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FAMILY SUPPORT 2008 ACTIVITY UPDATE

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report dated May 1, 2009, from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services.

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. This report be received for information.

2. PURPOSE

This report provides an update on the activities of the Family Support Team in 2008. The Family Support Team, a unit within the Business Operations and Quality Assurance Branch of the Community and Health Services Department, provides assistance to Ontario Works and Social Housing clients in their pursuit of child and spousal support income.

3. BACKGROUND

Legislated Family Support Program assists clients and reduces subsidy costs

The Family Support Team was established in 1998 to reduce the cost of social assistance allowances and benefits to York Region by assisting Ontario Works participants, and particularly sole support parents, to pursue child and spousal support income. Sole support parents currently represent approximately 36% of Ontario Works participants. In 2004, the Team began to assist tenants receiving rent subsidies in Housing Services.

The objectives of the Family Support Team are to:

1. Assist Ontario Works participants and Housing Services tenants to take action to pursue financial support from persons with a legal obligation to provide it.
2. Assist in the enforcement of agreements, orders and judgements related to support.
3. Participate in the established court administration process.

The Team actively participates in Settlement Conferences in the Family Court of the Superior Court of Justice. The Team supports participants' involvement in employment initiatives, parenting programs for separated and divorced parents, and provides linkages to child care programs.

Staff also participate on the local Court Liaison and Resource Committees as well as on the joint provincial-municipal Family Support Working Group to address training, systems and program requirements.

York Region collects support payments on behalf of the client

Through an 'assignment', an Ontario Works client gives York Region the right to collect support payments on their behalf. In exchange, the Ontario Works participant receives a full allowance. This avoids the need to deduct late or unpaid support amounts from their allowance payments.

An 'assignment' is a legal document and the principal tool used by the Province and by York Region to collect monies from a payer for the Ontario Works Program.

For each case where potential support income is identified, Family Support staff determine the appropriate action to be taken as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Family Support Team Determination

Determination	Action Taken
There is a current Court Order or Agreement in default	An Assignment for Support is completed
The whereabouts of the payer is unknown	An investigation begins to locate the absent payer in order to pursue support
There is potential support available	An enforceable private agreement or court order is pursued

The Provincial Family Responsibility Office enforces assignments. Enforcement measures may involve garnishment of wages and income tax returns, seizure of assets, suspension of driver's licenses and reporting of arrears to credit agencies. The Family Responsibility Office then forwards the monies collected to the municipalities. The Family Support Team has access to the Family Responsibility Office computer system (MECA – Maintenance Enforcement with Computerized Assistance). This allows the Team to obtain information to process, track and monitor municipal assignments and monies.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Cases are reviewed through referrals and applications for assistance

In 2008, the Family Support Team completed 2,379 case reviews consisting of 2,305 Ontario Works cases and 74 Housing cases (Rent-Geared-to-Income and Rent Supplement tenants). Reviews result from staff referrals, court proceedings and from information contained in the initial applications for assistance.

The Team obtained 409 Court Orders and Private Agreements and 201 assignments, granted 734 waivers (pursuit of support is waived when the payer cannot be located, or when there is a likelihood of abuse) and registered 143 overpayments. An overpayment results when York Region pays more than it should because there has been support income that is not reported to York Region. A total of 120 cases were terminated for reasons such as refusal to pursue support, reconciled with spouse, or participant obtained a support order in excess of their benefit entitlement.

Table 2 provides a summary of activities.

Table 2
Summary of Activities

Activity	2006	2007	2008
Cases Reviewed	2,101	2,086	2,379
Court Orders and Private Agreements	342	371	409
Total Assignments Processed	172	193	201
Waivers granted	420	461	734
Overpayments Registered	134	137	143
Terminated Cases	78	59	120

In 2008, York Region recovered \$539,760 gross costs from support assignments through the Family Responsibility Office

A further \$37,900 in municipal funds was reimbursed to York Region by the Province. This annual municipal reimbursement results from the Family Responsibility Office collecting on Ministry Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) assignments which have been cost-shared with the Region since 1998. Due to the Greater Toronto Area pooling and ODSP cost-sharing amendments, the provincial reimbursement will cease in 2011. In the past nine years this amount has gradually reduced as the assignments are paid out.

In addition to recovering funds from assignments, 143 cases were found to have received support income that was not reported. Therefore \$122,690 gross costs in overpayments were identified and are being recovered through collection activities.

There were 120 active files terminated as a result of Family Support intervention. York Region realized savings of \$992,676 gross costs in 2008 through cost avoidance based on a calculation of assistance costs which would have been paid had the 120 cases remained active for an additional 12 months. The Region saved an additional \$777,576 over 12 months through cost avoidance in cases where assistance was reduced.

Current recession will impact workload

In 2009, the increase in the Ontario Works caseload will increase the Team's workload. Referrals for singles seeking spousal support, and sole support parents will increase. There may be a decrease in support revenue due to the inability of payers to pay because of unemployment or economic conditions.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Family Support Team identified gross recoveries and savings totalling \$2,347,912. This is a 29% increase over 2007. This is primarily due to savings as a result of a 50% increase in the number of terminations of assistance. The majority of these recoveries and savings would not have been found without the services of the Family Support Team.

Table 3
Gross Recoveries and Savings

Activity	2006	2007	2008
Assignments Reimbursed	\$ 633,805	\$ 463,604	\$ 539,760
Reimbursement from Province*	\$ 155,400	\$ 76,200	\$ 37,900
Total Recoveries	\$ 789,205	\$ 539,804	\$ 577,660
Reduced Assistance	\$ 679,896	\$ 740,880	\$ 777,576
Cost Avoidance – Terminated Cases	\$ 700,740	\$ 542,590	\$ 992,676
Total Recovery & Cost Savings	\$2,169,841	\$1,823,274	\$2,347,912
Total Regional Recovery (20%)**	\$ 558,288	\$ 425,615	\$ 499,902
Total Provincial Recovery (80%)	\$1,611,553	\$1,397,659	\$1,848,010

*100% municipal funds reimbursed by the Province.

**The Total Regional Recovery includes 20% of figures in Assignments Reimbursed, Reduced Assistance and Cost Avoidance-Terminated Cases plus the Reimbursements from Province at 100%.

(See Section 4. Analysis and Options, Recovery through assignments)

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Lower regional costs are a positive benefit to local municipalities. The collection of support from payers redirects the cost of supporting a parent and children of Ontario Works participants and Housing tenants from the Region to the supporting parent/parents.

7. CONCLUSION

The Family Support Team performs a fiscally accountable mandated service to our clients and to York Region. The Team assists participants of Ontario Works and Housing tenants to obtain support, which provides a long-term independent source of income.

In 2009, the Team will continue to provide its services to Ontario Works participants and Housing tenants. The Team will monitor the impacts on support revenue due to increased inability of payers to meet support obligations as a result of unemployment or economic conditions. The Team will also continue to receive provincial funding for one Family Support Worker under the Enhanced Family Support Initiative.

For more information on this report, please contact Dennis Norton, Managing Director, Business Operations and Quality Assurance at Ext. 2088.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.