

2011

Ontario Federation of
Indian Friendship
Centres (OFIFC)

219 Front Street East
Toronto, Ontario
M5A 1E8

Tel: 416-956-7575

Fax: 416-956-7577

Website:

www.ofifc.org



OFIFC SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION FOR THE REVIEW OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN ONTARIO - 2011

Contents

ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIAN FRIENDSHIP CENTRES (OFIFC) 3

ABOUT OUR SUBMISSION 3

URBAN ABORIGINAL DEMOGRAPHICS, POVERTY AND BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT 4

ONTARIO WORKS AND ODSP AND THE URBAN ABORIGINAL POPULATION 7

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMMISSION TO CONSIDER..... 8

 Issue One – Reasonable Expectation and Necessary Supports to Employment 8

 Issue Two – Appropriate Benefit Structure 12

 Issue Three – Easier to Understand..... 14

 Issue Four – Viable Over the Long Term 16

 Issue Five – An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security 17

Conclusion..... 18

APPENDIX - FRIENDSHIP CENTRE LEAD COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS 19

 United Native Friendship Centre, Fort Frances..... 19

 Sault Ste. Marie Indian Friendship Centre 22

 Nishnawbe-Gamik Friendship Centre, Sioux Lookout..... 25

 N’Swakamok Friendship Centre, Sudbury 27

 Ininew Friendship Centre, Cochrane..... 29

 Dryden Native Friendship Centre 30

 Moosonee Native Friendship Centre..... 31

 Red Lake Friendship Centre..... 32

Ontario Works Office Hours		
May	2 nd	2:00 pm - 4:30 pm
	3 rd	8:00 am - 4:30 pm
	4 th	8:00 am - 12:00 pm
May	24 th	2:00 pm - 4:30 pm
	25 th	8:00 am - 4:30 pm
	26 th	8:00 am - 12:00 pm
June	14 th	2:00 pm - 4:30 pm
	15 th	8:00 am - 4:30 pm
	16 th	8:00 am - 12:00 pm
July	5 th	2:00 pm - 4:30 pm
	6 th	8:00 am - 4:30 pm
	7 th	8:00 am - 12:00 pm
July	25 th	2:00 pm - 4:30 pm
	26 th	8:00 am - 4:30 pm
	27 th	8:00 am - 12:00 pm
Aug	15 th	2:00 pm - 4:30 pm
	16 th	8:00 am - 4:30 pm
	17 th	8:00 am - 12:00 pm

Ontario Works Office Hours
Red Lake, August, 2011

ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIAN FRIENDSHIP CENTRES (OFIFC)

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) is an urban Aboriginal organization representing the collective interests of twenty-nine member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout Ontario. The primary mandate of the OFIFC is to advocate with respect to issues of collective concern on behalf of its member Friendship Centres, administer programs delivered in Friendship Centres, assist member Friendship Centres with service and program delivery and community development. The OFIFC administers a number of programs delivered by Friendship Centres in areas such as health and wellness, justice, family support, children and youth initiatives, education, employment, skills development and training. Friendship Centres also design and deliver local initiatives in areas such as economic development and cultural awareness.

The vision of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre Movement is "*to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to and participation in Canadian Society and which respects Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.*"

The OFIFC is dedicated to achieving greater participation of all Aboriginal peoples, inclusive of First Nation/Status/Non-Status, Métis, Inuit and people who identify as Aboriginal - regardless of their location of residence within the province of Ontario, in all facets of Canadian and Ontario society.

ABOUT OUR SUBMISSION

OFIFC Staff attended, with local Friendship Centres, seven of the ten Commission Lead Consultations in the communities of Windsor, London, Hamilton, Peterborough, Thunder Bay, Timmins and Ottawa. Possibly because the greatest percentage of social assistance recipients resided in the GTA and southern regions, the north was largely unrepresented in the Commission lead consultations. The OFIFC recognized the need for greater participation of urban Aboriginal people that reside in northern communities, many of which host a larger percentage of Aboriginal people. The OFIFC facilitated eight Community Conversations with Friendship Centres in the communities of Fort Frances, Cochrane, Dryden, Moosonee, Red Lake, Sault Ste. Marie, Sioux Lookout and Sudbury.

The Friendship Centres invited community members with lived experience with OW and ODSP, program staff that worked with OW/ODSP clients, and outside agencies that would be interested such as local OW/ODSP workers and local social planning members, as well as invitation to local First Nations to participate in the Community Conversations. Overall participation was viewed to be successful with the number of participant turn-out varying from community to community with average turnouts of at least twenty people or more.

The Friendship Centre Lead Community Conversations typically opened up with a Visioning exercise (which also addressed Issue 4 – viable over the long term, expected outcomes) which kept discussions focused around the five issues of concern to the Commission. Through the Conversations, typically the most pressing of the five issues were the first three which seemed to speak more to the concerns of the participants. The last two issues largely dealt with a technical/bureaucratic aspect of the social assistance system which participants felt government would determine. Nonetheless, the five issues were discussed at length with the participants.

The submission provides a summary and overview of the unique conversations that took place for the Commission to consider.

We have developed our submission from a combination of participating in the Commission Lead Consultations with Friendship Centres and facilitating the Community Conversations at Friendship Centres. Together, the input collected from these sessions has largely formed the basis of our submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario and the recommendations it contains.

URBAN ABORIGINAL DEMOGRAPHICS, POVERTY AND BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Ontario has the largest Aboriginal population among provinces comprising 21% of Canada's total Aboriginal population. It has been forecast that in 2017, Ontario will continue to have the highest absolute number of Aboriginal people.¹ Over 80% of Ontario's Aboriginal people live off-reserve with 62.1% living in urban areas.² Most significant is that Aboriginal youth are recognized as the fastest growing population in Ontario, 48% are under the age of twenty-four.³ Further, 35.7% are children and youth aged 19 and under.⁴ Compared to the total Canadian population, Aboriginal peoples have a higher fertility rate at 2.6 children; it is 1.5 for non-Aboriginal women. The portion of very young Aboriginal children (age 0-4) is twice that of non-Aboriginals: 9% compared to 5% and is projected to rise by 28% by 2016, compared to just 1% for the Canadian population.⁵

In 2007, Statistics Canada defined the 'poverty line' (or low-income cut off - LICO) for a single person living in a major city as \$21,666 (before taxes). Canada does not prescribe to a standard measure of poverty. Rather, the most accepted measurement is the LICO. Statistics Canada measures the number of families who are below the LICO, which translates into those who spend 20% or more of their gross income on food, shelter and clothing. This figure is often used as the unofficial 'poverty line'. It is well known that urban Aboriginal people tend to have lower incomes than non-Aboriginal people. Over one in four (29%) urban Aboriginal families lives below the LICO and over one-half (53%) of single urban Aboriginal people live below the LICO.⁶

In 2000, the poverty rate for Aboriginal people in cities was 42.8%, which was more than double the rate for non-Aboriginal people (19%).⁷ Several factors contribute to the high poverty rates experienced among Aboriginal people, including significant barriers to education and employment opportunities. Another important factor that needs to be considered is the high mobility rate of the urban Aboriginal population between and within urban locations as well as between urban and rural settings including the reservation. Frequent mobility between cities and

¹Ministry of Finance, "2006 Census Highlights: Fact Sheet 9", Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/economy/demographics/census/cenhi06-9.pdf>

² Statistics Canada, 2006.

³ Government of Ontario, *Breaking the Cycle, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, 2008, p15

⁴ Statistics Canada, *2006 Census Highlights: Factsheet 9 – Aboriginal Peoples of Ontario*, Ministry of Finance. Available at: <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/economy/demographics/census/cenhi06-9.html>

⁵ Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 15 January 2008. Accessed from:

<http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/080115/d080115a.htm> 26 August 2008

⁶Peter Dinsdale, National Association of Friendship Centres, Presentation to Best Start Conference, March 9, 2010. Available at: <http://beststart.org/events/detail/poverty/Peter%20Dinsdale.pdf>

⁷Urban Poverty in Canada. Available at: http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2007/upp/vulnerable_populations.pdf

reserves is a phenomenon linked to the high rates of urban poverty experienced by Aboriginal people.

Migration from the reserves to urban areas is influenced by the high population on reserves and over crowding because of inadequate housing and a lack of employment and education opportunities. Also to be considered is the high rate of family violence among the Aboriginal population. Factors that influence migration to urban centres include opportunities (or the illusion of opportunities) for employment and education, perception of greater availability of supports and services, hope of adequate housing and the presence of an urban Aboriginal population. One of the top reasons for migration to urban centres for Aboriginal women is to flee violence.

The 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey (Statistics Canada) collected data about Inuit, Métis and off-reserve First Nations children under six years of age living in urban, rural and northern locations across Canada. It was designed to provide a picture of the early development of Aboriginal children and the social and living conditions in which they are learning and growing. In general, the Survey revealed that higher proportions of young Aboriginal children are growing up in large families and are being raised by young parents compared to non-Aboriginal children. The Survey confirmed that close to half of the respondents were living with low-incomes. Particularly distressing is the reality that many Aboriginal women who live below the poverty line tend to use a larger share of their income on the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing than the average family (*Urban Aboriginal Task Force, 2007*). The Survey clearly demonstrates the need for targeted supports for Aboriginal children and their families.

