnecessary.*

*.Welfare workers were nice but found  
contact with welfare office consistently  
made me feel bad - found workers there  
disrespectful and felt like I was being  
perceived as lazy and incompetent.*

While health issues were not specifically raised as a question to participants, many talked about health-related concerns. For example, concerns were raised about the general deterioration of their health (stress, anxiety, etc.), about certain medications not being covered, about being depressed, and malnourishment.

*The elements of fear exist everywhere... always worried about being able to look after your kids, and not losing your next cheque.*

*A lot of my friends are depressed. They feel without concrete help, they are lost.*

*It is hard to accept – to live with the feeling that we are not useful in Canadian society.*

One person mentioned that the word going around is that if you do not have a job by such and such a time, you`ll be cut off (welfare). Another participant said you must find a job or else. They (the government) have gone too fast... it`s not easy to have self-esteem if you`ve been on the system a long time. A few people mentioned that the claw-back of the National Child Benefit was a further attack on people on welfare with children.

<b>Participant Feedback to the Social Services Department</b>	
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Participants in the follow-up interviews and focus groups were asked what advice they would offer the welfare department. Here are highlights of what they told us.

Community Placements	<p><i>After 6 month placement, they should have people hire you. You get good experience, then they let you go. If you want people out of system, need system to find the real jobs, not to give false hope.</i></p> <p><i>Give us \$6.80 per hour at the placement. It would be better to get paid by the agency than through welfare.</i></p> <p><i>Have follow-ups so that after six months, they don't just drop you off, with fewer options.</i></p>
More Direct Link to Work	<p><i>I don't need experience, I need a job. If you keep doing this over and over again, it's degrading.</i></p> <p><i>Get a list of employers, get some jobs, bridge the gap to help people find jobs. Put the emphasis and the money into connecting people to employers.</i></p>
Live our Life	<p><i>Let them (workers) be in our shoes.</i></p> <p><i>Recruit people like us for welfare offices – people who know what it's like to live on welfare.</i></p>
Increase Flexibility and Responsiveness	<p><i>The Ontario Works Program should be flexible to accommodate recipient's initiatives.</i></p> <p><i>Elaborate the current training programs – offer more variety.</i></p> <p><i>Allow people who are able to find part-time jobs to keep 100% of their earnings... the amount you can keep now does not motivate people to work. After a time (when confidence is increased), you could turn into full-time.</i></p>
Support and Encouragement	<p><i>Have more groups like this (focus group) so that people can talk to each other and share problems.</i></p> <p><i>Better training so that workers know what the other is doing.</i></p> <p><i>People are volunteering, in school or training... the cheques should be increased!</i></p>

## Section Five: Recommendations for Action

The recommendations are drawn strictly from the experiences and comments of individuals in the Ontario Works Program who were part of this study. The recommendations were arrived at through a one-day workshop involving the researchers and Project Team members, with the assistance of an outside facilitator. We asked ourselves: what are the obstacles and opportunities to increasing the independence and employment of individuals in Ontario Works? What recommendations or actions do we propose?

In asking these questions, we recognize that it is not a realistic goal for all individuals on social assistance to attain independence and employment. We also acknowledge that our recommendations are made within the context of the Ontario Works Program existing as a mandatory program in Ontario.

We also feel it is important to remember that there have been other voluntary programs developed in Ottawa-Carleton (e.g., Opportunity Planning, Focus for Change, Action for Careers and Training, etc.) that have successfully increased the opportunities for people on social assistance to achieve greater independence and obtain employment.

### Systemic Issues

- Many participants told us they had difficulty meeting their basic needs for food and shelter.
- Participants spoke about the difficulty of making the transition from social assistance to employment. The system did not build in ways to make the transition easier.
- For many participants, the prescriptive nature of the Program did not allow the necessary flexibility to meet their needs.
- The system did not appear to be open and transparent.

#### We recommend that:

1. **Allowances for basic needs and shelter be increased to reflect the actual cost of a nutritious diet and adequate housing.**
2. **Clients be allowed to retain the full amount of the National Child Benefit to recognize the additional needs of their children.** At present the National

Child Benefit is being treated by the Ontario Government as income for families on assistance, and is therefore deducted monthly from their benefits.

**3. Clients be allowed to retain a greater amount of their earnings from part-time or full-time work.** For instance, in the first three months that an individual is on assistance, they are not allowed to retain any of their earnings from employment. Furthermore, the amount of “additional” earnings, over and above an initial exemption, that a recipient can retain from employment is reduced by 5% per year, from a maximum of 25% to zero.

