



BOARD REPORT

REPORT No.: 2022-70

MEETING DATE: NOVEMBER 17, 2022

SUBJECT: SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM UPDATE

RECOMMENDATION

For information only.

REPORT SUMMARY

To provide The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB or the Board) with an update on the current activities and future vision of Social Assistance programs.

BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) has introduced several initiatives during the last few years to modernize the Ontario Works (OW) delivery system. MCCSS is working with Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) and District Social Service Boards (DSSAB) to transform social assistance and co-design a new system that connects people to the supports they need to achieve greater independence and employment.

The focus of the work of CMSMs and DSSABs in delivering social assistance will eventually shift towards a greater emphasis on connecting those who rely on social assistance programs with the supports and services they need to move towards greater independence and employability. Stabilization services will become a core deliverable of the program. An initial report on this transformation was provided to the Board at the November 17, 2021 meeting (Report No.: 2021-58).

COMMENTS

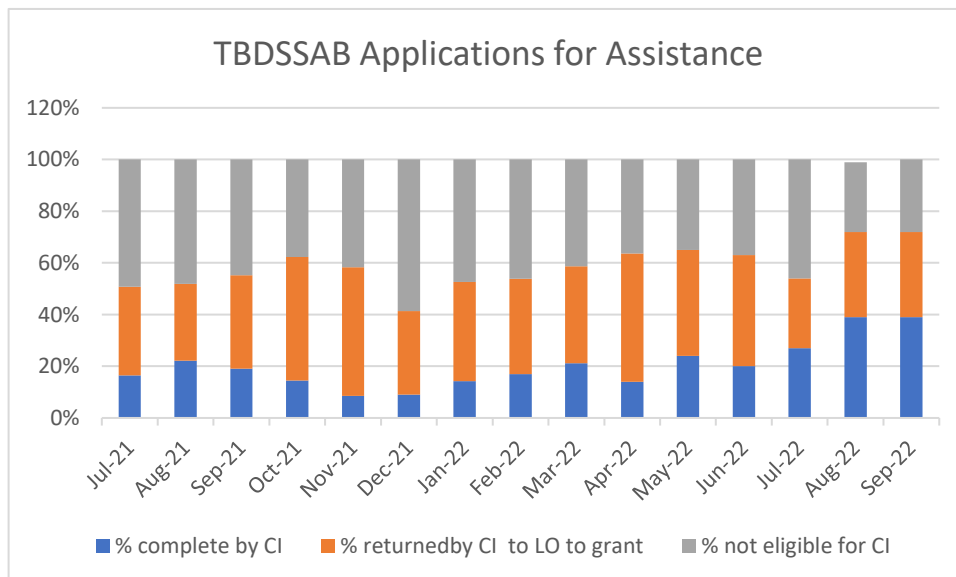
Centralized Intake

In October 2020, MCCSS introduced a Centralized Intake (CI) process for applicants looking to apply for OW. MCCSS piloted the new intake model with seven sites at that time. MCCSS planned to have all 47 Service Managers live with CI by April 2021,

though only 20 of the 47 Service Managers were engaged in April 2021. TBDSSAB went live with CI on June 21, 2021 with 14 other sites. There is one more group of sites planning to go live in fall of 2022.

Applicants for OW benefits can apply by using the online Social Assistance Digital Application or by contacting the CI by telephone. MCCSS Caseworkers (CW) at the Intake and Benefits Administration Unit (IBAU) determine the applicant’s eligibility for OW. Once eligibility is determined, the case is transferred to the OW local office for ongoing case management. MCCSS had set a target of 70% for CI in making the initial determination for OW eligibility of the cases that are processed by IBAU. MCCSS has since adjusted the target to 50 to 55% granted by IBAU.

The chart below indicates the percentages of total applications that were directed to CI and those not eligible to be assessed by IBAU. In addition, the chart also indicates of those applications that went through IBAU, the percentage that were granted by them or returned to local office for granting.