In terms of family violence experienced among the Aboriginal community, Statistics Canada's 2004 *General Social Survey (GSS)* suggests that violence in marriages and common-law unions is a reality that too many Aboriginal women face. It is estimated that 24% of all Aboriginal women experience spousal violence from either a current or previous marital or common-law partner. This is three times higher than the rates of domestic violence faced by non-Aboriginal women. Family violence can lead to physical harm and stresses that impact the mental health and well being of women and children exposed as victims or witnesses.

The experience of family violence has to be considered in the context of social assistance as many times Aboriginal women are either staying in vulnerable situations due to lack of economic and social supports or are fleeing abusive situations to transitional housing and shelters. In Ontario, an evaluation of shelters was conducted which identified that all shelters (15) are involved in helping abused women obtain employment or income support, such as Ontario Works, ODSP and Employment Insurance. However, barriers were identified such as access to long-term income supports as key to these women being able to access and retain housing as the women frequently lack the education and skills necessary to survive independently. Also identified was a lack of understanding of the dynamics of violence which resulted in rules and regulations that ultimately discriminated against women fleeing violence in obtaining housing and supports.⁸

We know that many Aboriginal families in Ontario live in persistent poverty which contributes to chronic crisis situations. The long-term effects of poverty add to the overall poor health outcomes of many Aboriginal children and youth, leaving their futures entrenched in the cycle of

⁸An Evaluation of Shelters as Service Navigation Hubs for Abused Women, Ontario Trillium Foundation, June, 2011

poverty. Far too many Aboriginal families continue to experience poor socio-economic circumstances which lead to stress and an inability to cope with crisis situations, which often lead to incidences of violence in the home.

In terms of housing and homelessness, it is a known fact Aboriginal housing concerns are not isolated from poverty, education, health and employment issues. While not in the purview of this Review, it should be noted that decades of negligence towards the creation of affordable housing has meant that people living on social assistance have extremely narrow options with respect to obtaining safe and secure housing. This has had the effect of reinforcing barriers to health, education and employability. With 23% of the Urban Aboriginal population making less than \$30,000, Aboriginal people have long held the bottom rung of housing affordability, not only on First Nations, but also in Canada's urban and rural environments. Add to this figure, 56% of Urban Aboriginal people rent an apartment or house in need of repair brings new meaning to the term affordable housing especially with over 20% of the off-reserve Aboriginal population in core housing need.

Key Statistics to Consider:

- **Education:** 44% of the on-reserve population and 67% of the urban Aboriginal population in Ontario have completed high school; overall 23% of these Aboriginal high school graduates are less likely to attend a post-secondary institute within two years of graduating. 3% on-reserve and 9% of urban Aboriginal people have a post-secondary degree.⁹ Within the working-age population a large gap continues to exist between the educational attainment of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people.
- **Unemployment rates:** unemployment rate for on-reserve Aboriginal people is 18%; the urban Aboriginal population in Ontario is at 12% compared to 6% for the non-Aboriginal population, with a labour force participation rate of 57% for the on-reserve population and 67% for the urban Aboriginal population.¹⁰
- **Significant wage gaps exist:** the average income of on-reserve Aboriginal people is about \$17,000, urban Aboriginal people in Ontario is about \$28,000 compared to \$38,000 for the non-Aboriginal population.¹¹
- Studies have shown that Aboriginal people tend to work in the service industry and in low-skilled jobs.
- Incidence of low income before tax (2006) among Aboriginal families in populations less than 100,000 is 25.5% compared to 11.2% among non-Aboriginal families and in populations over 100,000 is 31.2% for Aboriginal families compared to 13.8% among non-Aboriginal families.¹²
- Incidence of low income before tax (2006) among Aboriginal individuals in populations less than 100,000 is 50.1% compared to 34.6% among non-Aboriginal individuals and in populations over 100,000 is 58.4% among Aboriginal individuals compared to 37.7% among non-Aboriginal individuals.¹³
- For the percentage of children under age 15 in low income families in populations less than 100,000 is 36.2% for Aboriginal compared to 17.4% for non-Aboriginal and in

⁹Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. Urban Aboriginal People: Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs Quick Facts, 2009. Available at: <http://www.aboriginalaffairs.gov.on.ca/english/services/datasheets/urban.asp>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Fact Sheet – Urban Aboriginal Population in Canada, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. Available at: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/of/ias/fs/index-eng.asp>

¹³Ibid.

populations over 100,000 is 44.8% for Aboriginal compared to 20.5% for non-Aboriginal.¹⁴

ONTARIO WORKS AND ODSP AND THE URBAN ABORIGINAL POPULATION

Ontario moved towards a workfare model with the *Ontario Works Act, 1997* (the Act), and this together with related regulations provides a legislative framework for the provision of employment assistance and financial assistance to help people in temporary financial need. The Ontario Works program follows a series of Policy Directives which delineates the working administrative aspects of the *Ontario Works Act, 1997*. The Act establishes a program that:

- recognizes individual responsibility and promotes self-reliance through employment;
- provides financial assistance to those most in need while they meet obligations to become and stay employed;
- effectively serves people needing assistance, and
- is accountable to the taxpayers of Ontario.

The workfare model of Ontario Works requires people who receive financial aid through social assistance to participate in compulsory labour or service as a condition of their assistance and a human resource strategy which seeks to move recipients off welfare by investing in skills development, job creation and social supports.

Section 7(4) of the Act states that a recipient “may be required as a condition of eligibility for basic financial assistance to:

- a) satisfy community participation requirements;
- b) participate in employment measures;
- c) accept and undertake basic education and job specific skills training; and
- d) accept and maintain employment.”

The difference in administration of Ontario Works on First Nations and off-reserve creates difficulty for individuals in the context of migration patterns from reserves to urban settings. Ontario Works is delivered on-reserve by 100 First Nations delivery agents in 112 communities. Of these, 35 currently deliver the full Ontario Works program, which includes financial support and employment assistance. The remainder deliver financial assistance only. Whether Ontario Works is delivered by a municipality or a First Nation, the rules are the same. However, in situations where First Nations do not deliver the employment assistance component, participation requirements are not mandatory.

The federal government provides First Nations with funding to cover the municipal share of Ontario Works costs and reimburses about 93 per cent of the provincial costs of the program under the 1965 Indian Welfare Agreement. The agreement does not cover ODSP.

Under Ontario Works, recipients are mandated to participate in additional programs, such as:

- *Employment Support*: This program is intended to assist recipients to become job ready. Each municipality or region develops employment supports as it sees fit. These supports may include sessions on job search techniques, workshops on resume writing skills and basic education and training.

¹⁴Ibid.

- *Community Participation:* The community participation program requires that recipients participate in community service (work without pay) in public or not-for-profit organizations. The program is intended to provide recipients with skills to enable them to become "job ready". Recipients perform community participation for a maximum of 70 hours per month.
- *Employment Placement:* People who are deemed as "job-ready" by their case worker are referred to an employment agency or broker to help them find paid work. Recipients are expected to accept any job offer they receive. The agency or broker is contracted by municipal/regional government and paid proportionate to the savings to the welfare system by the recipient having found a job.

In order to receive financial assistance, recipients in Ontario Works are required to sign an Ontario Works "participation agreement" which will bind the individual to participate in one or more of the above Ontario Works programs. Recipients during the first 4 months of receiving social assistance are expected to perform job search activities and are provided with employment supports. After the first 4 months if the recipient has been unable to find a job (any job offer must be accepted) they can be required to participate in the Community Participation or Employment Placement programs whilst still performing a job search. Failure to comply with the Ontario Works participation agreement can result in sanctions.

In terms of social assistance, in 1990, 28.6% of people who identified as Aboriginal over 15 years of age and did not live on-reserve received social assistance. In comparison, for on-reserve Aboriginal people this rate was higher, at 41.5% (RCAP, 1996). As noted by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "[Social assistance] has become the staple of many Aboriginal communities [and have] contributed to the persistence of individual and community economic dependency". Recent data does not exist which identifies Aboriginal social assistance recipients because provincial and municipal governments currently do not differentiate social assistance recipients on the basis of identity. The most recent statistics for on-reserve Aboriginals, however, suggests the pattern has hardly been reversed. In 2003, 34.8% of on-reserve Aboriginals received social assistance, compared to 5.5% for Canada's general population and in some Aboriginal communities social assistance rates were much higher (National Council of Welfare, 2007).

ODSP is delivered directly by the province through the Ministry of Community and Social Services in 9 regional offices and 45 satellite offices. ODSP employment supports are delivered through a network of 150 community-based service providers and are cost-shared (50-50) between the province and municipalities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMMISSION TO CONSIDER

Issue One – Reasonable Expectation and Necessary Supports to Employment

The workfare model tends to shift focus on issues of high welfare rates, blaming the recipient for being poor and lazy, rather than focusing on the causes of unemployment and poverty. There is a perception that social assistance has created a culture of dependency. The reality is Ontario is in an economy where jobs are being eliminated in favour of technology and in the wake of continued downsizing and re-structuring of private sector companies, as well as the loss of jobs

in the public sector. Therefore, it is not surprising that people on the margins have the most difficult time gaining employment. Increasingly, highly skilled and educated people that want to work are finding themselves on social assistance. Studies have shown workfare does not remove people from poverty, nor does it address root cause of poverty tied to low wages, unemployment and access to education and skills for good jobs. It is arguable that current employment supports must go beyond resume-writing seminars and performing menial tasks in community placement will help individuals find permanent, adequately paid employment.

