



Community and Health Services Department
Office of the Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

TO: Community Services and Housing Committee Members

FROM: Joann Simmons, Commissioner of Community and Health Services

DATE: December 5, 2007

RE: Ontario Speech from the Throne Highlights

The following provides highlights of the November 29, 2007 Ontario Speech from the Throne, which sets the Ontario Government's policy agenda for the upcoming session of the legislative assembly.

From the Community Services perspective, the Throne Speech covers many of the same areas we saw from the election platform. Of particular interest is the creation of a cabinet level committee, led by the Honourable Deb Matthews, Minister of Children and Youth Services, to develop a strategy for reducing child poverty in Ontario. This will be important to watch particularly if the scope of the committee's work touches on programs and services managed through municipal service managers.

The implications for Community and Health Services will require more analysis once specific policy and program announcements are available. The upcoming 2007/2008 Fall Economic and Fiscal Update and Provincial Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review will likely provide more information on how these policy directions will unfold. Note that the Throne Speech also made clear that maintaining a strong fiscal position for Ontario will be important, so we will have to see what government finances look like in the "Fall Update" to know what resources will be available to the province to invest in new initiatives.

Highlights

Early Learning, Education, and Post-Secondary Education

- Phase-in full day learning for four and five year olds. Progress had already begun with the appointment of an early learning advisor.
- Expand Pathways to Education initiative for students in at-risk communities.

- Improve graduation rates in high schools and encourage young people to keep learning beyond high school in college, university or apprenticeships; there are few details on specific measures. The election platform had included special supports to at-risk students, specialized schools for adult learners, a new adult literacy curriculum, and expanded apprenticeships.
- Deliver new textbook and technology grants of \$300 for university and college students.
- Expand homework help available on-line and after school.

Skills Development

- Make major investments in education and skills. There are no details on what this will include.
- Ensure more help to displaced workers through Employment Ontario, including faster delivery of services and expanded training and support initiatives.
- Press the federal government to bring “fairness” to the Employment Insurance program.

Provincial Municipal Relationship

- Call on federal government to provide municipalities with the equivalent of 1% of GST for infrastructure and public transit.
- Reconfirms commitments to upload Ontario Drug Benefit costs in 2008 and begin uploading ODSP costs in 2009.
- Reconfirms plans to continue working through the Provincial-Municipal review to put cities and towns on a firm financial footing.

Poverty and Low Income

- Creation of a new cabinet committee to begin work on developing poverty indicators and targets as well as a focused strategy for making progress on reducing child poverty.
- The strategy will include a plan to provide dental benefits to low income families, as well as building on measures already in progress, such as raising the minimum wage to \$10.25 by 2010, increasing child care spaces, implementing the Ontario Child Benefit, and providing more affordable housing.
- Work to phase-in positive changes made possible by the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA)* to improve and expand accessibility.

Note that the Throne Speech confirms a number of **Health Services** related election platform items, including:

- Provide caregiver grant to those caring for elderly family members.
- Expand progress on wait times for emergency room visits.
- Broaden services available to seniors through home care.
- Improve level of care in Long Term Care (LTC) homes by building 35,000 new beds and hiring 2,000 new nurses for LTC homes.
- Introduce new comprehensive diabetes strategy.
- Introduce legislation to ban trans fat in all school cafeterias, prescribe healthier menus that conform to the Canada Food Guide, and develop an Ontario Fitness Challenge program to fight childhood obesity.

Key Comments

The Throne Speech made an important reference to a recent report from the United Way of Greater Toronto on rising low income levels in Toronto, which includes an analysis of poverty trends between 1990 and 2005 in the City of Toronto as well as the 905 areas (including York Region) that are part of the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA).

Although the report shows clearly that poverty rates and numbers are lower in the 905 than in the City of Toronto, it also highlights that the 905 is beginning to face long-term poverty trends and service capacity issues similar to those experienced by the old Metro Toronto “suburbs” of Scarborough, Etobicoke, and North York in the late 1970s. The report argues, citing the Strong Communities Coalition reports as evidence, the need for investments in social programs and infrastructure in the 905 that matches the needs of a growing population of low income families.

The United Way of Greater Toronto report shows that solid analysis of low income trends and poverty could be an important factor in developing priorities or approaches as part of a provincial poverty reduction strategy. This will particularly be the case if there are opportunities for municipal input into the strategy that could highlight the distinct conditions and challenges faced by low income populations in affluent communities like York Region.

TF/LG/kn

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