The IBAU CW determines eligibility and grants assistance with follow up for the local office to complete in either 30, 60 or 90 days depending on the risk assessment that is performed at IBAU. Once the case is granted by IBAU, the local office contacts the client to discuss any items that were flagged for follow up. These items could be a rent verification, identification verification, or review of assets, among others. The local CW also meets with the client to review their rights and responsibilities or fill out other necessary forms and to complete an employment plan. The local CW will also complete a client profile and employment assessment in GERE - TBDSSAB’s stand-alone software to assist with employment planning.

There are applications for which the IBAU cannot determine eligibility for circumstances such as pending income or the applicant did not pass the ID verification process. These cases are transferred to the local office to assess eligibility and grant assistance if determined eligible.

Applications that are determined ineligible by IBAU are transferred to the local office to verify ineligibility at which point the local office informs the client of ineligibility. Internal Reviews resulting from decisions made by IBAU are heard through the local office.

There are certain categories of applications that cannot be completed by IBAU including applicants under 18 years of age, applications for Temporary Care Assistance, applicants requiring interpreter services, and homeless applicants who do not have a contact number for follow up and emergencies. The local office completes these applications.

Currently MCCSS is reviewing CI processes to scope in some of the excluded applications that are listed above.

Employment Services Transformation

TBDSSAB has been informed by MCCSS, in partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development that it will become part of Employment Services Transformation in late 2023, with a possible launch of the new model in 2024. When this change is complete, the focus of TBDSSAB's work with clients will no longer include employment planning but will focus on stabilization services. While MCCSS has not officially defined stabilization services, it has recently released the concept. MCCSS has outlined four focus areas:

1. Basic Needs: financial support, housing needs and crisis resolution
2. Life Skills: self-efficacy, education, and literacy/numeracy
3. Health: primary care, mental health and addictions, and ongoing medical concerns
4. Community Supports: dependent care, justice and legal support and cultural connections.

TBDSSAB CWs are already engaged with clients in these areas. While undertaking employment planning with a client, many of these areas would be considered "barriers to employment" and as such the CW and client work together to resolve them. When TBDSSAB moves from an employment focus to stabilization services, the CW will primarily focus on these four areas. New pathways and partnerships will be forged and existing partnerships will be strengthened.

Centralization of Financial Administration

MCCSS delayed pilot projects for the centralization of financial administration prior to the provincial election. Once these pilots are launched there will be a more fulsome picture of what this will entail and potential impacts to local operations. A further update will be provided to the Board once details on the centralization of financial services administration is known.