**4. Clients continue to receive supplementary benefits (e.g., drug card) for a period of time after leaving social assistance, so they can sustain employment during the initial transition.** In many cases, employees who are actually able to get jobs with benefits, must wait at least three or six months before they are eligible for employer benefit plans.

**5. Time and resource restraints be relaxed and the system be made more flexible, to recognize and value the variety of individual experiences and needs.** For instance, strict time limitations on training programs, employment placements, and the development of self-employment plans will work for some but not all participants of Ontario Works.

**6. Current options available be expanded and more streams be created. The definition of “work” must be widened to recognize such activities as co-operative ventures and community economic development.** Municipalities should be given flexibility to deal with local conditions and build on their previously successful employment programs (e.g., Opportunity Planning<sup>17</sup>).

## Information, Resource and Support Issues

- Participants related the great difficulty they had in getting consistent and accurate information.
- Participants were not clear about their rights; were afraid of not performing satisfactorily and were not sure of the consequences if they failed.
- Participants told us they did not know about available supports, had difficulty accessing supports and, in some cases, had problems fulfilling their obligations due to lack of supports.

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<sup>17</sup> The *Opportunity Planning* Pilot Project helped participants in Ottawa-Carleton reduce their dependency on social assistance, resulting in savings of \$1.5 million per year to the social assistance system. Program elements included: individualized support, choice, continuum of services, linkages to existing community resources, etc. (RMOC, The Opportunity Planning Project Evaluation, November 1995).

- Bus passes and childcare were essential supports for many participants, regardless of the part of Ontario Works in which they participated.

**We recommend that:**

**7. The time allotted for the initial assessment for Ontario Works be increased to allow for appropriate selection of options and clarity of roles and responsibilities.** This would also lead to more consistency and realistic expectations on the part of participants and workers.

**8. Comprehensive information about education, training, placements and supports be provided to all participants at the initial assessment regardless of which option clients have chosen. Clients should also be informed on an on-going basis of policy and other changes that may affect them.**

**9. All documents be written in plain language and clients be provided with copies of any documents they are asked to sign.**

**10. Benefits (e.g., bus passes) be improved and clients be provided with information about eligibility for benefits.** For instance, bus passes should not be limited to community placements. Workers should have an awareness/sensitivity to hidden needs such as books, lunches, photocopying, quality of safety gear, etc.

**11. Licensed and/or informal childcare, as chosen by the parent, be provided as needed to all participants.** This should include short-term care to allow parents to attend short courses as well as flexible care to accommodate evening or weekend courses and shift work.

**12. Training and educational opportunities under Ontario Works be expanded to include education at the post-secondary level.** This would allow clients to complete a partially finished degree or to seek accreditation for existing qualifications, increasing the likelihood of successful integration into the labour market.

## Labour Market Issues

- Participants felt that the fact they were receiving social assistance contributed to their difficulty in being employed.
- Many participants had been through training programs that had not given them the specific skills employers were looking for.
- Some individuals had qualifications and/or experience that were not recognized in Canada.

**We recommend that:**

**13. The Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton engage in a proactive campaign to directly challenge stereotypes of people on social assistance and to make employers aware of the skills and abilities of people on social assistance. Such a campaign must demonstrate that most recipients genuinely want to work.**

**14. Existing practices be modified and/or eliminated which require individuals to identify as social assistance recipients when they present themselves for employment.** For instance, the Social Services Department requires some individuals to get employer signatures to prove job search. In other cases, the Department requires letters from the employer to get start-up benefits or verify earnings.

**15. The Social Services Department work with employers in the Region to identify specific training that is geared to current labour market needs; and to develop partnerships for training in the workplace.**

### Input/Feedback Issues

- Participants were worried that bringing forward concerns and problems to workers might jeopardize their benefits.
- Participants were very appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences, raise concerns, and have some input, without fear of the consequences.

**We recommend that:**

**16. A mechanism or forum be created outside the Social Services Department, with appropriate funding, where clients can talk to a safe third party about their individual concerns, and get information and assistance without fear of jeopardizing their benefits.**

**17. That on-going mechanisms be put in place so that clients can give feedback, in a group setting, on their experiences in the Ontario Works Program, and be given the means to influence the system without prejudice.**

## Areas of Further Research

**Throughout this study, areas were identified where further research is required:**

- To examine Ontario Works rules, regulations and practices that have the effect of discouraging people from acting in ways consistent with the goals of Ontario Works, for instance:
  - (i) Sale and/or exchange of assets (e.g., furniture) resulting in reduced entitlements;
  - (ii) Support from family and friends (e.g., meals) being quantified and deducted from monthly benefits.
  
