



**Survey Analysis of Ontario's
Integrated Employment Services:**

**Experiences of Job-Seeking
Social Assistance Recipients with OW/ODSP
Person-Centered Supports and Employment
Ontario Employment Services**

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an anonymous online survey conducted among nearly 1,200 recipients, primarily from Ontario Works (OW) along with participants from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), across Ontario. Conducted between July and December 2024, the survey involved a non-random, non-representative sample and aimed to collect user feedback on their experiences with OW and ODSP life stabilization (person-centered) supports, as well as Employment Ontario (EO) employment services since 2021. This feedback is essential for assessing the effectiveness of the Integrated Employment Services (IES) model in meeting the needs of social assistance recipients and enhancing their employment opportunities.

The following are the findings related to the social assistance profile of the sample, experiences with the new OW/ODSP common assessment tool, OW/ODSP person-centered supports, the EO common assessment tool and EO employment services.

| Participant Employment and Financial Status

Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated they are conditionally available for work, pointing to the need for adequate person-centered supports to prepare participants for employment by addressing foundational barriers such as housing, food and transportation. Additionally, underemployment is prevalent, with a quarter of respondents employed less than 10 hours weekly. Only a small percentage of participants are engaged in substantial employment, with less than three percent working 20 hours or more weekly. This underscores the need for enhanced job support to help social assistance recipients secure stable, long-term employment opportunities.



Financial dependency appears pronounced, with slightly more than three-quarters of respondents requiring continuous income support from OW/ODSP. This persistent reliance reflects ongoing economic challenges faced by recipients and the need for better support mechanisms to improve financial stability during these difficult times.

Referrals to Employment Ontario, necessary for effective employment support, are notably lacking, as 61% of participants were not referred, while only 36% received referrals to EO for job opportunities. This significant gap in referrals indicates a disconnect in service integration, with many lacking the essential support needed to stabilize their lives and effectively transition into the workforce.

The duration of unemployment among the respondents further compounds the challenge, with a significant 43% unemployed for 6 months to a year and 19% for over a year, highlighting the need for proactive and timely interventions to reduce unemployment spells.

Slightly over half of respondents indicated they require \$1,500 to \$1,999 monthly to cover basic living costs, well above the minimum support currently provided. This financial discrepancy indicates the need to reassess current benefit levels to ensure they more accurately reflect the cost of living. Such a review is necessary to determine if adjustments are needed to better support the basic needs of recipients.

Assessment Process and Access to Person-Centered Supports

Slightly over half of respondents found the purpose of the OW/ODSP common assessment clear, while the rest did not, indicating a need for improved clarity in communication. Comfort with sharing personal information with OW/ODSP Caseworkers was low, with over two-thirds of respondents reporting discomfort. This highlights the need for more sensitive and personalized communication strategies, as well as stronger assurances regarding the confidentiality and use of information.

In terms of capturing the overall situation and needs of the participants, almost sixty percent felt that the common assessment did not adequately reflect their circumstances. Although two-thirds of participants felt that their Caseworkers understood their personal needs and provided appropriate support, a considerable proportion did not feel fully supported, emphasizing the importance of improving the process to better recognize and address individual needs.

Furthermore, 65% of participants reported not receiving clear next steps or follow-up after the common assessment, highlighting a communication gap that can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction among service users. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of respondents did not notice any improvement in support services following the assessment, while approximately one-quarter were uncertain about any benefits derived from the process. These findings demonstrate a need for reevaluating and enhancing the assessment's effectiveness to improve service provision.

A significant majority (71%) reported not receiving adequate information about available OW/ODSP (person-centered) supports through electronic or printed materials, which underscores the reliance on verbal explanations that may not suffice for ensuring comprehensive understanding among all clients.

Access to necessary person-centered supports was reported as inadequate by 78% of participants, highlighting a critical gap in service availability and accessibility. While supports related to housing and food were more commonly requested, this distribution seems to indicate a focus on essential living needs. However, concerns remain about whether these supports are sufficient to meet actual needs, especially in the context of rising living costs.

The majority of respondents (79%) experienced difficulties both in accessing and receiving timely person-centered supports, with significant delays noted, underscoring the need for streamlined processes and faster provision. Respect and understanding from support services staff were positively noted by 68% of participants, yet there remains a notable percentage (31%) expressing a need for improved staff interactions.