“Training should be connected to a real job, I am 19 and have my high school, how many times do I have to attend WHIMIS and still have no job.”
Sault Ste. Marie Participant

Workfare models do not reduce unemployment or create jobs. Rather, workfare creates a pool of low cost labour. Currently, there is no incentive or focus in Ontario Works for employers to hire people or create jobs. In fact, there is evidence that suggests a workfare model replaces paid workers when employers take advantage of wage subsidy programs that entitle Ontario Works recipient wages to be covered over a term. This has major implications including replacing paid employees with social assistance recipients as it provides a pool of free or subsidized labour. Ontario Works justifies this by being able to say they are providing job training thus making a recipient more employable, the reality is that rarely does this partnership lead to full time meaningful employment.

In the Discussion Paper, an issue was raised that there is a need for better integration of employment and training services provided through Ontario Works, Employment Ontario and the federal Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS). There are currently 16 delivery agents in Ontario providing ASETS programs, some of which overlap with the delivery of Ontario Works employment assistance and Employment Ontario employment services and training. The 2008 Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review found that employment services are not well integrated leaving access confusing and difficult. The report called for partners to simplify and modernize delivery of supports.

Since 2009, MCSS and Service Canada have partnered on various activities to increase the level of cooperation between ASETS and Ontario Works. Specific activities include:

- Communication to all First Nation Ontario Works Administrators advising of ASETS services and supports
- MCSS attending ASETS co-ordinator meetings
- Reaching out to First Nations and Agreement holders that have successful partnerships to learn more about them and best practices
- Ontario Works First Nations Administrators Forum (May 2010)
- Establishing the Coordination of Client Supports Project (January 2011)

The OFIFC is an Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) holder which is funded by Service Canada. The ASETS is the partnership and results-based successor strategy to the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy (AHRDS) and is a key component of the Federal Framework for Aboriginal Economic Development. ASETS is an integrated approach between Service Canada, Ministry of Community and Social Services and Aboriginal Agreement Holders mandated to provide culturally appropriate labour market programming to Aboriginal peoples. The objective of ASETS is to expand employment opportunities by providing culturally appropriate labour market program geared to Métis, Inuit, First Nation and urban Aboriginal populations.

The Employment and Training Program delivery network is comprised of 26 Urban Aboriginal Employment Service Providers housed at Friendship Centres. The Program offers several employment and training services with thirteen program interventions designed for urban Aboriginal peoples. These interventions allow clients to prepare themselves to enter into career oriented employment. The criteria for employment and training interventions is based on providing a means through which urban Aboriginal clients can work towards entering an expanding labour market with the required skills and supports necessary for their long term success. The ASETS agreement has been secured until March 31, 2015.

- A total of three Urban Aboriginal Employment Service Providers received funding to assist the Alternative Secondary School Program housed in Friendship Centres. The purpose of these funds is to assist Friendship Centre's with any costs that will help initiate the program and/or meet the needs of alternative students that will be accessing the program.
- A total of eight Urban Aboriginal Employment Service Providers received funding to hire a Community Career Developer (CCD). Due to funding constraints, these are part-time positions that have a one year contract ending March 2012. The main function of the CCD is to provide outreach and network with private, volunteer and public sectors in order to support, create and enhance employment opportunities for Aboriginal people within their community.
- The Employer Liaison position will work with the Community Career Developers to develop partnerships with unions, colleges, literacy programs, universities, businesses, organizations, etc.

The Alternative Secondary School Within Native Friendship Centres Program (ASSP) was established in 1990 as a result of a research study conducted in 1989, "Native Student Dropouts in Ontario Schools", commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The purpose of the ASSP is to address the needs of disengaged urban Aboriginal students and help them complete their secondary school diploma. The ASSPs are currently being delivered in 11 Friendship Centre sites: London, Sudbury, Fort Erie, Hamilton, Ottawa, Sault Ste Marie, Kenora, Fort Frances, Timmins, Red Lake and Kingston.

Getting a Grade 12 diploma or equivalency is now the minimum education level for getting employment & training in Ontario. The ASSPs provide over 80 students annually the opportunity to achieve credits required to complete their grade 12, transition to mainstream schools or to improve their academic skills. Teachers and student support offices assist individual students and are creative introducing alternative approaches which contribute to student success.

Section 6 of the Act states that employment assistance "may be provided for", which means that while recipients have an obligation to participate in employment-related activities, the program has no obligation to provide employment assistance and recipients have no right to receive it. Any necessary supports to employment should be made available through the following recommendations:

1. Ontario Works develops relationships with Ontario ASET holders in order to optimize outcomes for Aboriginal people on social assistance.
2. Employment mechanisms delivered through the social assistance system should always be connected to sustainable employment through job creation, mentoring, and job action planning developed through active partnership building with community agencies, involved employers and economic development stakeholders.

3. Social assistance must recognize the unique challenges associated with employment seeking in small northern communities, solutions must be crafted from an economic development perspective tied to employment and training opportunities that reflect the region. Supports must also acknowledge systemic barriers unique to isolated northern communities.
4. Employment and training delivered through the social assistance system must include access to specialized training explored, trades and apprenticeship programs, certificates, and degrees. Social enterprise models should be explored in communities to generate employment and training opportunities. Any such support must reflect the local labour market and economy.
5. Partnerships should be explored with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Ministry of Economic Development and Trade and the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines and Forestry.
6. Transitional supports and benefits should be assessed on an individual basis entailing supports geared to families, single moms, life and financial literacy skills, children transitioning from high school, criminal records and CPIC. Transitional supports should include work start-up benefits for transportation, work clothes, and subsidized child care.
7. Support programs like the Regaining Strength Program (employment and training support for women who experience domestic violence) should be supported and expanded.
8. Transitional benefits should reflect regional costs for food, housing and utilities. Benefits and supports should be assessed over three month increments for effectiveness and success.
9. Employment and training supports for clients accessing ODSP should be available locally and connected to community supports for treatment and rehabilitation, including traditional healing methods. ODSP participation agreements must be individualized, be accommodating and based on the nature of the disability with client decision-making.
10. Within the social assistance systems, OW Staff should receive cultural awareness training from a reputable and experienced Aboriginal organisation prior to being in contact with the public in order to foster better communication and understanding with Aboriginal recipients. As well, workers should adopt holistic healing principles to guide their work with the Aboriginal population.
11. The OW/ODSP must take official notice of racism and discrimination in communities and address such inequalities in their everyday working relationship with the Aboriginal population.
12. Employment and training supports should address the unique needs of Aboriginal youth by providing supports and access to life skill building techniques which fosters independence and successful transitioning.

Issue Two – Appropriate Benefit Structure

Ontario Works is an income support program that provides temporary financial assistance to individuals and families during difficult times, such as a period of unemployment. In reality, for many individuals, seniors, single parents and parents of young children, the circumstances around their labour market participation are more complex and they may need long term support.

In 1995, the provincial government, at the start of their commitment to reform welfare, reduced general welfare benefits by 21.6%. The Government of Ontario justified these cuts by claiming that the government was bringing welfare benefits in line with other Provinces, even though living costs in all provinces are not the same. The cuts to social assistance benefits have increased the number of people living in poverty. As well, Ontario Works seems to ignore the compelling figures that show a direct relationship between women on social assistance and domestic violence; domestic abuse and issues of employability; and the poverty of those on social assistance and the health of children.

Recipients who are single women with children are obligated to pursue child and/or spousal support which are not considered exempt from income reporting. Women at risk of violence from their former partner are supposed to be exempt from this requirement, but this exemption is ignored by OW workers.

The Summit III to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women *Final Report: Strengthening the Circle to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women* (2009) focused on how programs and services funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services can be improved to support Aboriginal Women and families who are working to end the violence in their lives. The Summit participants provided a number of suggestions for Ontario Works, Shelters, Counselling, Child Witness programs, Transitional Housing and building capacity in the overall system. From Summit III four themes emerged:

1. Women will be supported as they come forward. Women approach different services and different community members when they start to name the violence in their lives. There has to be a capacity in every community and in service organizations to respond to women who seek support. Minimally, organisations need to be able to acknowledge her experience and refer her to services. Immediate attention needs to be given to ensure that:
 - Services provided to urban Aboriginal women are also available to Northern and remote communities.
 - First Nation women who are in their communities receive the services they require.
2. Services must work together to ensure support is there for women. In many communities there are not enough services or Aboriginal specific services. It will require many different services to work together to support women who want to address the violence in their lives. The primary example was that Ontario Works is a key service that plays a vital role in Aboriginal women's lives when they are addressing violence. They often require a basic income to support themselves and their children. How can Ontario Works support women facing those situations?
3. The response to the violence needs to support all members of the family. The solution to addressing violence is to work with all members of the family and the community to simultaneously ensure safety and support people to stop using violent behaviour in their lives. It is not sufficient to create services that only focus on the women but do not support men to address their violent behaviour.