- To investigate the extent to which the Ontario Works Program is creating highly resourced streams that target and count only those individuals who would, through their own initiative, find work. Are increasing numbers of people on social assistance being left behind?
  
- To examine and document participants' experiences in the Employment Placement and Self Employment Component of Ontario Works. How successful are these aspects of the Program in helping people find and maintain employment? These components were not part of this study.
  
- To examine the impacts of the Ontario Works Program on specific groups and individuals, such as sole support parents, new Canadians, and clients over fifty years of age.
  
- To track the number of people who leave welfare, and find out more about why they leave welfare, and what happens to them.



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*Appendix I*

**PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS**

Brian Bourns	Ottawa Economic Development Corporation
Ken Clavette	Labour Community Services
Karen Graham	Advocate
Jane Hueston	Community Legal Services of Ottawa-Carleton
Linda Lalonde	The Anti Poverty Project
Sue MacLatchie	Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres
Hélène Perrault*	Task Force on Poverty
Susan Rowley	Canadian Mental Health Association
Jeffrey Roy	Centre on Governance, Ottawa University
Mengistab Tsegaye	Local Agencies Serving Immigrants
Larry Weissmann**	Faith Partners

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Joan Gullen	Resource Person
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Susan Learoyd	Coordinator, Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton
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Researchers:	Fred Sadori and Barbara Carroll
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\*new member, November 1998

\*\*resigned in January 1999

## *Appendix II*

### **Summary of Preliminary Findings (October 1998)**

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.

## *Appendix III*

### **Summary of Regional Findings – Literature Review**

#### **Quebec**

Even though Quebec Government statistics have shown that there is not a high degree of resistance to the program, other government studies have shown that workfare exhibits such outcomes as : a low success rate; low participation rate; waste of financial resources; and evidence that many recipients are deemed ineligible and are therefore placed in inappropriate programs or on long waiting lists.

#### **New Brunswick**

Outcomes of *NB Works* have shown : high drop-out rates, particularly among the category of single women with children; low-wages with minimal fringe benefits for graduates of the program; menial or general labour type employment placements; and a tendency for private sector partners to take advantage of employees provided by the program.

#### **Alberta**

Outcomes examined in the literature included : a decrease in Alberta`s welfare caseload by almost 50 percent following provincial welfare reforms, accomplished primarily by decreasing new inflows onto social assistance; the category of recipients most affected were young, single and employable individuals; an increase in the average employment earnings of former welfare recipients as compared to minimum-wage employment; and a lack of evidence supporting the claim that former recipients may have moved to other provinces in order to receive federal unemployment insurance benefits.

#### **New York City**

Some of the findings presented in the literature included : evidence of a conflict between the program and public sector trade unions as a result of the replacement of public sector jobs with participants of the program; an overall failure to move people from welfare into permanent full-time jobs; the lack of appropriate and affordable day-care facilities for single mothers who are forced to participate in the program; and a high drop-out rate among participants.

#### **Wisconsin**

Outcomes examined in the literature : Wisconsin`s workfare program is costly, with an approximate 40 percent increase in the operating cost of the total welfare budget; a decrease in the welfare caseload by as much as 80 percent in 28 of the State`s 77 counties; the belief that the program has aided in the creation of a deterrent by deflecting those whom would have attempted to get on the system; and significant rises in the cost of supporting a family with members participating in the program by as much as 60 percent in recent years.

Appendix IV – A

**QUESTIONNAIRE - FACE SHEET Part I**

Date: M\_\_\_D\_\_\_Y\_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 1.** What is your age?

- 16-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 65 +

**Question 2.** Your Gender?

M or F

**Question 3.** Are you:

- A Canadian citizen or born in Canada
- A landed immigrant or a refugee claimant

**Question 4.** Language spoken in the home?

- English
- French
- Other (please specify)  \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 5.** Which of the following categories best describes your household at the present time?

- one adult
- adult with one child
- adult with two children
- adult with 3 children or more
- 2 adults
- 2 adults with one child
- 2 adults with two children
- 2 adults with 3 children or more
- Other (extended family member living at home)  specify \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 6.** What is your child's status at school ? Please check number of children per category.

