Integrated Service Delivery to Humanize the Welfare to Work System

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ABSTRACT

Thesis: An integrated model of service delivery, combined with community partnerships for provision of childcare, focused training related to specific employer needs, and other resources indirectly related to return to employment, provide a system that is most effective and humanizing in assisting individuals to find meaningful employment.

Summary:

I. A number of factors have contributed to dehumanizing of Welfare Clients. Recent deep cuts to welfare amounts have left individuals without adequate funds for housing and food. Services divided between many agencies require clients to navigate a maze of places, people and paperwork. Agencies limited to one or two services must turn over large numbers of clients to provide revenue for survival, lessening their ability to provide relationship and stability to clients.

II. An integrated model, such as the one Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre is using, can provide full service from assessment to employment. Clients begin with common assessment and job search skills training, including interview skills and resume creation. Community Placement can offer short-term experience for skill and confidence development. Employment Placement can then liaise with employers and clients and create fit between the two. Job mentors monitor and coach for long-term job maintenance.

III. Partnerships between the Service Agency and other community agencies will be established to overcome other barriers. Childcare, specific job skills training identified with area employers, computer skills and similar resources will be drawn on, with case management continually handled by the service agency.

IV. Such a model provides an interactive, holistic, and client centred approach to the Welfare to Work system. It maintains client dignity and integrity, builds a support system that is stable, and contains the elements that build the independence and self-sufficiency of the client without becoming overwhelming.
Introduction

No one ever set out to dehumanize delivery systems for social assistance. However, the confluence of a series of events, policies and environmental factors did indeed lead to a system that often left social assistance recipients feeling nameless, degraded and marginalized.

In Ontario, the Progressive Conservatives brought about a 21.6% cut in assistance amounts. The PC party’s document outlining these cuts relates: “Under the plan, a family of four currently on welfare would receive less than it gets today. However, we will allow anyone on welfare to earn back the difference between the current rate and the new, lower rate without penalty and without losing their eligibility (PC Party of Ontario, 1994).” This plan did not account, however, for two important facts. Most individuals are not on assistance because they do not want to work, but rather because they have numerous obstacles to finding employment. Therefore, a program that seeks to offset cuts to their assistance dollars by allowing them to earn income misses the essential issues facing recipients. The other fact is that during the period since the cuts, the cost of living increased by approximately 18%, with no accompanying rise in assistance.

The second focus of the Common Sense Revolution was a restructuring of service delivery under the auspices of the “Business Transformation Project”, which introduced the two-stage application process, including the telephone pre-screening and the consolidated verification project. This initiative, designed to bring new levels of efficiency and accuracy to the delivery of social assistance has instead brought a new level of rigidity and bureaucracy to the system. In his article “Rhetoric and Retrenchment,” Herd writes that the “social safety net in Ontario is being eroded piece by piece and the constant adjustment of labyrinthine rules to winnow the rolls has become an ongoing part of administrative practice” (Herd, 2002). While there are other, happier, stories of those who found sensitive caseworkers guiding them through the system, the level of frustration is rising.

As a result fewer and fewer individuals qualify for assistance, while greater numbers of discouraged individuals simply give up on the application process altogether (Herd and Mitchell, 2003). Those who do complete the application process and qualify experience a more rigid, less personal system that often requires the client to fulfill exacting regulations that they neither understand nor are equipped to accomplish.

At the same time that the legacy of the Common Sense Revolution has made accessing the social net more difficult, the economic climate has added to the burden. Leschied, Whitehead, Hurley and Chiodo (2003) report a 17.1% family poverty rate in London and Middlesex County. For children under the age of 15 the poverty rate is 24.5%. In a study of 693 children, seen by CAS London between 1995 and 2001, 65% were on social assistance. The Canadian Policy
Research Network (Maxwell, 2003) indicates that families and individuals are
being asked to bear greater social risks stemming from costs of education,
benefits and pensions, costs associated with frequent job changes, and the
potential trap of low paying jobs.

The combined effect of these factors is the creation of new levels of frustration,
stress, and dehumanization of social assistance recipients. Herd and Mitchell’s
2002 report for the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, for which they
interviewed dozens of social recipients in seven different focus groups, is entitled
“Discouraged, Diverted and Disentitled” (Herd and Mitchell, 2002). Social
assistance recipients echo repeated frustration with having to move from agency
to agency; aggravation due to inability to contact caseworkers; confusion and
humiliation caused by regulations, directions and forms that require more
education than many recipients possess; and an aura of suspicion and hostility
as though they are trying to “get away with something.”

Social service agencies were facing their own challenges in this environment.
Downturns in the economy and cuts in available revenue place financial stress
that threatened viability. Outcome-focused funding with no infrastructure
revenue available placed great pressure on agencies to focus on statistics rather
than client interaction. The “workfare” tag created a level of animosity between
agencies and clients alike and became a significant attitudinal barrier. The
temptation to get numbers through the system rather than to provide significant
relational assistance grew as the financial pressures increased.