4. More funding, support, advocacy and awareness for Aboriginal specific programming is needed. While there has been an increased acknowledgement that Aboriginal people have a cultural foundation that can support service delivery, it is not always the case that Aboriginal women can access culturally specific programs.

“Let the Workers and Administrators of the programs eat the ‘Harris Diet’”
Fort Frances participant

In terms of Aboriginal women experiencing violence and accessing Ontario Works in crisis situations, the following goals were identified from Summit III participants:

Goal: Shift the organizational culture of Ontario Works to be able to be responsive and respectful to women who have experienced violence:

Be welcoming and helpful to women. The first phone call needs to be supportive, non-judgmental and not demoralizing. It is the little things – Pictures, words, small tokens of kindness that are not “scheduled” that allow women to feel connected and not alone.

The amount of energy that it takes to navigate and survive the “back & forth” between services is difficult to sustain while in crisis. Some women are still not at the point of recognizing the abuse and are living in the hurt and pain. Often they are not able to ask for the appropriate services. As service providers it is important to always be open because there may be a woman who is suffering.

Goal: Develop policy and deliver programs in a way that is consistent with the Aboriginal community it is meant to serve:

- Ensure that in First Nations communities the political and administrative part of Ontario Works is run separately.
- Address the disparity in funding. Some communities receive more than other communities receive for each case. (Currently there is a court challenge.)
- Train everyone delivering the services including how to manage the emotional dynamics of the job, how to deal with money when the client is a family member or friend.
- Recognize that in many communities, young adults continue to live with their parents but still need to get their own income through Ontario Works.
- Recognize that some communities do not have jobs and continue to invest in employment support programs that support gaining self-esteem and self-sufficiency. (e.g. teaching men to hunt and fish and helping communities grow gardens.)

Goal: Work in an integrated way with Violence Against Women services:

- Train Ontario Work’s workers to understand the issues that face Aboriginal women and how to work with women who are experiencing violence.
- Provide information to women on what is available for them through Ontario Works. At the same time, ensure that Ontario Works staffs have been briefed so they can offer services from Ontario Works and to the community.
- Develop Family Violence Policies for administrators of Ontario Works.

Any changes made to the appropriate benefit structures should reflect the above and following recommendations:

1. For successful transitions to employment, the social assistance system should explore new benefits and supports such as assistance with acquiring a driver’s license, access to transportation, utilities, seasonal clothing, medicine, identification replacement, criminal pardons, local dental care, recreation for children, back to school, access to

emergency support if child support is late or missed, nutritious food supplement, and child care subsidies.

2. Family benefits should not be attributed on the basis of 'head of household' as this creates a significant barrier to escaping a situation of domestic violence for women and her children fleeing an abusive partner.
3. Special benefits should be universal and available to low-income working individuals and families.
4. In the northern regions, benefits such as the northern allowance should increase to account for the cost of housing, transportation, utilities and food.
5. Social assistance benefit rates should increase to accommodate differing shelter rates for market rent and subsidized housing, child care and subsidized child care. A guaranteed annual income supplement should be explored to reduce the effects of poverty.
6. Transitional supports should include pre-employment training for people who have never worked before, budgeting and financial literacy. Supports should be extended to the newly employed and those who are accessing continued education and training through the social assistance system.
7. Transitional supports should include a follow-up support program for clients who are experiencing challenges in successfully transitioning off social assistance.
8. Asset limits currently exacerbate and entrench cycles of poverty. Exemptions should be explored around child support, gifts for children, northern necessities such as snow mobiles and boats for transportation, and honoraria for participating on community committees and First Nation Councils.

"Making OW/ODSP work for the client and not having the client work for OW/ODSP and have personalized OW/ODSP contracts at intake."
Sudbury

Issue Three – Easier to Understand

The 800 rules cited by the Commission are complex and create a system which is inadequately understood, intrusive and imposes a high degree of surveillance under which recipients of both OW and ODSP have to prove and verify on an ongoing basis that they meet all the conditions of eligibility. Recipients are sanctioned with income penalties or forced to repay amounts provided in error. In the context of this overly burdensome and complex administrative landscape there is a high frequency of suspension of benefits for failure to report correctly which destabilizes incomes that are already insufficient.

Many times, Ontario Works have discretionary authority over determining what benefits a recipient may be eligible for. The Northern Allowance is a mandatory amount paid to communities north of the 50th parallel with out year round road access; however, administrators have discretion to provide the equivalent amount to northern communities below the 50th parallel. Due to the high cost of food, shelter and transportation in northern communities, this amount should be reviewed and made more accessible to other communities.

When a child is in the care of a Children's Aid Society, benefits are not reduced for the first month, thereafter, a reduction in assistance may occur after a review has been undertaken to assess whether the child should be included as a dependant. Where a child is a permanent ward, it is not considered a dependant and where a CAS is responsible for the care of the child, the parent is not eligible to receive assistance for the child. As well, when the child is under age 16 and is under temporary care, the child may be considered a dependant for the purpose of maintaining a suitable shelter upon the child's return. These rules are not being consistently applied.

From the discussions, there has been a discretionary application of such benefits to recipients. We have heard of young mothers who immediately have their benefits reduced which creates challenges in meeting CAS requirements for food and adequate preparation to return the child home. Given the high percentage of Aboriginal children involved in child welfare matters, this discretionary application of benefits is unacceptable and more so when the number one cause for child welfare involvement stems from neglect due to poverty related issues.

Any changes to make social assistance easier to understand should reflect the following recommendations:

1. There are far too many rules which are complex and unrealistic for people already on significant economic stress to navigate. In the case of Aboriginal people there is an added cultural dimension; changes must be explored to account for the realities of northern regions, small communities, and Aboriginal people.
2. Benefit formulas should be changed to reflect regional socio-economic realities. Shelter amounts should reflect and accommodate local market rent.
3. Rules for obtaining child support should consider situations where family violence and restraining orders are in place to avoid dangerous predicaments for the client.
4. Rules should change to accommodate families with children to reduce claw backs that result in entrenched poverty for children, including families involved in child welfare.
5. Rules for participation agreements have to be changed to reflect the realities of small and northern communities with little job opportunity or possess a small pool of employers.
6. Youth transition workers should be explored to assist and support youth to foster independence and success.
7. Rules around the discretionary application of rules by OW workers needs to be addressed and made more consistent.
8. Access to social assistance should be lowered to the minimum age of 16 for youth who are transitioning from child welfare, youth justice and have left home early due to circumstances of violence.
9. Benefits should be assessed on individual needs with an agreed action plan or contract which is evaluated over three month increments with specific supports geared to intake,

mentorship, transition to employment & training with the goal of successful transition off social assistance.

Issue Four – Viable Over the Long Term

Although the Act does set out objectives, the Commission is interested in how can those objectives be better clarified and applied. The Commission supplies a few examples of outcomes, such as getting people into temporary or low-paid jobs (which is the current trend). However, to create long term sustainability (especially in northern communities), solutions must be crafted which go beyond simple band-aid solutions only to have recipients return to social assistance, no better off than before.

Tied to improving people's capacity to obtain sustainable employment there needs to be an element of government investment, such as that outlined in the OFIFC response to the Northern Growth Plan, to include increasing the community's capacity in terms of being able to support a sustainable labour force with meaningful and good paying jobs. Northern Growth Plan initiatives should not be exclusive to mining but should also include social supports needed for effective and meaningful community participation in job creation, employment, and economic development. Further, there are emerging areas of overlap, and opportunities for collaboration regarding social programming and education-specific training. Issues exist around recruitment and retention of Aboriginal students, whether it is apprenticeships and/or training-based programs. There is an opportunity for collaboration with the Ministry of Northern Development Mines and Forestry, and the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities to identify priority areas for Ring of Fire mine developments, trades, and employment needs in northern communities and where OFIFC member Friendship Centres deliver services.

Racism exists in northern Ontario to a degree which prohibits the inclusion, participation and engagement of Aboriginal peoples on a consistent basis across all areas of social, political and economic participation. In addition to recommendations put forward with respect to educational attainment, it may be in the Provinces' best interest to develop training specifically around cultural awareness; and have this training implemented to all administrators delivering public services, such as OW/ODSP in Ontario and in particular in the North. This issue must be acknowledged by the Ontario government and we must work collaboratively to educate mainstream Ontarians so that we all benefit from opportunities for this generation and future generations.

Emphasis has to be on facilitating people into employment with adequate support rather than viewing social assistance from a deficit model which views recipients as the problem without looking at the context of the economy and available resources.

Any data collection and assessment models need to be well thought out and purposeful in their objective. To do any less may set up a system which reinforces stigma, racism and discrimination against vulnerable and marginalized populations. Aboriginal people continue to be ranked highest amongst low socio-economic attainment factors. Therefore, any such collection and assessment must include an element of cultural and historical understanding to dispel further damaging data. Supports must be attached to any findings that show need amongst these populations, access to adequate resources can help to equalize any gaps.