Ontario Works E-Signature Pilot

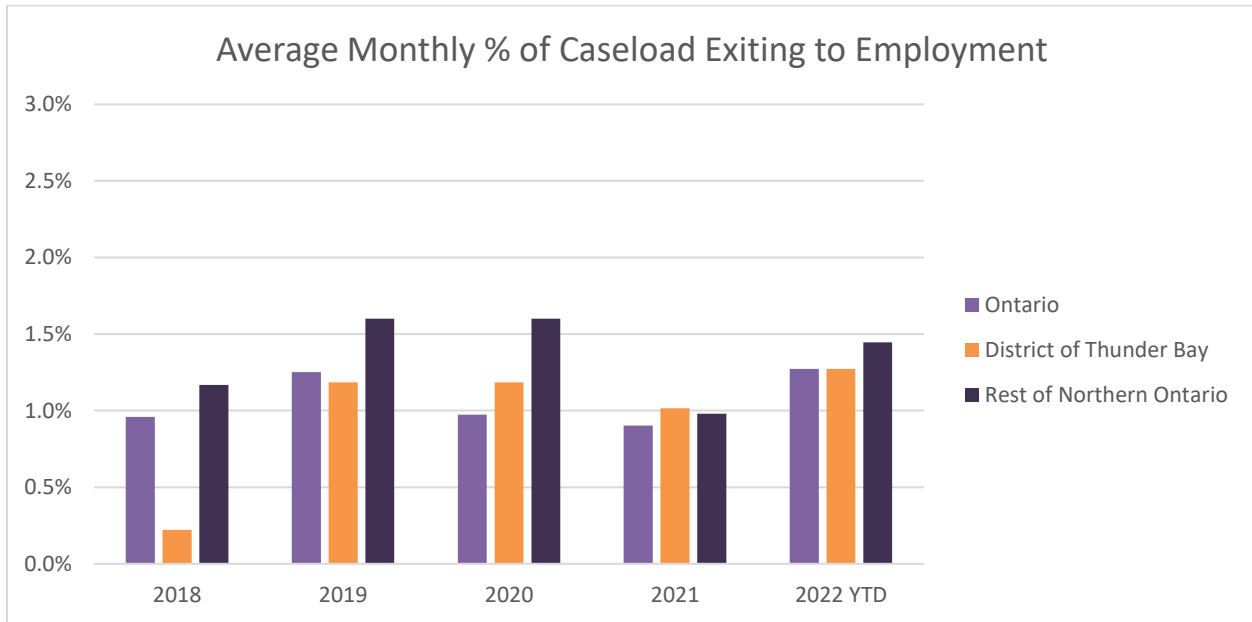
In August 2021, TBDSSAB was selected by MCCSS to participate as the first pilot site in the province for the OW e-signature process. MCCSS is piloting three legislated forms that are sent to an OW applicant/recipient, via secured email, for an electronic signature. The three forms include the General Consent to Gather Information, Consent for Revenue Canada and the Rights and Responsibilities. This has reduced the need for wet signatures (in person) to be obtained for initial and ongoing eligibility. MCCSS trained TBDSSAB staff in the use of the web-based e-signature tool, local processes were developed, and the e-signature pilot was launched in November 2021. Using lessons learned through TBDSSAB's use, the Ministry launched e-signatures to all 47 OW sites in July 2022.

Exits to Employment

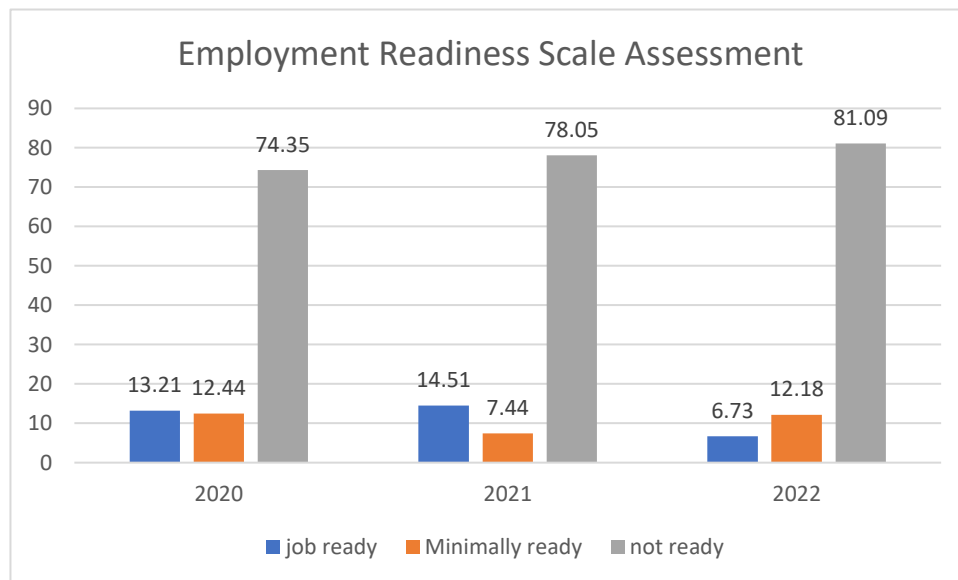
Social Assistance programs brought forward to MCCSS that the statistics used to track exits to employment are incorrect. There are two reports that indicate exits. One is called a "Case Closure" Report and generated by data taken from SAMS. The other is called the "Performance Report" which is generated by MCCSS using back-end data. The Performance Report is the official report that OW targets are reported from. These two reports do not match. TBDSSAB had discussed this with MCCSS but was not successful in getting the reports to match until in January 2022. TBDSSAB brought forward that the Performance Report indicated that TBDSSAB had 216 fewer closures than the Case Closure Report. MCCSS has now changed the way they collect the target numbers based on TBDSSAB feedback. This is on a go forward basis as of January 2022.