The Response

The challenge for the London Community generally, and for Pathways
specifically, has been to retain a sensitive and personal approach to client care
within this difficult environment, and within the constraints of the changes to the
social assistance system. The remainder of this article will focus on the
significant choices made by the City of London, the role of the ESCLM in
integrating agencies for ease of client movement and on Pathways’ particular
service delivery model as means of providing value-based, client-centered
service within the context of the Ontario Works System.

The City of London

The City of London made two significant choices which have shaped their
delivery of service and which have helped them alleviate some of the problems
identified in other areas of Ontario. The first of these was to deliver Ontario
Works programs through purchase of service contracts with community based
training organizations. The partnership with purchase of service agencies has
grown in the London area to encompass 14 different agencies, providing a full
range of services from employment planning and counselling to employment
related clothing. Each of these agencies is a member of the Employment Sector
Council of London Middlesex (ESCLM). The mission of the ESCLM is to be “a
dynamic service delivery system that provides opportunity for all people to meet the changing labour market needs in our community.” Educational partners who are also members of the ESCLM are London District Catholic School Board, Thames Valley District School Board, Fanshawe College and community based literacy organizations.

This decision to use community agencies has brought a number of advantages to the London Middlesex Community and to the area Social Assistance recipients, advantages that have gone a long way to counteract the negative impacts described in the opening section of this paper. Community agencies offer clients a sense of advocacy, a support for the clients in dealing with the regulations of the system. As the partner agencies of the ESCLM continue to integrate and improve communication, the need for clients to redo paperwork and retell their stories is diminished.

Community partnerships enable participants to experience collaborative support for addressing multiple issues. The dialogue built over a period of a decade in the London Middlesex region through ESCLM has enabled organizations to celebrate their strengths and offer real value to participants. This environment has required mature leadership from funders, ESCLM and community based agencies. Shared training for employment planning, service delivery standards, information sharing agreements and common technology platforms have enabled closer working relationships, which translates into less duplication of information, maximization of resources and a client-centred community infrastructure.

Another significant choice of the City of London was to resist the workfare concept, and instead focus on Community Placement as an employment preparation tool for those who are not yet job ready. In conjunction with the purchase of service partners, Community Placement was positioned and implemented as a positive employment step, which at times ended in individuals being hired by the agencies with which they volunteered. Community Placement offered the opportunity to gain experience which resulted in improved skills, gaps filled in resumes, increased self confidence and, as many clients reported, a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

The impact of these two decisions has had a significantly beneficial impact on the delivery of Ontario Works in the London Middlesex Region. While clients still face the difficulties of meeting the requirements of the validation process, the added layer is one of advocacy and support that assists them in navigating those requirements.
Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre

The purchase of service from agencies for Ontario Works by the City of London proved a watershed for Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre. Prior to that time period Pathways primary service was a 10 week property management training course funded through the Transitional Skills Development Fund of Human Resource Development Canada. The opportunity to become a Purchase of Service provider allowed Pathways to expand its service to the community and more fully express the mission and values upon which it was built.

Pathways entered into purchase of service agreements with the City of London for Employment Planning and Preparation, Community Placement and Employment Placement. At the same time Pathways redefined its understanding of the mission and values and the critical stakeholders in the achieving its goal. A focused strategy integrated the values and key success factors for all stakeholders but particularly for clients and front line workers.

The mission of the agency was to assist individuals to overcome multiple barriers to meaningful employment. However, the mission at times was overly fixated on employment as the end result and the vision needed to be reframed to better reflect the individual and community development impact desired. Employment was a step towards a broader and profound individual and community result. The vision has become “unleashing the potential of individuals to build new futures.”

The core values were identified as follows:

*Value of Work*
We believe that work is essential and gives dignity and provision to people.

*Integrity*
We strive to live and work consistently. We are committed to aligning our actions with our words.

*Proud of What We Do*
We believe our service is essential to assist people. We believe in its value and consider it a privileged mission.

*Embrace Change*
Change is the constant of life. We do not fear change but welcome it as a fresh opportunity for growth.

*Value of the Individual*
We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person.

*Cooperation*
Our mission cannot be accomplished alone, but only as we work together with various stakeholders.

*Quality & Efficiency*
We seek to provide quality and satisfaction to all stakeholders.

*Leadership*
We seek to be a leader in our community and develop leaders for our community
In order to support the intent of the mission and values, Pathways established new offices (7000 square feet). The offices are accessible by all public transit, one block from Ontario Works offices and are decorated in warm and inviting colours. A full employment resource with online computers, fax machine, phones, and staffing is provided.