Any solutions and measurement assessments under the rubric of long term viability should reflect the following recommendations:

1. Expected outcomes for social assistance should include job creation strategies, assisting clients' transition to meaningful and sustained employment and active involvement in creating partnerships with employers and community agencies and supports.
2. Improvement of worker and client relationships, especially with the Aboriginal population in areas of high density, like northern communities.
3. Social assistance must include element of active partnership building with employers, and communities to create a better quality of life with more opportunities to employment and training.
4. Any data collection and evaluation methods must be tied to non-discriminatory purposes that support the creation of increased supports to improve outcomes in areas where deficits are shown, such as supports for the Aboriginal population which increase opportunities at par with the non-Aboriginal population.
5. Integration should begin with establishing consistencies and better communication within the social assistance system internally. Municipal services should better integrate to create a one-stop intake process for services to reduce administrative duplication.
6. Any integration process should include awareness training with holistic approaches around poverty, mental health and addictions, and risks associated to homelessness.
7. Implementation of the OFIFC response recommendations to the Northern Growth Plan.

Issue Five – An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Issue five was one of the more challenging questions for participants to consider. For many, integration of services began with municipal OW and provincial ODSP administrators; methods to reduce inconsistency among workers should first be explored. There is a perception that workers use their discretionary power far too often when determining and disclosing appropriate benefits. Participants felt that municipal integration of services would be beneficial in lessening duplication and run around.

The *Urban Aboriginal Task Force Final Report* (UATF, 2007) highlights clearly the need to address duplication of services across levels of government, at the level of social service provision. Much greater dialogue is necessary between municipal service providers and Aboriginal service providers. Research and experience has shown that Aboriginal people prefer to receive services that are Aboriginal designed, developed and delivered in an Aboriginal cultural context and that better outcomes are obtained in this manner. Therefore OW/ODSP must work to identify better collaborations to increase efficiencies and optimal use of social services and benefits in the province.

Challenges facing Friendship Centre sites are inadequate and stagnant funding levels, lack of mental health and addictions facilities and resources, lack of emergency and transitional housing facilities and challenges associated with developing partnerships with other stakeholders, such as municipalities and mainstream agencies.

The following recommendations should be considered when considering an integrated Ontario position on income security:

1. Implementation of UATF recommendations as they pertain to OW/ODSP.
2. Social assistance should allow clients to collect eligible Employment Insurance hours while on job placement which they can apply towards Employment Insurance establishing access to more training supports.
3. Income tested benefits typically are assessed on a regressive scale. Any income earned amounts should allow for assessment to begin above the LICO, preferably beginning at incomes earned over \$35,000 to ensure people stay out of the cycle of poverty.
4. A tri-partite commission should be established to evaluate and modernize the 1965 Welfare Agreement.

Conclusion

Ontario has answered the call for a Social Assistance Review which has come at a critical juncture in the development of a social assistance system which improves the quality of life for people in Ontario. A movement towards positive outcomes to increasing sustainable employment and the long-term well-being of people will require dedicated and sustained efforts at the level of policy, resources and commitment across all sectors of government. Without concerted effort by all sectors involved in improving the well-being of those most marginalized, results will be limited and a system will remain which is punitive, has negative financial eligibility and is based on a coercive workfare model. Such a system contributes to the rise of poverty and unemployment.

We thank the Commission for this opportunity to contribute to the work of creating a new social assistance system based on the needs of real people. We look forward to receiving the Commission's Options Paper in December. We would be happy to further discussions that our submission may generate. The OFIFC remains determined and dedicated to improving the quality of life for urban Aboriginal people in Ontario by building community capacity to effect sustained healthy intergenerational change within the family and community, to strengthen and increase community partnerships and bring forward concerns that are unique to the needs of urban Aboriginal people to all levels of government.

APPENDIX - FRIENDSHIP CENTRE LEAD COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

United Native Friendship Centre, Fort Frances

Issue 1 - Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

Participants were asked to consider what employment supports, education and training programs would be needed to get the type of career they want. Participants identified that any employment supports, education and training programs offered through social assistance should reflect the local labour market and economy. The goal of such supports and programs should be based on the needs of local community in order to create a successful and meaningful transition into the local workforce. In addition, Employers should be mandated to keep clients employed beyond the subsidy period to create more sustainable employment opportunities. The main goal of creating these supports is to create a locally sustainable labour force. And finally, programs like the Regaining Strength Program (was offered at the Seven Generations Educational Institute) should always be available. This is a federal program which provides life skills, essential skills, job preparation training, and job placement for women faced with challenges related to domestic violence.

Additional supports in the community would need to be in place to encourage successful transitioning from social assistance to meaningful employment. Participants identified that additional supports such as access to affordable and safe child care, transportation, and the ability to continue receiving benefits for a period of time in circumstances where transitioning will prove difficult because of part-time employment and the standard three month waiting period for full-time benefits.

Participants were asked to consider how much influence they thought they had over the activities they had to meet in their participation agreements. Participants felt like they had no influence or control over their participation agreements and that workers were typically insensitive to their situations. Participants identified that because they live in a small community, it has become increasingly difficult to meet these agreements and that employers have even refused to sign their job seeking sheets. Many times, participants expressed the feeling that the process is too sporadic and doesn't include partnerships with community agencies.

Participants were asked if they had experienced any problems receiving benefits because of the participation agreement requirements. In response, participants largely felt that yes, they had experienced problems to the point of being cut-off because of some requirement that needed to be met. There is a lack of consistency between workers and services are not integrated within the municipality so there is a lot of repetition to gather information and paper work between OW and Housing services.

Participants identified barriers in Fort Frances, such as the lack of affordable child care, transportation, jobs (casual or part-time or require a skill), and there is racism and discrimination. Criminal records checks were also viewed as a barrier as employers are increasingly requesting clean checks as a condition to employment. Some solutions participants came up with include a benefit that assists clients with replacing Identification, increasing child care and expanding the Dial-A-Ride program funded by Ministry of Transportation and the Town of Fort Frances¹⁵). Employers should be more accommodating in terms of criminal records check and review them individually, as this only increases barriers for vulnerable people to gain meaningful employment.

¹⁵<http://fort-frances.com/files/dialaride.pdf>

In terms of the social assistance system connecting people with disabilities to employment services, or treatment or rehabilitation they may need, poses the question of whether this will become part of the assessment and reporting process to become eligible for social assistance. If so, such a path will only serve to increase client stigma. Consideration of local services available for such treatment and rehabilitation will have to be evaluated. Currently, local services for treatment have long waiting lists and even medical/dental treatment is difficult as many times clients have to travel. Proper supports must be in place to support the family otherwise there is always the possibility that child welfare involvement may occur.

Further, if people were required to sign participation agreements in order to be eligible for ODSP may increase barriers. Participation agreements for ODSP clients will have to be individualized and accommodating and must be reflective of the region.

Issue 2 - Appropriate Benefit Structure

In terms of social assistance rates, participants were asked what basic needs they had that they cannot afford right now. Participants listed items such as: driver's licence, transportation, phone, cable and internet, seasonal clothing, medicine, and market rent. Participants identified that there is a perception among workers that because a client may have Indian Status their health benefits are covered and do not disclose benefits they may otherwise be eligible to receive. Participants identified items they would need help with if they were transitioning into a job and leaving OW/ODSP, such as proper work clothing, being able to keep subsidized housing and child care spaces, medical benefits, proper identification, and criminal pardons. There should also be supports such as pre-employment training for individuals who have never worked before. Participants suggested that the social assistance system develop protocols that have a holistic approach to work with communities.

Participants were asked that if government wants to make sure that people are better off working, what should happen. Participants identified that government should be focused on creating more jobs in the north and that these jobs need to be sustainable and accessible. Government should be investing into communities and agencies that support the most vulnerable population, like the Friendship Centre.

In terms of asset limits, participants identified that these should be changed as it really limits their potential to get back on their feet. As the system stands, it penalizes an individual and entrenches them in a cycle of poverty.

In terms of the Special Diet Allowance, Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities and Temporary Care Assistance benefits, participants identified that these should be increased and be readily accessible as well as be available as you are transitioning off of OW/ODSP. If these extra benefits were no longer part of social assistance, it would mean more stress and poverty and that children would suffer and child welfare apprehension may result.

Issue 3 - Easier to Understand

In terms of easier to understand rules, participants were given the task to identify rules that are not working and the impact each rule has had on their life and family. Participants identified the following challenges with rules and their effect:

- Make rules understandable and equal – cut out 790 rules, keep it simple
- Clients should be able to bring an advocate to them understand the rules

- Housing and Intake should work together
- Not knowing the scale of benefits, how they are determined and clawed back
- Benefit formulas should reflect the region
- Shelter amounts should reflect the local market cost
- Child Support - is challenging when you have a restraining order or you get accused of stalking – workers have said to stalk the father on Facebook! This creates a dangerous situation when there is already a high incidence of family violence in the community
- There are too many deductions – child support (which is for the kids), small winnings from Bingo – there are no breaks and you can't get ahead
- Employers have to sign your job seeking list, in this small community they are overwhelmed with resumes and having to sign for OW clients – many have begun to refuse to sign
- It is embarrassing because there are no jobs
- The requirements are not realistic

Issue 4 - Viable Over the Long-Term

The Community Conversation in Fort Frances did a visioning exercise which asked participants to think about one thing they would change about the social assistance system in Ontario. From the visioning exercise, participants identified five themes which focused on:

- Improving the worker/client relationship, especially with the urban Aboriginal population
- Increasing benefit and asset amounts with the addition of transitional support,
- Service provision based on individual client needs,
- Consistency among workers and
- Providing local ODSP support.

