



News Release

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Ontario Works Not Meeting Mandate to Help Recipients Obtain Employment and Become Self-Reliant: Auditor General

(TORONTO) Although the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services' (Ministry) Ontario Works program is intended to provide temporary assistance, the average length of time people collect benefits has nearly doubled, from an average of 19 months in 2008/09 to almost three years in 2017/18, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says in her *2018 Annual Report*, released today.

"We found that in each of the last five years, Ontario Works has helped only 10% to 13% of recipients to leave the program for employment, and the Ministry did not have a target to reduce the time individuals depend on assistance," Lysyk said after her Report was tabled in the Legislature.

"We also noted that the service managers that deliver the program were not taking sufficient steps to ensure that recipients are participating where required in employment-assistance activities aimed at finding jobs and leaving Ontario Works."

Ontario Works, administered by the Ministry and delivered by municipalities and First Nations—the service managers—provides financial benefits to help with basic living expenses of Ontarians who are either unemployed or underemployed.

In 2017/18, more than 450,000 individuals—recipients and their dependents—received assistance at a total cost to the Province of almost \$3 billion. Since the last audit of Ontario Works in 2009, the average monthly number of cases increased by almost 25%, from 202,000 to 250,000 in 2017/18.

Among the other findings in the Report:

- Service managers have determined that 36% of recipients have barriers affecting their employability, such as homelessness, addictions and mental-health conditions, that they need help to address. Although the Ministry expects service managers to help recipients overcome these barriers, it does not analyze and assess whether their efforts are effective.
- Success rates for employment of Ontario Works recipients varied across service managers; in 2017/18, for example, the percentage of recipients finding work ranged from a low of 2% at one service manager to a high of 29% at another.
- Service managers were not taking sufficient steps to ensure that all recipients are eligible for the program. The service managers visited during the audit often overlooked or did not obtain and review critical applicant information, increasing the risk of errors in determining applicant eligibility.
- The Ministry suspended its Eligibility Verification Process, to review recipients who have a high-risk of ineligibility, for over two years while it implemented a new IT system, and re-introduced it in April 2017. Reviews completed in the first year following reintroduction of the Process identified almost \$11 million in overpayments and the need to terminate about 4,200 Ontario Works cases, equivalent to 2% of the entire caseload. Although these reviews identified many ineligible recipients, service managers did not complete more than 40% of the eligibility verification cases assigned to them during 2017/18.

- Service managers across Ontario are approximately one year behind investigating approximately 6,000 fraud tips. They investigated about 17,000 tips in the last three years, and in more than 25% of them identified overpayments. Another 10% of investigations led to termination of benefits. Timely reviews of fraud tips are critical to identifying and minimizing overpayments.

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Read the **Ontario Works** audit report at www.auditor.on.ca

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