	1 child	2 children	3 children		
Pre-school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Part time	<input type="checkbox"/>
Elementary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Part time	<input type="checkbox"/>
High school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Part time	<input type="checkbox"/>
College or University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Part time	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Specify	_____				

**Question 7.** In which category of Ontario Works are you participating?

- Job - paid employment   
Educational - Training   
Community Placement

**Question 8.** In order to fully participate in the Ontario Works program, do you need child care?

- Yes  \* if yes do you need Full time care  Part time care   
No

**Question 9.** Has adequate child care been provided to you as a participant in the Ontario Works program ?

- Yes   
No   
Other  specify \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 10.** Do you have a child with special needs?

- Yes   
No

**Question 11.** Have those special needs been met adequately in the Ontario Works program?

- Yes   
No   
Clarify if necessary \_\_\_\_\_



**Question 12.** Which level of education have you completed?

- Elementary
- Some High School
- High School Diploma
- Some College or University
- Diploma or Degree
- Other  \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 13.** Is this your first time on social assistance?

- Yes
- No

**Question 14.** How long have you been on Social assistance?

- less than 6 months
- 7 months to less than a year
- 1 year to less than 2 years
- more than 2 years

**Question 15.** What was your main source of income before receiving social assistance?

- Do not wish to respond
- No income
- Employment insurance
- Pension
- Disability
- Worker's compensation
- Self-employed
- Paid employment  Full-time  Part-time
- Other  specify \_\_\_\_\_

**The following questions apply only to respondents who have indicated paid employment or being self-employed as their source of income.**

**Question 16.** What was your occupation ?

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**Question 17.** When did you stop working?

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**Question 18.** What were the circumstances which caused you to end your job?

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**Question 19.** Were you volunteering with a community agency before participating in Ontario Works?

Yes

No

**Question 20.** Have you ever participated in back-to-work programs?

Yes

No

**\* if answer to question 20 is yes, please answer questions 21 and 22**

**Question 21.** Which program(s)?

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**Question 22.** Did it allow you to enter or re-enter the job market?

Yes

No

*Appendix IV – B*

**Interview Questionnaire, Part II**

**Question 1.** Can you describe how you got involved in the Ontario Works Program?

**Probes**

- A. Who made the initial contact? B. When?
- C. How was the program, or your participation requirements in the program explained to you?
- D. What activities were you pursuing (work, volunteering, school) when you were first contacted?

**Question 2.** What, if anything is preventing you from getting work in this region?

Please identify those obstacles or causes?

**Question 3.** What were your initial expectations in regards to the Ontario Works program?

**Probes**

- A. What did you expect the program to provide (tools, training, jobs, funding)?
- B. What did you expect to get out of this program?

**Question 4.** Have you had to make any changes in your life due to your participation in Ontario Works, If so, can you please list and describe these changes?

**Probes**

- A. What were some of the specific requirements the program imposed on you (time)?
- B. Changes as in family, personal, emotional etc.
- C. How do you feel about the changes you made in your life due to this program?
- D. Where do you see yourself in a few months?

**Question 5.** How has your participation in Ontario Works affected your job search and your job possibilities ?

**Probes**

- A. Provided opportunities, taught me new skills etc. Provided no opportunities.
- B. Do you believe it will affect your transition into the job market? If so, in what way?
- C. What specific part of the program has helped or hindered your job opportunities?

**Question 6.** How do you feel about participating in the Ontario Works Program? (angry, sad, disappointed, happy, energetic) What are the negative or positive aspects?

**Question 7.** What supports did your worker provide for you (other than your regular cheque) ? and what supports do you feel should have been provided to you?

**Probes**

- A. What did you ask for, what did you get?
- B. Do you consider the supports adequate, inadequate, helpful? if so, which ones?
- C. Would you like to make any changes to this program?

**Question 8.** Do you expect to find a job any quicker due to your participation in Ontario Works?

**Probes**

- A. Do you feel other activities may have been more useful? Explain.
- B. Was the initial information that was provided adequate, inadequate?

**Question 9.** Are you participating in this program voluntarily (ex. you don't have to sign up) or have been forced in some manner to participate?

**Question 10.** Is there anything you would like to add about this questionnaire or Ontario Works?

## SUMMARY

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**Do you need any additional information in regards to the Ontario Works Program?**

### **Optional**

I would be willing to be contacted in the next 5 or 6 months in order to participate in a short follow-up interview (by telephone) which will strictly examine the main themes, and changes over time in the two groups. We would not match individual responses.

Yes

No

Contact number: \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have reviewed the information contained in this

document and confirm that it accurately reflects the answers I have provided.