Participants were then given the task of identifying what the purpose of social assistance should be. Participants identified that the main purpose of social assistance in Ontario should be focused on being involved in assisting clients get work, including job creation strategies, and to work more closely with and possibly integrate within the local community.

Participants discussed what additional data should be collected to assess the effectiveness of social assistance and should ethno-cultural and racial data be collected. The notion of collecting ethno-cultural data by the social assistance system raised the question as to why and what difference will this data pose. Collecting specific ethno-cultural data would be acceptable if it is tied to establishing more supports geared to this population and that the collection would have to have a purpose, otherwise, it could pose racial profiling and increase discrimination among vulnerable populations.

In terms of integrating services between the province and municipalities, it was suggested that the social assistance system needs to better integrate internally to create consistency among workers. Municipalities should integrate their Housing, Child Care and Children's services better with social assistance which would alleviate clients having to duplicate the intake process. Tied with integrating services is the notion that service providers need to change their attitudes and behaviours when working with vulnerable populations. Participants identified that many of the workers they have come across have not been sensitive and helpful.

Issue 5 - An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Participants suggested that Ontario should allow social assistance clients to collect eligible Employment Insurance hours while they are on a job placement so they can apply hours

towards application for Employment Insurance. There are more training and re-training opportunities associated with collecting Employment Insurance than with social assistance.

Income tested benefits, such as the WITB and child benefits are typically assessed on a regressive scale, meaning the more money you make the less benefits you will receive. Participants discussed how such a regressive scale undermines a family's ability to rise above poverty while working. It is not known at what income level government begins scaling back these benefits. Participants suggested that government should allow families to earn at least over \$35,000 annually before they begin to scale back benefits, otherwise what incentive is there to work?

In terms of other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance that participants could suggest is to re-evaluate the 1965 Welfare Agreement in Ontario.

Other Suggestions not covered:

- There should be a supplemental benefit for breast feeding mothers.
- Social Assistance should be more user friendly.
- Poverty is stressful, many times families are put in crisis situations, the social assistance system should be more cognizant of this.
- The social assistance system should focus on families and children to ensure they have a better future.
- The benefits are just not enough; many times parents will go hungry to feed their children.
- Workers have lost sight of why they are there.
- Social assistance should cover birth control.
- We are not on social assistance because we want to be, we want a better life, but there are no jobs and everything is so expensive.
- Don't lump everyone on Social Assistance as 'milking the system' and penalize everyone.
- If you are in subsidized Housing they want you to be on OW. One young woman wanted to live off her child support and child benefits. Local housing officials said she had to be on OW to keep her subsidy. She went on OW and her child support was deducted, she only received \$150 in benefits.

Sault Ste. Marie Indian Friendship Centre

Issue 1 - Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

Participants were asked to discuss what employment supports, education and training programs they would need to get the kind of career they want. Participants identified that social assistance should provide supports geared to single moms to learn new skills, take part-time classes and help them transition into post-secondary education. There should also be supports for families with children who are transitioning from high school, especially working low-income families whose children do not qualify for OSAP. Social assistance could also provide supports and access to trades and apprenticeship programs. Participants suggested that any training supports offered has to be meaningful and connected to employment, it is not enough to attend a training session on Smart Serve and not be connected to an employer. Basic training on budgeting, money management and financial literacy would be a good workshop but there needs to be more connection with employers. Social assistance could also look at various social enterprises to give clients work related experience while generating a revenue and wage for the clients and municipality.

In terms of other supports needed to be able to work, participants identified that start-up supports need to include transportation (such as bus passes), work clothes and access to affordable child care spaces. Employers need to become involved and practice inclusionary policies with access to mentorship programs for clients.

Participants were asked to identify how much influence they had over activities they had to meet in their participation agreements. Inconsistencies regarding requirements among workers were experienced by participants, which in their view stemmed from racism and discrimination. Communication between worker and client also arose as an issue. In terms of contacting employers, many participants experienced no call-back or follow-up from potential employers and felt the process did not go anywhere as they are still left unemployed. Participants identified that the process has to be connected to employers actively engaging clients with work opportunities as there seems to be no hires stemming from the process. In addition to the participatory agreement, there should be opportunities tied to job creation with work experience that is sustainable and wages that are comparable.

Participants were asked how the social assistance system can better connect people with disabilities to employment services, or treatment, or rehabilitation. Participants identified that services would have to be assessed on an individual basis and suggest appropriate services or options available. OW workers would need training in addictions and mental health, as well as sensitivity training. Communities do not have enough supports so an investment in community supports would have to be increased. Participants acknowledged that there does not seem to be enough supports for men in the community.

Participants were also asked that if people were required to sign a participation agreement in order to be eligible for ODSP it would have to be done on an individualized basis and determined on the nature of the disability.

Issue 2 - Appropriate Benefit Structure

In terms of appropriate benefit structure, participants were asked what basic needs they had that they could not afford right now. The following is a list of items participants had difficulties paying for on a monthly basis:

- Internet, phone, and cable
- Bus pass
- Stuck in a borrow-to-pay cycle
- Dental care and medication expenses
- Adult and children's clothing
- Education (support, books, computers, fees)
- Shoes
- Extracurricular activities for kids (e.g. Sports)
- Back to school and winter clothing allowances
- If child support payments are late or missed there is no emergency support
- Nutritious food, have to access food banks
- Child care
- On OW, waiting for disability, can't do participation agreements

Participants were then asked to identify the most important thing they needed help paying for if they were transitioning into a job and leaving OW/ODSP. Participants identified the following:

- Child care
- Medical/dental
- Transportation
- Clothing allowance
- Continuation of subsidized rent
 - in SSM flat rate for subsidized housing is a % of income
 - lack of housing, 3 year waiting list
- Budgeting and financial literacy
- Need more transitional support.

Participants were asked that if government wants to make sure that people are better off working, what should happen. Participants identified that if government really wanted to lift people out of poverty there should be a guaranteed annual income supplement. The social assistance system should extend support and continue benefits for people who are newly employed and those who are continuing their education. Current market rent is high; there should be a mechanism which controls rent so it is more affordable.

In terms of asset limits and income rules, participants identified that these should be changed. Child support should be exempt, common-law couples should be able to claim separate benefits and that allowable income earned should be increased to allow for people to get off social assistance.

In terms of the Special Diet Allowance, Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities and Temporary Care Assistance benefits, participants identified that the special diet allowance should be universal and available outside of the social assistance system. There is also the notion that families who are on assistance and have a special needs child will voluntarily have CAS place the child in care because the benefit is not enough, foster parents receive higher rates.

Issue 3 - Easier to Understand

Participants were asked to identify rules they felt were not working and the impact each rule had on their life and family. The following is a list participants came up with:

- Living common-law – should be individual
- Gifts (monetary) for children should be exempt
- Youth jobs subtracted from ODSP checks of parents
- Look at age and circumstances, young teen moms are not eligible for social assistance until their child is born
- There is not support for youth transitioning from CAS
- Sault Ste. Marie needs more youth social assistance workers
- Food vouchers
- Dependant allowance, even if kids aren't in the home or are home part-time
- Re-diagnosis on long-term health issues every year is an issue
- Support payments, no emergency support until money is received
- Mom has to chase parent (father) for child support but the money comes off her check
- Having to name father can be dangerous when fleeing violence
- Rules about I.D., lateness and documentation

Issue 4 - Viable Over the Long-Term

The Community Conversation in Sault Ste. Marie did a visioning exercise which asked participants to think about one thing they would change about the social assistance system in Ontario. From the visioning exercise, participants identified three themes which focused on:

- Increase benefits
- Transportation
- Consistency among workers

Participants were asked to discuss what they thought the purpose of social assistance should be. Participants identified that the purpose of social assistance should include creating a living environment where people can achieve sustained employment, that assistance benefits should be assessed on individual needs with an action plan or contract that is evaluated after a period of time for success. Participants felt that the social system as it is does not do enough to ensure people achieve meaningful employment and that transitional supports should be included which are integrated with other municipal services, such as housing and child care. There needs to be an element of partnerships with employers to encourage sustained employment.

In terms of the collection of ethno-cultural data, participants questioned the relevance it would have to social assistance, more specifically what would the purpose serve. There would have to be benefits tied to the collection, in terms of outcomes of supports geared to vulnerable populations. It should be collected with caution because of discrimination and racism, would this reinforce stereotypes. Participants considered the fact that 45% of OW recipients lived in the GTA compared to 6% living in the north and felt that the Commission would focus on GTA issues.

Issue 5 - An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

The Sault Ste. Marie Community Conversation did not have enough time to adequately answer this section. However, participants identified that the social assistance system should integrate more with other services in the municipality and in the province.

Nishnawbe-Gamik Friendship Centre, Sioux Lookout

The Sioux Lookout Community Conversation opened up discussions with brainstorming some of the local issues with social assistance and the Aboriginal community. Participants identified a number of issues which could be summarized in themes. In the interest of brevity they are summarized as follows:

- Migration off- and on-reserve creates issues between accessing social assistance in town or on a First Nation.
- Issue of trust and stigma with OW workers and employers as an Aboriginal person
- Need more educational opportunities to succeed
- Benefits need to increase, especially shelter allowance
- Child care
- Drug abuse
- FASD as a disability, lack of diagnostic clinics and support
- Lack of health, mental health and Traditional healing services
- Lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity within the community

Issue 1 - Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports

What mechanisms should be established to ensure that the needs of employers are addressed and to connect people receiving social assistance with employers?

