



## BOARD REPORT

REPORT No.: 2024-06

MEETING DATE: FEBRUARY 15, 2024

SUBJECT: SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES AND COMMON ASSESSMENT TOOL

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### RECOMMENDATION

THAT with respect to Report No. 2024-06 (Integrated Social Services Division), we The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board, call upon the Premier and the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services to set Basic Needs and shelter rates for Ontario Works according to locally defined market baskets of essential goods, including transportation, telephone, average market rents and a nutritious food basket, that are adjusted annually according to the Consumer Price Index;

AND THAT we call upon the Minister of Children Community and Social Services to provide extensive training to social assistance in order to appropriately use the Common Assessment Tool with participants to address the concerns about the tool that have been raised;

AND THAT a letter enclosing a copy of this resolution and Board Report No. 2024-06 be sent to the Premier of Ontario, the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, local Members of Provincial Parliament, member municipalities, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers' Association, the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

### REPORT SUMMARY

To provide The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB or the Board) with information regarding advocacy related to social assistance rates and the newly introduced Common Assessment Tool (CAT) questionnaire developed by the Ontario Government for use with Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Program.

### BACKGROUND

At the January 18, 2024 meeting of the Board, a letter of advocacy from the Town of Orangeville was received in the Correspondence of the agenda. Following discussion of

this letter, the Board directed Administration to present a report to the Board at the February 15, 2024 meeting on the issues identified in the Town of Orangeville letter.

## COMMENTS

### Ontario Works Assistance Rates (OW rates)

The housing market across the province has become tighter since the COVID-19 pandemic, with greater demand for rental units resulting in escalating rental rates. Social assistance shelter rates are well below average market rent in Ontario, which creates challenges for individuals receiving benefits to access housing in the market and a large shortfall in rent revenue for service managers.

As rent-geared-to-income and community housing is administered by 47 service managers with funding from municipalities, the shortfalls result in higher costs for the service manager and ultimately a considerable impact on the municipal taxpayer. The social assistance shelter rates remaining so low compared with actual market rates act as a deterrent for further investment in new community housing units.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the Basic Needs allowance has not increased since 2018. According to the Bank of Canada, the cost of a fixed basket of consumer products has risen by 18.67% between 2018 and December 2023. This results in significantly less buying power today for recipients of Social Assistance. This also leaves OW recipients unable to afford services such as phone and internet, which have become essential needs.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past several years, TBDSSAB has shared concerns regarding the lack of increase in social assistance rates through various methods, including formal submissions and deputations at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and Rural Ontario Municipalities Association (ROMA) annual conferences. Links to these papers follow:

<https://www.tbdssab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AMO-2022-Increases-to-SA-Rates.pdf>

<https://www.tbdssab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2023-AMO-Increase-Social-Assistance-Rates.pdf>

<https://www.tbdssab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-ROMA-Briefings-Social-Assistance-Rates.pdf>

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<sup>1</sup> Social Assistance Shelter Rates Position Paper January 2024 Rural Ontario Municipalities Association (ROMA) Conference

<sup>2</sup> Bank of Canada Inflation Calculator

The position taken by TBDSSAB in this advocacy is that Ontario Works shelter rates be adjusted to meet market pressures and that the rates be adjusted annually according to the Consumer Price Index.

### **The Common Assessment Tool (CAT)**

The CAT was developed by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development and is mandated for use by Employment Ontario and Ontario Works sites with the goal of determining the suitability of a participant to engage in employment activities and is not considered complete until there is a response for each question.

In addition to demographic, employment and educational history, the CAT has included the Mental Health and Addiction Screener (MHAS). The questions are taken directly from the Global Appraisal of Individual Needs – Short Screener (GAIN-SS). The GAIN-SS is a short tool designed to quickly and accurately screen individuals for possible mental health and/or substance use conditions<sup>3</sup>.

Administration has started to review the questions in the MHAS portion of the CAT and given the inclusion of complex and invasive personal questions, there is concern regarding possible triggering of a participant without the needed resources to refer to mitigate possible issues. Questions that cause concern deal with intimate partner violence; suicidal ideation; and visual and auditory hallucinations.

Moreover feedback, garnered from Service Managers across the Province who have used the CAT, indicates that there are concerns regarding “vicarious trauma<sup>4</sup>” to staff who are working with participants. The concern is not unfounded as the MCCSS user guide for the CAT contains the following statements: “Self-care Caseworkers should prioritize their health and wellbeing when administering CA module 1 with clients. There are residual impacts of stress in the human service industry, and self-care strategies for stress-management are important. Strategies can include both individual and group self-care practices. For example, offices can create local working groups or Community of Practices to give Caseworkers a space to debrief on distressing incidents, discuss experiences with MHAS, and share best practices.”<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association will be directing a letter to MCCSS echoing the concerns of the members regarding use of the CAT.