CWs continue to work with each participant on employment planning. In 2022, the percentage of caseload exiting to employment has increased 25.4% from 2021, at an average of 1.27% of the caseload exiting to employment monthly (1.01% in 2021).

Following are the average monthly exits to employment from 2018 to date in 2022, compared with the average for Northern Ontario and the Ontario average.

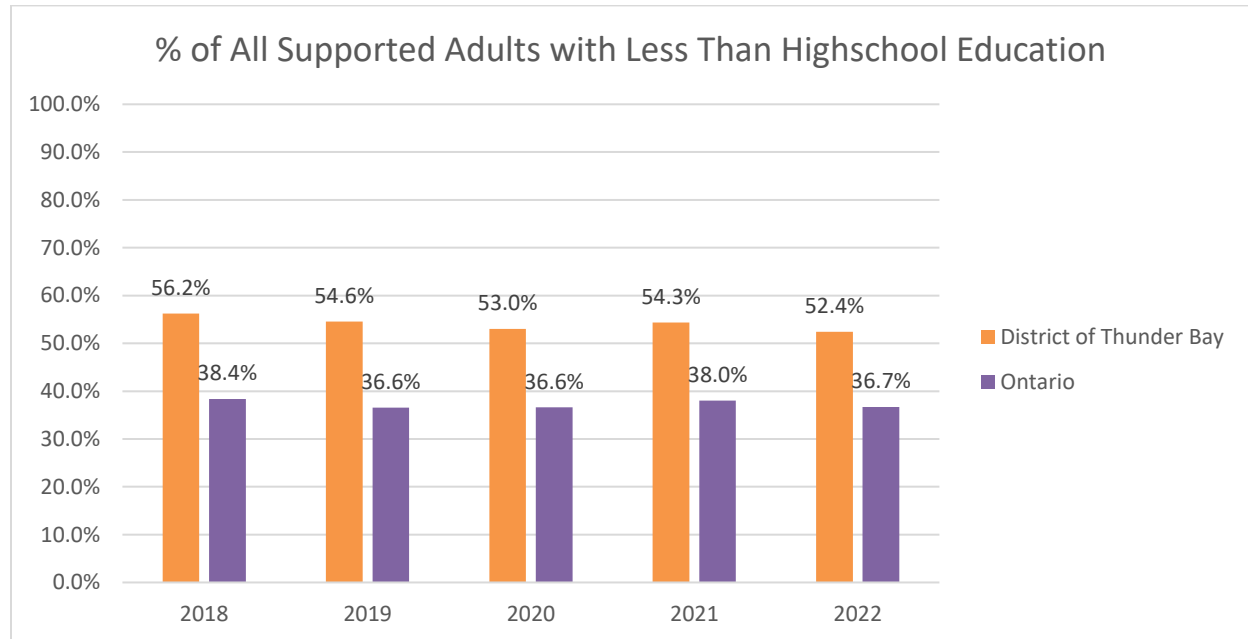


Since 2020 the caseload has decreased in participants who are “job ready” according to the Employment Readiness Scale Assessment. It is important to note that the participant completes the assessment independent of any TBDSSAB staff. Participants may be less ready for employment for several reasons, including education levels attained.



TBDSSAB’s caseload has historically had a lower high school achievement percentage that the average across the province. This means that TBDSSAB’s participants have

higher needs and more barriers to employment than their counterparts across the province.



Going to Work Employer Incentive Program

TBDSSAB partners with both Employment Ontario (EO) and March of Dimes (MOD) for employment options for OW participants. Additionally, TBDSSAB has developed the “Going to Work” program to help support clients in entry into the workforce.