- Improved capacity, i.e. more staffing, childcare space, wage subsidies

- Need for specialized positions within Administration, which is currently not the best practice for small Northern communities
- More mentoring programs
- Promote employer subsidies
- Full wage subsidies for employers

Issue 2 - Appropriate Benefit Structure

Considering the potential for increased costs, what new benefits, if any, should be provided to all low-income individuals and families, whether or not they are receiving social assistance?

- Review the shelter allowance component of OW
- Separate channels of employment and financial
- Different models of programming
- Education subsidies and incentives
- More flexible supports, i.e. on a drop in basis

Issue 3 - Easier To Understand

Are the rules meeting their objectives? Are there rules that are not working? What changes do you suggest?

- Issue of discretionary application of the rules
- Realign form processes
- Simplify the literary of the application
- Continuity across on/off-reserve
- Address discrepancies between OW/ODSP
- Online application not user friendly, especially for individual who may not even have basic computers skills
- Must be culturally appropriate

Issue 4- Viable over the Long-Term

What should the expected outcomes be of social assistance?

- More focus on quality than quantity
- Less focus on statistics
- Focus on success stories
- Identity-gender/cultural usage (recognize)
- Focus on long-term training, right now the system prohibits long term training w/ lack of coordination
- Smaller Northern communities are stretched in terms of administration capacity

Issue 5- An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

What should Ontario do to address the short-term income support and training needs of people who are not eligible for Employment Insurance?

- Lack of cohesion across shelters and child protection agencies
- Separate employment and financial services for OW (only in northern communities is this the case)
- Lifting restrictions on longer Employment Insurance funding periods
- Establish a “built in benefit until Employment Insurance is delivered, often there is a 6-8 week delay.

Do you have suggestions on other areas of federal-provincial interaction related to social assistance?

- Lack of communications

- Understanding of local/provincial and federal delivery, especially for Aboriginal people
- Opportunities for continuous training
- Too many limitations

N'Swakamok Friendship Centre, Sudbury

Issue 1 - Reasonable expectations and necessary supports to employment

Participants identified barriers to employment, such as education. Many of today's decent paying jobs require specialized training, certificate or degree. The demand for subsidized child care is increasing as parents are finding it challenging to cover the cost of non-subsidized childcare. Transportation is another barrier participants identified, as bus fares continue to rise and some employment opportunities would require a vehicle. Subsidized housing has long waiting lists and it is very difficult to find affordable safe housing. Market rent is just too expensive.

Participants were asked to discuss reasonable expectations and supports to employment. Participants clearly identified that benefits should match the cost of living according to regions and locations to cover basic needs of food, housing and utilities. Training supports should be based on the needs of the local labour market and with input and choice from the client.

Sudbury participants focused their discussions around supports for youth because of the high population and also because youth were seen as the future and needed these supports to succeed.

Social assistance should not just be about the money but should focus on training and preventative measures. Youth should have access to increased training supports to encourage independence and financial literacy. Social assistance must also be careful about creating dependency, but can not lump everyone together, there has to be a measure of individual case planning. The notion of personalized contracts were discussed where clients can take ownership of their success and where the process is reviewed and assessed at 3, 6 and one year increments. Supports should be open to younger youth, those that do not have a stable home, are in care or transitioning out and those who are homeless to prevent homelessness, engaging in criminal activity or drug abuse as a source for money and security. In terms of treatment and rehabilitation, there should also be a choice and access to alternative treatment options, such as traditional methods and circles. There needs to be an increase of cultural sensitivity training for the workers.

Issue 2 - Appropriate benefit structure

In terms of appropriate benefits, participants identified that current benefit rates are not enough to live on and that they should change to reflect the poverty line (LICO). Current shelter allowances should match market rent indexes. Earning should be gradually deducted from a low percentage scale and as employment becomes stable deductions could be raised to ensure a smoother transition into full-time employment. Participants cautioned about creating dependencies, as well as defining what dependency means, there would have to be a balance. Employment supports should be increased and seen as an investment. Asset limits should allow for savings to assist with transitioning off.

Issue 3 - Easier to understand

In terms of rules, participants all agreed that the current rules are not working and leave clients feeling like they are criminals and have no rights. The current structure does not allow for client empowerment, the forms are intimidating, long and complex. Another issue brought up in

discussion was the CPIC; rules seem to be inconsistent across communities with varying rates for getting the document.

Participants gave the following suggestions for the Committee to consider in terms of solutions for making rules easier to understand:

- Encourage Aboriginal people to work in OW support positions
- Youth prevention component - teach financial planning and provide alternative supports to parents on social assistance so children are less likely to access social assistance
- Have OW workers come to Friendship centres once a week
- Communicate rules so they are easily understood
- Prepare personalized contracts as part of intake
- Practical (individually tailored) budgeting and financial planning
- Job fairs and life skills training should be offered
- Lower minimum access to age 16 to include youth transitioning from home
- For youth, the system needs to take the role of guidance and mentorship and empowering clients to make positive choices in the future.
- For adults entering the system, the focus needs to be one that helps them to acknowledge past choices and learning new behaviours for this different stage in their adult lives.

Another suggestion was a change to the contract process. Current process is described as intimidating, long and confusing. The legal jargon excluded many clients from understanding, leaving them feeling as if the contract was working against them. Participants put forth the idea of personalized contracts that set forth 3, 6 and 12 month goals with a plan for transitioning off OW in a way that fit with clients' particular needs (including job satisfaction). This approach was preferred because participants felt that it encouraged ownership of their own success and choices with an increased sense that OW was working with them as opposed to against them.

Finally, the idea of home visits and more engaged relationships with OW workers was suggested by participants. They stated such an approach helped OW/ODSP workers to better understand the context of clients' struggles and barriers. A developed client understanding will help workers to become more engaged and find more innovative, individualized approaches to helping clients achieve their goals.

Issue 4 - Viable over the long term

As part of the visioning exercise, participants were asked to consider one thing about OW/ODSP they would want to change. From the discussions, three themes emerged as follows:

- Increasing benefits and subsidized housing
- Sensitivity and cultural training, increased communication and coordination among OW workers
- Introducing individualized supports

Participants were asked what they thought the purpose of social assistance should be. Participants identified that social assistance should include awareness, training, support and mentorship/advocacy.

- Participants suggested that awareness training on poverty, mental illness and risk factors to homelessness should be a priority as well as a focus on prevention and planning.

- Training could include supports and incentives to training and education through funding opportunities, access to transportation, career counselling and financial management strategies.
- Supports could include individualized service plans; home visits; different support workers at different stages such as intake, mentorship, transitioning off assistance; daycare, nutritional support, support and build upon community supports such as Friendship Centres and justice supports.
- Mentorship and advocacy could include partnerships in community capacity building, focus on client advocacy, success stories and creating environments of compassion and understanding.

The main themes as discussed focused on awareness and the importance of individual attention to clients (equality in outcomes and not in process). A barrier to awareness identified included the attitude of some OW workers treating clients like they were lesser or a burden because they are on OW/ODSP, treating them like a number, like criminals or like they are stupid and lack understanding. Overall, the lack of compassion, understanding and support were some of the things identified as barriers to coordination, cooperation, awareness and most importantly, partnerships and relationships in working to support OW/ODSP recipients in ways that maintain their dignity and self worth.

Participants discussed different roles for workers to support clients at different stages of their OW experience. An intake worker, a support person for the adjustment and learning period (someone to deal with barriers the client may be facing, addictions, mental illness, lack of skills, trauma, etc.) and a transition worker to help clients successfully off OW with follow-up to ensure a low likelihood of returning.

While for government, this suggestion translates to more resources and more workers, it should not be easily discounted. It could also mean a shift in focus (not seeing clients as burdens wanting to cheat the system, but rather as the system being invested in the success of individuals who would contribute to the growth and success of diverse and sustainable communities). It should also be seen as workers working more efficiently and more coordinated with existing resources and changes to systems that are not working.

Issue 5 - An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Participants in Sudbury did not have enough time to talk about this issue in detail; some aspects relating to this issue were brought up when talking about the other four issues, namely coordination, priorities, responsibilities and change of outlook.

Innew Friendship Centre, Cochrane

Participants engaged in a visioning exercise which asked them to think of one thing they would change about the current social assistance system. Participants identified that benefits need to increase to reflect the increased cost of living with income measures geared to the market cost of housing. Social assistance supports need to make domestic violence issues a priority, such as re-location assistance and fast tracking supports. Eligibility and assessment guidelines need to be better clarified from workers with better overall communication and attitude of workers. Training supports need to be reflective of the local workforce to be meaningful and successful. Participants also identified a need for supports to help clients know their rights and advocate with them.