Regarding the overall impact of the supports on life management and employment readiness, only 25% felt that the supports helped them manage their lives better, and an even smaller percentage (21%) believed these aids prepared them for employment. These findings indicate a need for reevaluation and enhancement of the supports to effectively assist clients in achieving life stabilization and readiness for employment, which are essential for long-term well-being and economic participation.

Participant Experiences with Employment Ontario Services

Among the entire survey sample, a substantial portion, 61% (729 individuals), have not been referred to Employment Ontario (EO) for job opportunities, while 36% (438 individuals) confirmed they had been referred, and a small fraction of 1% (22 individuals) were unsure of their referral status. The following findings pertain only to those participants who were referred to EO and engaged with its services.

Among those referred to EO, a majority expressed discomfort in sharing their employment details with their EO Caseworkers, with only 24% feeling comfortable. This discomfort highlights the need for better communication strategies and support mechanisms to foster trust and comfort during EO assessments. Moreover, the alignment of the assessment questions with participants' job search needs was found lacking by nearly two-thirds of respondents, indicating a disconnect between the assessments and the specific employment objectives of the job seekers. Additionally, 78% felt that the employment assessments did not adequately consider their personal circumstances such as health, caregiving responsibilities, and transportation issues, suggesting a need for a more holistic approach in assessment processes.

Although 63% of respondents felt that their employment goals were understood and supported by their EO Caseworkers, there remains a significant portion who did not feel supported, which could underscore the importance of further training for Caseworkers to enhance their responsiveness to diverse client needs. The communication of next steps post-assessment is a major shortfall, with 77% of participants indicating they did not receive clear follow-up instructions, pointing to a critical area for procedural improvements. Furthermore, while a majority knew how to appeal or challenge the assessments if they disagreed, a notable 14% were unaware of how to navigate the appeal process, pointing to a potential gap in ensuring all participants are fully informed of their rights within the assessment framework.

Among those referred to EO, a significant majority, 87%, reported having accessed employment support services, indicating a high level of demand for these resources. Despite this high engagement, 12% of respondents had not accessed services, suggesting potential barriers that warrant further investigation to ensure all eligible participants can use available supports. Concerns about the potential loss of social assistance benefits if employment services are not accessed were minimal, indicating that most participants (85%) did not perceive this as a likely risk. However, 14% expressed concerns, indicating a need for clearer communication and education about how engaging with employment services impacts their benefit status, to alleviate fears and encourage more informed participation.

The readiness of participants to engage in employment activities varies, with 31% feeling the need to stabilize their personal circumstances before seeking employment. This could highlight the importance of life stabilization supports before employment readiness, ensuring individuals are fully prepared to enter the job market successfully.

There appears to be a major potential gap in the provision of detailed information about available employment resources, with 85% of respondents reporting they did not receive comprehensive information through electronic or printed materials. This could point to an urgent need for improvements in how information is disseminated to ensure all participants have the knowledge necessary to engage fully with the services provided.

Moreover, while most participants reported that employment services considered their past work and educational experiences, the depth of this consideration was often superficial. Only a small fraction received a detailed assessment of their skills and experiences, suggesting that employment support services could be improved by adopting more thorough and personalized assessment processes to better match individuals with suitable employment opportunities.

Regarding the effectiveness of EO employment services, a notable 70% of participants referred to EO expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of resources like job search assistance and skills training, indicating a demand for improvements to better suit job seekers' needs. Furthermore, 79% found the training and job preparation options to be limited and inadequate, suggesting a need to diversify and improve these services to align more closely with employment goals and market demands.

The functionality of EO employment services in facilitating job searches was brought into question, as an overwhelming 89% of respondents felt that these offerings did not make it easier to find employment. This reflects not only potential shortcomings in service provision but also the challenging realities of the job market, which complicates the effectiveness

of EO services in securing employment for participants. Similarly, 69% were unable to secure employment through these services, potentially pointing to a gap between service provision and successful employment outcomes. Additionally, 73% did not receive job referrals or placements, which underscores the necessity for improved integration and coordination within employment services to enhance their reach and impact.

The alignment of job placements with participants' skills and education presents a concerning picture, as only a small fraction, 4%, felt their placements fully considered their essential skills, while a significant majority found the roles either partially relevant or not requiring their specific skills at all. This mismatch suggests that some placements may lead to underemployment or dissatisfaction among job seekers.

In terms of long-term career support, an overwhelming 96% of participants reported not receiving assistance in setting long-term employment goals, indicating a shortfall in strategic career planning services offered by EO. This lack of support could hinder individuals' ability to progress and achieve sustainable employment outcomes over time.