EO offers assistance to participants who are “job ready” and can directly access employment. EO can also offset wages for a period, to entice the employer to hire the OW participant and can assist participants in finding employment. SA staff refer clients who have a recent employment history to EO agencies to work with them.

Employment Placement through MOD offers an OW participant an employment placement up to 6 months. This program offers opportunities to participants who require a higher amount of assistance and are “minimally ready.” Workplace assistance efforts are provided.

To augment the partnerships with EO and MOD, TBDSSAB began to establish direct employer relationships in the fall of 2021. SA staff work closer with those who are “further away from the employment market” with this program. Program staff would train potential applicants in customer service skills and WHMIS as well as assisting with resume updates and practicing interview skills. Once the training was completed, their resume was sent to an employer and the applicant was interviewed. This initiative resulted in six of the first 13 applicants referred being hired.

In July 2022, this program was named "Going to Work". A Job Development Officer was hired under a temporary contract and incentives to employers were developed and offered as part of the program package. Each employer who hires an applicant referred under "Going to Work" signs an agreement and may be eligible to have 50% of the employees' wages supplemented through a defined training period.

To date, 20 confirmed employer partnerships have been formed. There are 108 active client participants with 74 being referred to a perspective employer. The current hire rate through this program is 24.3%. To date \$7,615 has been paid to employers to offset the training costs for our clients. Given the initial results, this program is being extended into 2023, with further evaluation to be undertaken.

Housing Hubs

As part of the Strategic Plan, technological hubs were established in three multi-family neighborhoods owned by TBDSSAB. Tenants who live in these neighborhoods have access to WIFI, computers, printers, and supports through the hubs. These housing hubs are offered at the Limbrick, Windsor and Trillium neighbourhoods in Thunder Bay. The results from these sites will be evaluated and further locations, including in communities other than the City, will be considered.

With the goal of being more available and hands on with clients, SA programs have scheduled a CW in each of the hubs one day a week. The full suite of OW programs is offered on site to participants. This includes applications for assistance, changes in benefit until composition, employment updates and case management appointments, and other services that may be required. As well, employment programs run training sessions at the hubs for in-person service and virtual access for those who cannot attend in person. An average of 16 clients meets with CWs at the hubs each month. In June 2022, a new hub opened at Spence Court (230 W. Amelia Street) and feedback from participants will be evaluated.

Financial Empowerment Program

In the fall of 2021, Thunder Bay Counselling Centre partnered with TBDSSAB to develop a prototype for a Financial Empowerment program. TBDSSAB is one of two sites across the province to develop a prototype. The Manager, Social Assistance, and front line CWs worked with Thunder Bay Counselling Centre to develop the program. Some of the goals of the program is to give participants information on tax benefits they may be entitled to and to offer money saving tips.

There have been three programs offered virtually in 2022 and participation is developing. There have been two in-person programs offered, one at Trillium and one at Limbrick, with positive feedback from participants who took part. This initiative will continue and be evaluated in 2023.

STRATEGIC PLAN IMPACT

This report relates to the Board's strategic plan through the Practical Vision of providing Flexible Inclusive Services through Increased Community and Employment Placements.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate financial implications resulting from this report.



CONCLUSION

It is concluded that this report provides the Board with an update on the current activities and future vision of Social Assistance programs.

