

Employment and caseworkers

Caseworkers

According to the conference attendees, there is a tension that exists, for both caseworkers and people receiving assistance, between the social worker role and that of monitoring compliance. With a system that involves more than 800 rules and is set-up for monitoring and policing rather than supporting, it is difficult to create trust between the worker and client.

For those with experience receiving assistance, this tension is evident in the power dynamics that exist between the caseworker and client, and the resulting fear, intimidation, and mistrust that impedes a positive relationship. In many cases clients mentioned that information about certain programs or entitlements were often not shared, and as a result have to find out information on their own or through word of mouth. The system intake process itself was seen as mired in negativity, such as when trying to access a particular program. For example, often people will hear “you are not able to access particular program if you do not meet criteria x,y and z”. Form letters that are automatically generated by the system, usually announcing the withdrawal of benefits for unclear reasons, were another specific action that contributed to the tension because of the fear they create. This tension also creates barriers that often override attempts at sensitizing workers to broad issues impacting clients, such as physical and psychiatric disability. These barriers include physical barriers (such as the requirement of in person meetings for those with mobility issues), waiting times, glass panels at offices, and form letters that heighten tension and anxiety. Many of these barriers are inherent in a system that creates a compliance monitoring atmosphere.

It was emphasized that it is important to recognize that for caseworkers, the system from which they are operating often makes it very difficult for them to provide the type of assistance to clients that they would like to. Caseworkers contend and struggle with high caseloads, as well as the aforementioned conflicting expectations. Additionally, program administrators often require quantitative, numerical based information from caseworkers that can take away from being able to get more of the one to one, qualitative time with their clients.

Recommended changes

1. What are best practices in terms of providing frontline support in OW and ODSP offices?

In light of the structural barriers that exist and the evident tension involved with contradictions in the present caseworker role, there are methods of improving the caseworker-client relationship that is presently showing success. It was mentioned by various stakeholders at the conference how the SAIL

program launched by the Province¹, which is a program that helps workers understand the experience of those receiving ODSP, is showing very good results when incorporating the perspectives of lived experience as was done in Toronto. Perhaps this model can be duplicated in other municipalities.

2. How can we ensure that front line workers are sensitized to the broad issues impacting clients, including physical and psychiatric disability?

Diversity training was seen a superficial way to address issues around sensitivity. What is needed is the opportunity for caseworkers to truly understand the day to day barriers facing their clients. If the system is trying to look at addressing huge barriers clients face with caseworkers, attention must be paid to these day to day problems in order to address them.

3. What is the appropriate role of front line support?

It was emphasized that there is a strong need to shift from monitoring to supporting clients if progress is going to be made. This will also affect the need to work on the attitudinal behaviours in regards to how clients are treated at all points in the system, from the organizational level to the front line support and administrative level.

Employment, education

A couple of key themes emerged for conference attendees in this area– that there is lack of transition support from social assistance to work, and lack of assistance to finding long term, sustainable employment. While programs exist to help people into employment, there is often a gap between what the programs are intended to do and what the needs of its participants are.

The lack of transition supports take the form of the clawback on any earned income. A Blueprint Panel member suggested that in many cases recipients are discouraged from working full time because of the clawback, as it is better financially to work part time instead. The clawback also imparts fear that prevents people from taking work opportunities, as there is a concern that they will be completely cut off from assistance and hence security if they earn too much. For newcomers, the 14 week plan for skilled newcomers cuts participants off as soon as the business is started. Losing medical benefits if full time work is secured is also a huge concern for someone who is receiving ODSP and has a disability. For those who live in supportive or social housing, those who return to work have their rent jump very high as a result. Overall, a shift in approach is needed, acknowledging that financial assistance is only one

¹ In February 2008 the Ministry of Community and Social Services launched Supportive Approaches through Innovative Learning (SAIL), an enriched professional development program for service delivery staff and management working across the province. Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) adapted and customized the training that incorporated stories of those with lived experience.

part of social assistance, and a client is not necessarily “done” just because they have found work. Also, acknowledging and assisting clients deal with the inherent fear around work and income that can be debilitating.

In terms of assistance finding long term, sustainable employment, attendees noted there was often a disconnect between the kind of support provided and that which is necessary to move forward. The programs that are available seem to be missing the mark in getting people to work, and often take a “one-size fits all” approach.

A Blueprint Panel member mentioned that for skilled or educated newcomers, the workshops provided are not worthwhile – as it is Canadian experience, not skills delivered through workshops, often required by the companies or organizations they are applying to. There was also the impression that Ontario Works pays for undesirable educational opportunities and prevents grants for more desirable educational opportunities. Student loans being considered as income that can be clawed back also adds to this problem.

The disconnect was also very apparent for people with disabilities. It was mentioned that training and education programs provided or funded by social assistance are based upon capitalizing on existing skills. However if an existing disability prevents someone from using such skills, it is difficult to acquire new skills under the present system which can accommodate the present disability. Another Blueprint panel member felt that there was an assumption that if someone with an addiction has gone through treatment, they are “cured”, and should immediately be able to work or attend training and education programs, which is not always the case. A participant mentioned how difficult it was to return to the workforce especially if you have been out of it for a long time, especially with mental health problems, and the barriers accumulate.

There was also concern about process that rewards for “securing any job” for client, were employment organizations get compensated according to placing workers. It was felt that only candidates who are likely to succeed are put forward, and others get left out.

Recommended changes

1. What are best practices in regards to training and employment?

Best practices that were mentioned were programs that addressed the need to take individual circumstances into consideration, and acknowledged the importance of the relationship between the caseworker and person receiving assistance. Paid internships that some non-profits are providing are organized for success so people can “win”, appreciative of the individuals’ circumstances and barriers, such as transportation, childcare or addictions. On the government end, the City of Toronto is trying to change their brand and image to become more of an employment centre, improving relationships between caseworker and client, and moving away from being solely focused on eligibility. This includes asking questions that are not on paper in order to find out what people need, after getting the trust and relationship built.

2. How can we design employment supports that provide pathways out of poverty?

Overall, it is clear that in order to help people find long term, sustainable employment, the designing of programs to help people find and keep employment has to take into account individual needs, experience and abilities. However, there also needs to be clear communication of programs that are already available, and what those programs are designed for. Increasing this communication involves the sharing of information between caseworker and client, as was discussed in the section on caseworkers. For instance, one Blueprint panel member found information about an education grant only through word of mouth. This sharing also needs to take into consideration that information about certain programs is not widely available, and workers themselves may not have a clear idea of what is available to clients.

The system needs to find employers who accommodate disabilities. Also, there are those who are seeking work who need assistance to understand how to accommodate their disability to the job that they are working at.

The designing of employment or education programs also has to look at the bigger picture, as well as consider those who are providing employment. It was mentioned the system needs to consider the labour market overall in providing training and education programs so they correspond to what's currently in demand. There appears to be a serious lack of communication between social assistance services and the current economic climate, and what is considered a "good" job needs to be redefined.

It was also suggested there needs to be stronger labour market regulation, implementing a provincial employment equity program that would expand on the current federal one.

On the employment end, it was suggested that employers need to be engaged and responsible for getting people into the job market, and use the merit principle as opposed to "who you know".