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix IV – C*

**Questions for Focus Group on Ontario Works**

May 1998

1. How did you get involved in the Ontario Works program?
2. What is your experience in getting training or finding a job?
3. How do you think the Ontario Works program will help you get training or find a job? (*Note: put responses on flipchart*)
4. What were you told about the Ontario Works program? By whom? (*Note: put responses on flipchart*)
5. Have you had to make any kinds of changes in your life because of your participation in Ontario Works? (*Note: put responses on flipchart*)
6. What do you hope to get out of your participation in Ontario Works?  
(this question can be omitted if not sufficient time)
7. What supports did your worker provide for you (other than your regular cheque) and what supports do you feel should be provided to you? (What did you ask for and what did you get?) (*Note: put responses on flipchart*)
8. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience in Ontario Works?  
(this question can be omitted if not sufficient time)

*Appendix IV - D*

**Interview Guide – Follow-up Interviews & Focus Groups**

1. How are things going?

Probe: can you tell me about your experience with OW.

2. Can you tell me about any changes in your life due to your participation in OW?

Probes: ask specifically if needed about; changes in program status, family, health, emotionally, support, childcare, income, opportunities, knowledge skill level, needs, interpersonal relationships, parenting style.

3. Can you tell me, based on your initial expectations and hopes with the OW program, how you see the program now?

Probes: your initial goals, your initial needs, hopeful, hopeless, worse off now, better off now, more job ready, supports, work type, work hours.

4. Can you tell me about your overall experiences with OW, focusing on the aspects you felt were good/positive or bad/negative?

Probes: advantages, disadvantages, provision/delivery of services, attitudes, problems, negative, positive things.

5. What are the features of this program that you liked/approved or disliked/disapproved the most?

6. If you had any advice to offer the welfare department, what you say to them? (not necessarily related to workfare)

Probes: supports, services.

7. Would you like to add anything to this interview?

8. If you had to sum up your feelings/experiences about OW in one sentence, what would you say?

## *Appendix V*

### **Monitoring Ontario Works Research Project Background Materials & Research Tools**

#### **Information to Agencies/Individuals on the Project**

Letter to Community Agencies (Bilingual) – May 5, 1998  
List of Agencies (109) Receiving Letter  
Information Sheet (English & French version) – focus groups – *Is Ontario Works “working”?* *We want to hear from you.* (April – May 1998)  
Sign-up Sheet for Interviewees - for use by Employment Resource Centres (ERC`s) and Community Agencies (May – June 1998)  
Poster for ERC`s - Follow-up Interviews - (for people with whom we may have lost contact)

#### **Job Descriptions**

Job Description – Moderator for Focus Group  
Job Description – Contract for Researcher

#### **Confidentiality & Consent Forms**

Confidentiality Form for Facilitators (focus groups)  
Information and Consent Form – for Interviewers - May/June 1998 (individual interviews)  
Confidentiality Form for Interviewers – November – December 1998 (telephone interviews) – English & French version

#### **Questionnaires (English and French versions)**

Questions for Focus Groups (May 1998)  
Questionnaire – Part 1 & Part II – Individual Interviews (June 1998)  
Interview Guide – Follow-up Telephone Interviews and Focus Groups (November – December 1998)  
Comment Sheet – for use by Interviewers (telephone interviews)

#### **Orientation & Training Sessions**

Orientation for Moderators & Recorders of Focus Groups (May 1998)  
Orientation and Training for Interviewers and Recorders of Individual Interviews (May 19, 1998)  
Orientation Session for Interviewers – Telephone Interviews (November 1998)  
Follow-up Interviews – Guidelines & Points to Remember – for Interviewers



## **Focus Groups**

Script – Telephone Calls to Individuals (May 1998)  
Agenda – Focus Groups (May 1998)  
Sign-up & Follow-up Sheet – Focus Groups (May 1998)  
Agenda – Follow-up Focus Groups (November 1998)

## **Presentations to Community Services Committee**

Presentation to Community Services Committee, February 19, 1998  
Report to Community Services Committee (English & French version) – September 2, 1998 (sent with CSC agenda)  
Presentation to Community Services Committee – October 1, 1998  
Interim Report – Monitoring Ontario Works Research Project (*All I Need is a Job*) – October 1, 1998

## **Background Information - General**

Points on Ethics  
Thoughts About Focus Groups  
Thoughts About Phone Surveys  
Literature Review on Workfare-Style Programs – Background Notes (9 pgs.)

A binder of background information and research tools on the Monitoring Ontario Works Research Project is available for reference at the **Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton**. In addition, a limited number of packages are available for purchase at a cost of \$7 each.

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