### **STRATEGIC PLAN IMPACT**

This report aligns with the strategic plan’s advocacy-related objectives financial implications.

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<sup>3</sup> How to Complete the Mental Health & Addictions Screener (MHAS)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vicarious\\_traumatization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vicarious_traumatization)

<sup>5</sup> How to Complete the Mental Health & Addictions Screener (MHAS)

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate financial implications related to this report.

## CONCLUSION

It is concluded that Administration recommends that a letter be sent to the Premier of Ontario, the Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, with the following requests:

### Ontario Works Assistance Rates (OW rates)



To call upon the Premier of Ontario to set Basic Needs and shelter rates for Ontario Works according to locally defined market baskets of essential goods, including transportation, telephone, average market rents and a nutritious food basket, that are adjusted annually according to the Consumer Price Index.<sup>6</sup>

### The Common Assessment Tool (CAT)

To call upon the Minister of MCCSS to provide extensive training in order to use the CAT with participants and to acknowledge concerns, about the tool, brought forward, further the TBDSSAB is in agreement with the Town of Orangeville's resolution, regarding the CAT, dated November 20, 2023.

## REFERENCE MATERIALS

Attachment #1 [Email from the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association enclosing Resolution from Town of Orangeville, dated November 2023](#)

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<sup>6</sup> Advocacy to Increase Social Assistance Rates POSITION PAPER August 2023 AMO Annual Conference



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**Subject:** Town of Orangeville Resolution - Ontario Works Financial Assistance Rates



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Good morning,

Please find attached resolution passed by Town of Orangeville Council at its regular meeting held on November 13, 2023.

Thank you,

**Lindsay Raftis | Assistant Clerk | Corporate Services**

**Town of Orangeville** | 87 Broadway | Orangeville, ON L9W 1K1

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**Corporate Services**

November 20, 2023

**Re: Ontario Works Financial Assistance Rates**

Please be advised that the Council of the Corporation of the Town of Orangeville, at its Regular Council Meeting held on November 13, 2023, approved the following resolution:

**WHEREAS poverty is taking a devastating toll on communities, undermining a healthy and prosperous Ontario, with people in receipt of Ontario Works being disproportionately impacted; and**

**WHEREAS the cost of food, housing, and other essential items have outpaced the highest inflation rates seen in a generation; and**

**WHEREAS people in need of social assistance have been legislated into poverty, housing insecurity, hunger, poorer health, their motives questioned, and their dignity undermined; and**

**WHEREAS Ontario Works Financial Assistance rates have been frozen since 2018; and**

**WHEREAS the newly introduced Common Assessment Tool (CAT) questionnaire developed by the Provincial Government for use with Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Program recipients contains complex and invasive personal health related questions; and**

**WHEREAS the use of the Common Assessment Tool (CAT) provides no benefit to clients, it does not score, provide results, assess client need, and does not match those in need to the services they require; and**

**WHEREAS the Common Assessment Tool (CAT) contains questions mirrored in the Ontario Health Common Assessment of Needs, used by health providers; and**

**WHEREAS** privacy obligations under The Personal Health Information Protection ACT (PHIPA) do not extend to municipal delivery agents for Ontario Works; and

**WHEREAS** designated Service Managers are doing their part, but do not have the resources, capacity, or tools to provide the necessary income and health related supports to people experiencing poverty; and

**WHEREAS** leadership and urgent action is needed from the Provincial Government to immediately develop, resource, and implement a comprehensive plan to address the rising levels of poverty in Ontario, in particular for those on Ontario Works:

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT** The Town of Orangeville calls on the Provincial Government to urgently:

- a. **At least double Ontario Works rates and index rates to inflation, answering calls already made by “Raise the Rates” campaign and the “Income Security Advocacy Centre”;**
- b. **Commit to ongoing cost of living increases above and beyond the rate of inflation to make up for the years they were frozen;**
- c. **Commit to jointly working between the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services and the Ministry of Health on the best methods of assessing client needs and then matching those in need to the services they require;**
- d. **AND FURTHER THAT** a copy of this motion be sent to the Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus, the Eastern Ontario Wardens Caucus, and all Ontario Municipalities

**Carried.**

Yours truly,

Tracy Macdonald  
Deputy Clerk