The heart of Pathways’ contribution to humanization of the welfare-to-work system is the integration of Client services. As shown in figures 1 & 2, Pathways is able to take clients from Employment Planning, through job search strategies, Community Placement, if needed, on through Employment Placement. Training in WHMIS, First Aid and basic computer literacy is available at each of these steps as well. Pathways’ strategic plan for the next phase of growth and development is to further enhance this breadth of delivery by forming intentional partnerships which will allow us to offer a variety of skill development for clients.

A web based database system, WebTracker, tracks client activity and counsellor’s notes in a way that allows any staff member to quickly understand the client’s history with the organization and reduces need for duplication of paperwork. WebTracker provides access to timely and comprehensive information about available programs and services, enables appropriate referrals and reminders for case management, reduces staff administrative time and so enhances client service. Nine of the purchase of service agencies are using WebTracker, leading to a greater facility of information sharing. An information sharing agreement has been signed by key agencies across the community that will enable inter-agency transfer with client consent for effective service.
Front-line staff nurture and develop strong working relationships with Ontario Works caseworkers and are effective advocates for both sides. Caseworkers rely on Pathways staff for communication of client activity and also respond fairly rapidly to requests from Pathways staff for client interventions. Pathways intentionally frames itself as a service organization to both the client and the caseworker and the fruit of that relationship is consistently positive service delivery to our clients. Four placement coordinators network with employers providing them with pre-screened candidates for positions. An employment mentor is available to assist employer and employee with any retention issues.

This combination of integrated service delivery, information tracking, and client-caseworker intervention has enabled Pathways to be a non-intimidating, supportive environment for Ontario Works clients. From the Receptionist to the Employment Counsellor, Pathways staff is focused on creating an open and welcoming environment that affirms the value and dignity of each individual. Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre has created a wrap around service to clients through integrated service delivery, community partnership and focused attention to the needs of participants. Integrated service delivery is not only an efficient means of providing services by maximizing economies of scale but also minimizes the distraction and frustration experienced by participants with fragmented service delivery. It has enabled staff with the effective use of technology to not lose track of participants, identifying key windows of opportunity for intervention and follow up.
Figure 2

Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre
Flow of Service

CLIENTS

Web Tracker

OW

Referral Process

Reception and Intake

Employment Planning and Counselling

JSW

Pre-Employment Preparation

Community Placement

Employment Placement and Maintenance

Next Steps

Research and Marketing

EMPLOYERS & HOSTS

Intentional Partnerships
For Client Support:

Childcare
Clothing / Food supports
Counselling

Intentional Partnerships
For Client Training:

Elder Care
Forklift Training
Light Industrial
Computers / MS Office
PMT
WHMIS / 1st Aid
Office Administration
IMPLICATIONS

While Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre has been able to effectively serve many clients, it has also experienced and continues to experience significant challenges which impact both clients and agencies seeking to serve them.

A lack of funding available for infrastructure has made the upgrades in computer technology and the purchase of software for client management the responsibility of agency reserve funds. Agencies are delivering services at the same unit costs as five years ago and are wholly dependent on referrals from caseworkers.

Outcome based funding has threatened the soul of compassion. Pathways finds many clients who are in need of the resources we offer, but for whom no funding is available. The outcomes are at times overly restrictive and do not recognize the process steps that overcoming barriers requires. Client needs must drive these outcomes. A fixation on outcomes that are short term and fiscally motivated can remove the heart and the spirit from our mission. When the heart is lost, a sense of “we are here and we matter” is lost. When the spirit is missing, a sense of hope and creativity is extinguished.

Participants require intensive case management. Humanization requires that someone know their name, needs and is able to intervene effectively at key junctures in their journey towards full employment. Employment counsellors who are available and aware of the barriers being addressed provide a critical catalyst and support participants. The availability of caseworkers must be increased in order to respond to the needs and questions of participants.

One of greatest challenges for the provision of effective service is the development of competencies for the current employment situation. The Ontario Works participant is arguably the most in need of resources and yet has limited access to skills development resources. Skills development and education have been identified as the clearest path to career advancement and higher wage jobs. Specific skill development is critical to avoid increased marginalization. Basic computer skills are needed to combat the linking of “technology poor” and “working poor” (Heldrich Policy Guide, 1999).

There is a documented need for additional envelopes of funding to be able to provide entry level training in a timely manner without incurring debt and unreasonable delays. The spectrum of services provided for skill development must increase. While GED upgrading is critical along with basic literacy and language skills, often there are little skills that will have relevancy in the current market place.

The enhancement of future productivity in the marketplace and the development of a skilled workforce will require greater levels of social investment from the
public sector and higher wages for workers in low paid jobs. It will require a
medium to long term perspective in program design, services offered and the
roles assumed by public and private sectors and the individual citizen.
Finally, there is a constant need to be vigilant about the essential values that
birthed the concept of social assistance. The case of Pathways in London has
demonstrated that a values driven service delivery model can, when delivered in
concert with other like minded agencies and funders, provide service that will
assist individuals to return to productivity.
REFERENCES