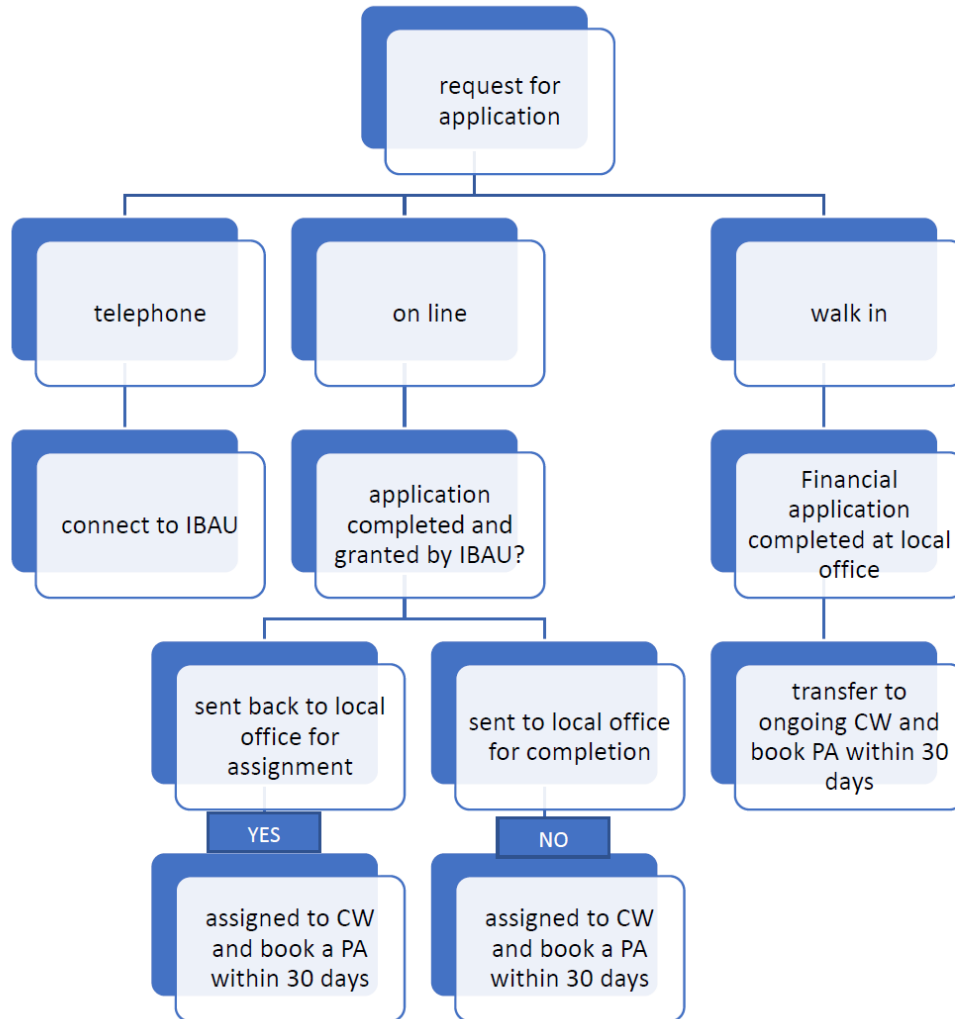
REFERENCE MATERIALS

Attachment #1 [Centralized Intake Workflow](#)

Attachment #2 [SA Vision Placemat \(Revised March 2021\)](#)

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Centralized Intake Local Application Flow Chart



A working vision for social assistance



Vision:

To create an efficient, effective and streamlined social services system that focuses on people, providing them with a range of services and supports to respond to their unique needs and address barriers to success so they can move towards employment and independence.

How we will realign:



Province

Delivers:

- ✓ Centralized financial assistance
- ✓ Financial controls and back-office functions suited to centralization or automation