Issue 1 - Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

In terms of employment and training supports, participants identified that employers need longer term incentives for hiring clients. OW should be connecting clients with employment through action planning and lengthening subsidized wages for the employer. Training opportunities should focus on a client's strengths and career choice in conjunction with the local job market. Any training opportunities must be tied to supports such as childcare, be local, include transportation and cover any certificate (CPR, Fork Lift, WHMIS or Fall Arrest, etc.) and special clothing required (steel toe work boots, safety equipment, office attire, etc). Social assistance employment and training supports should be tied to working with community agencies, be flexible, include cost of living, diet allowance and medical benefits beyond the transition period.

Issue 2 - Appropriate benefit structure

Participants identified the following basic needs that they can not afford such as, affordable housing, utilities, child care, nutritious food, seasonal clothing for children, back to school necessities for children, and laundry is expensive(washer and dryer).

Participants identified that if they were transitioning off of social assistance, they would need help with insurance, transportation, seasonal clothing, and child care (which accommodates shift work). Participants identified that social assistance has to be connected to creating longer, sustainable jobs to increase people getting off OW. Short-term jobs or contracts will not educe long term economic success of clients.

Dryden Native Friendship Centre

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Expectations and Necessary Support to Employment

In Dryden, participants engaged in a visioning exercise and discussed changes they would like to see in the social assistance system. Participants identified that benefits need to increase and reflect the cost of living in a northern environment. Many times expenses are paid out of pocket, such as utilities, telephone, transportation and basic entertainment, all of which make it difficult to get ahead. In Dryden, there is a lack of public transportation which hinders a person's ability to get and maintain employment. The cost of food is expensive and winters can be harsh, also there is a lack of service located in the community. Participants identified that all the claw backs associated with getting employment are too much to sustain a successful transition off assistance; subsidized housing is immediately clawed back. In terms of ODSP, there is no employment training for those that can and do want to work which will have to be accommodating and modified. ODSP is clawed back if a spouse collects CPP (which is minimal), clients should be able to keep minimal allowances. Participants identified that racism and discrimination exists in Dryden. OW workers are viewed as having racist attitudes and are not helpful, especially when clients are filling out the forms. There is a perception that status clients have their medical paid for by INAC, but OW workers need to understand that this is not always the case.

Participants discussed the purpose of social assistance as a system that eliminates barriers and creates opportunities through increased educational and training supports for long term employment. In order for a successful system that meets the needs of Aboriginal people, cultural sensitivity training and historical trauma for workers should be done. Participants identified that clients on OW/ODSP are stressed out for many reasons, such as constant fear of being cut-off, children being apprehended because of poverty related issues and racism and discrimination in the community. The social assistance should adopt a more holistic approach.

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

Participants discussed basic needs they have challenges covering such as the cost of shelter, utilities, child care, transportation, and nutritional food. Many times clients have to make a choice of either paying rent, hydro or eating, they can not afford all expenses. Participants would like to see benefits increase to improve the quality of life and supports in the community such as homeless shelters. Social assistance benefits should also include benefits for the working poor considering the high cost of living in the north.

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

Participants identified that social assistance rules need to be understandable, minimized and easier for clients to access the application process. Municipalities must take on leadership roles and connect with the community, especially the Aboriginal community. Rules have to be considerate of cultural differences and accommodating because of these with the Aboriginal community.

Issue 4: Viable over the Long Term

In terms of long term viability, OW/ODSP should fundamentally move towards a focus on creating a better quality of life with more opportunities to employment and training. Follow-up and support programs should be put in place to ensure that participants are not stuck in a cycle of poverty. Specific links connected to employers and participants (including temp services) should be part of social assistance. Flexibility of benefits, especially while transitioning off OW/ODSP should be part of a clients plan. As well, there should be incentives for OW/ODSP clients to become entrepreneurs.

Issue 5: An Integrated Position over the Long-Term

Ontario should allow participants who have had a long history of working access to Employment Insurance. As well, clients should be able to access locked-in benefits, such as CPP that clients may have paid into. In addition, specific employment and training programs targeted to young people should be considered in order to meet their unique needs and provide a sustainable future.

Moosonee Native Friendship Centre

Issue 1 - Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

In terms of social assistance supports for employment and training, there needs to be supports that assist with sustainable job creation and maintenance to reflect the reality of living in northern remote communities. Supports have to be cognizant of the cycle of resource extraction jobs, included is child care that is flexible and accommodating. Employers have to be supported with subsidies and funding for training to enhance clients' skills and development. There is high job competition in the north.

Participants identified the high need for access to transportation (they come from fly-in communities) and access to child care that is both affordable and flexible (work is not always a standard work day – shift and 2 week in/out).

In Moosonee, the social assistance system has to take into account the realities of living in a northern remote community. It is unrealistic to send clients on job searches when there are minimal jobs and the ones that are available require a skill, certificate or diploma. Clients should be able to keep the little earning they receive as most often work is seasonal. Training opportunities have to be supported and available, as it is, opportunities are very limited. Community partnerships and economic development should be a part of the mandate of OW in the north. Remote communities have systemic barriers to affordable transportation and

adequate and safe housing. OW workers have to be cognizant of mental health and anxiety disorders. Culturally sensitive and competent OW workers are needed in the north.

Issue – 2 Appropriate Benefit Structure

In terms of appropriate benefit structure, participants identified that in Moosonee, the cost of living is extremely high. Aboriginal people need access to snowmobiles and boats due to the geography to get around. Asset limits should take this into consideration for northern communities. Anything used for traditional harvesting practices and gifts to children should also be exempt from income. Also discussed, was the need for income exemption of clients who participate on community committees and First Nation Councils and receive small honoraria.

Participants discussed that the northern allowance should be increased because of the increasing high cost of living in the north (which is a mandatory supplement paid to recipients north of the 50th parallel and discretionary below the 50th parallel). During the winter time, the cost of goods and services increases substantially due to the increase in transportation costs. There should be a benefit for traditional hunters like there is for trappers. The special diet allowance should be modified to reflect the increase in the cost of food in northern communities.

Access to Employment Insurance should be opened up to include hours accumulated through contract and short-term/part-time work. There are more opportunities for training tied to Employment Insurance.

Red Lake Friendship Centre

Issue 1 - Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

In Red Lake, participants suggested that employment and training supports should be connected to and delivered through the Ministry of Employment and Training. Individualized approaches should be considered in creating an employment/training plan. Supports should include opportunities to attend college or universities. Employment opportunities could include co-ops, wage subsidy, apprenticeships and certification; these should include acquiring transferable/mobile skills. Also, they should implement fewer penalties for people who are working to get stable.

Transitional supports should include utility benefits because of the northern climate and benefits that reflect market rent because there is an absence of affordable housing at the current shelter allowance in Red Lake. Participants identified that with increased cost of living associated with living in a northern community benefits should increase. Minimum wage jobs currently available do not cover the basic necessities and any income earned is immediately clawed back from benefits, so there is no tangible benefit to be being employed in a community with little opportunity. In Red Lake there is a high need for access to affordable child care

In terms of access to rehabilitation and treatment for clients on OW/ODSP, in Red Lake there is no access to services or very minimal. Benefits would have to include support for child care while a parent was away. In terms of employment supports for ODSP clients, these should be made on an individual basis and include transportation supports.

Issue 2 - Appropriate Benefit Structure

Participants discussed appropriate benefit structure by identifying basic needs they can not afford right now. Participants identified challenges to affording utilities, nutritious food, seasonal clothing, prescription eye ware, dental and medication, recreation, funeral costs, transportation, moving costs (start up), and housing.

Participants identified that they would need help with education costs, housing and access to transitional benefits if they were transitioning into a job and leaving OW/ODSP. In terms of asset limits, clients should be able to keep their car and home because sometimes it is cheaper than rent if they own. Benefits should simply be increased because it is not enough to live on and definitely not enough to transition from

Issue 3 - Easier to Understand

Participants identified that there are too many rules which make it complex and not easily understandable and that tied to the rules is the set-up of inequities within the system.

Issue 4 - Viable Over the Long-Term

Red Lake did a visioning exercise to determine what they would like to see changed in the social assistance system. Participants identified two main themes: increased access to services and better confidentiality. Red Lake currently has a visiting Case worker who is available through appointment on select days and hours. However, due to unknown reasons, these appointments are cancelled by the worker with no notice. The same holds true for ODSP and Employment Insurance services. Participants agreed that the current process is frustrating. Confidentiality is also compromised as the OW office is located in the adult learning centre; it is not considered safe by clients in shelters or experiencing family violence, as everyone can see who is coming and going from the office.

Participants discussed that the purpose of social assistance should be a system which transitions people to get back on their feet with dignity.

In terms of data collection and assessment, participants wanted to ensure that any analysis should be analyzed according to regions and would not discriminate rather data should be used to create appropriate programs and supports.

Provincial government and municipalities should better integrate services by housing services together in local offices and be more coordinated at the ground level.

Issue 5 - An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Social assistance recipients who are not Employment Insurance eligible should be able to keep a greater amount of income earned because there are less supports available, especially in the north. Families in Red Lake can not access recreational sports for children because of costs related to transportation and child care issues. Participants identified that there is a high cost associated with medical transportation because services are not located in Red Lake. There are benefits that help with this cost, however, it does not cover the total cost and it is reimbursed after travel which makes travelling itself very costly for someone on a fixed income. Clients try to avoid medical travel because of this factor.