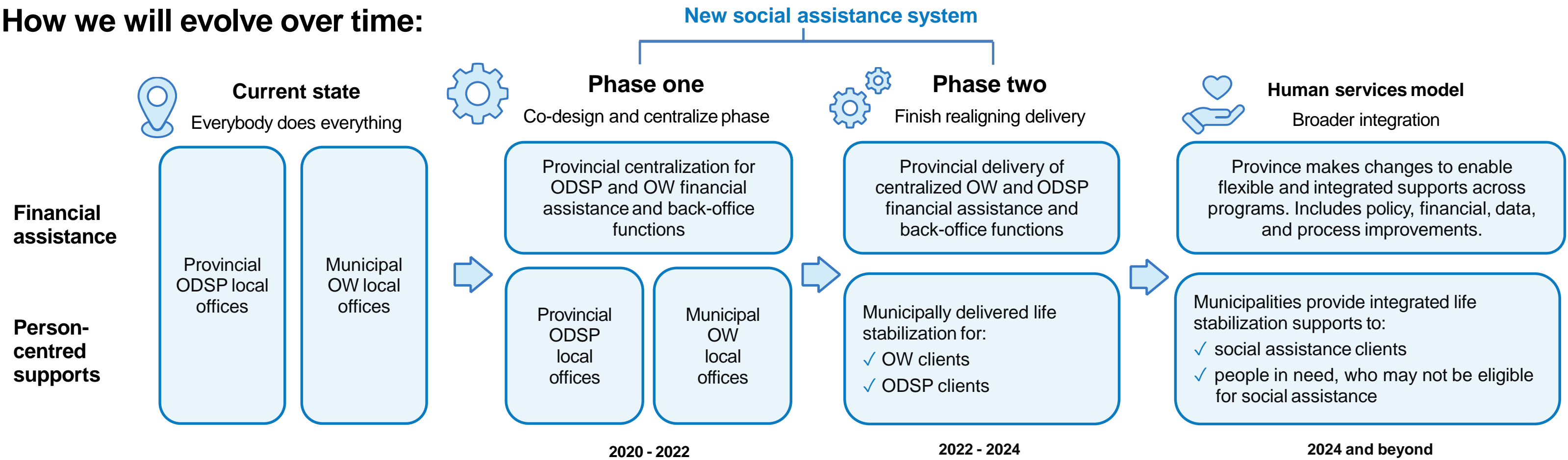


Municipalities

Delivers:

- ✓ Life stabilization – including needs assessment, service planning, warm referrals, discretionary benefits
- ✓ Person-centred, connected supports and navigation of broader system (e.g., housing, employment, mental health)

How we will evolve over time:



Integrated client services:

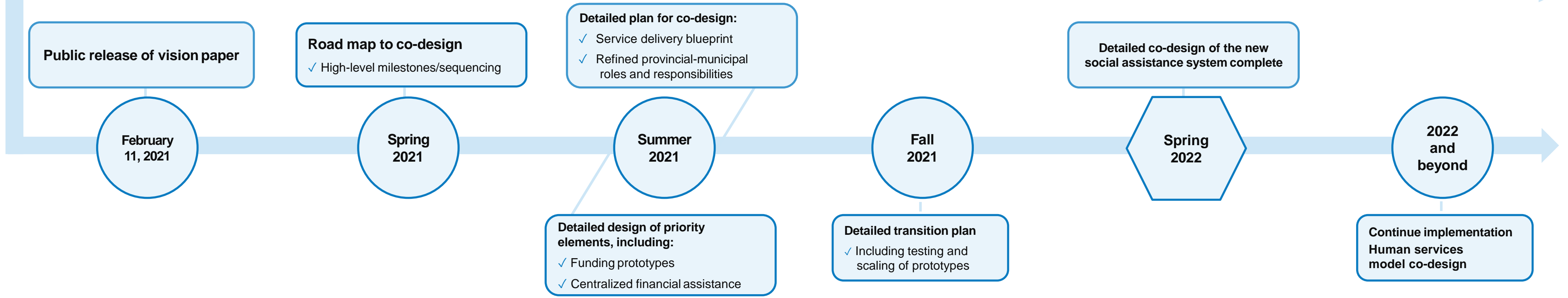


Social assistance: where we're headed

In the short term: co-designing the new social assistance system

Prototype and implement: developing centralized provincial functions, starting with intake, and tools and processes to support life stabilization

Co-design: engaging to design provincial and municipal functions, principles and processes



In the long term: moving to a human services delivery model

- ✓ In the human services model, benefits like social assistance become “tools” in the caseworker toolbox, as opposed to the other way around
- ✓ Caseworkers are knowledgeable about the broader system of benefits and supports, and can guide people to the supports they need – whether Ontario Works or something else
- ✓ People seeking help are triaged by municipal caseworkers, supported as needed, and potentially diverted from social assistance