Furthermore, although most participants felt they had the autonomy to decline the recommended employment plans or placements, about 12% perceived a lack of choice in their interactions with employment services, highlighting an area for improvement in ensuring that service delivery is client-centered and respects individual preferences and needs.

All these findings underscore the necessity for a comprehensive evaluation and enhancement of the Integrated Employment Services model from the user perspective, to better support and align with the diverse needs and circumstances of social assistance recipients during this challenging economic period. A critical part of this challenge is the limited resources available to service providers, which hinders their ability to offer timely, tailored supports that stabilize lives and prepare clients for meaningful employment. This ensures that all aspects—from initial assessments to employment support—are effectively tailored and delivered, optimizing outcomes for clients and the system.

Introduction

Since 2019, the Government of Ontario has undertaken a major reform to restructure employment services across the province. As stated by the government, it is “transforming Ontario’s employment services to make them more efficient, more streamlined, and outcomes focused.” The reform, now known as Integrated Employment Services—previously referred to as Employment Services Transformation—merges social assistance employment services, including Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, with other government employment services into Employment Ontario. This redesigned model is crafted to be “more responsive to the needs of job seekers, businesses, and local communities”.¹

This overhaul is structured around reforms that are designed to address the perceived inefficiencies of the previous system. The first change involves consolidating all provincially distributed employment services into a single system managed by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. The second change introduces redefined service catchment areas along with the appointment of new oversight actors, Service System Managers, in each region. The final change is the adoption of performance-based funding to enhance retention and ensure accountability.²

A key goal is to streamline services to reduce duplication and fragmentation, thereby facilitating a smoother process for both social assistance recipients and service providers. A one-stop service model is envisioned to ensure that clients will not have to navigate multiple departments and agencies, providing straightforward access to essential resources. The approach is centered around the client, aiming to enhance each individual’s experience by offering customized support tailored to their specific employment goals. This includes comprehensive employment supports such as job counseling, job matching and skill training. The services are designed to be localized, meeting the unique demands and opportunities of the specific labour markets they serve, and ensuring the efficient use of resources through targeted programs and strategies designed to tackle workforce development challenges.³

Moreover, regional Service System Managers (SSMs) are the key actors in Ontario’s new integrated service delivery model and are expected to oversee the delivery of these services, working in collaboration with local partners and service providers. SSMs are selected through a competitive process managed by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training, and Skills Development, and may include organizations from the public and private sectors, municipalities, not-for-profits, and social service delivery agencies. Once selected, SSMs are responsible for the design, management, and delivery of the Integrated Employment Services model in their regions, ensuring that services are coordinated to meet community needs without fragmentation or duplication. They also oversee client intake from Ontario Employment Assistance Services and Disability Support programs during the transition period. The program’s funding model is intended to be performance-based, incentivizing the achievement of specific outcomes such as successful job placements and sustained employment. It also aims to integrate support services across employment, social, and educational spheres, encompassing programs such as Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program.⁴

Inclusion is a cornerstone of the envisioned program, aiming to provide equitable services to a diverse range of clients, including newcomers, youth, people with disabilities and Indigenous populations. The program also seeks to enhance employer engagement to better align with the needs of local businesses and connect them with suitable candidates. The province intends to use new technology and labour market data to ensure consistent service delivery across regions and to improve service effectiveness. Additionally, innovative programs and best practices such as virtual platforms and training workshops are being explored to address emerging workforce challenges and opportunities.⁵

The revamped program has been implemented across Ontario, which is divided into 15 catchment areas. This rollout has been structured into an initial Prototype phase, followed by three phases. The phased rollout of the Integrated Employment Services has included specific timelines for each region to transition into the updated system.

1 Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, [Employment Ontario Partners’ Gateway](#).

2 First Work, [Moving Forward, Together: Ontario’s Employment Services Transformation](#). Toronto: First Work. May, 2023.

3 First Work, [Removing Roadblocks: Recommendations for Government and Service System Managers on the Employment Service Transformation in Ontario](#). Toronto: First Work. September, 2024.

4 First Work, [Removing Roadblocks](#).

5 First Work, [Removing Roadblocks](#).

Initially, the Prototype phase commenced with the regions of Peel, Hamilton-Niagara and Muskoka-Kawartha beginning their transitions into the new model as early as January 2021. The rollout continued with Phase 1, involving York, Halton, Stratford-Bruce Peninsula and Kingston-Pembroke where transition occurred by the end of 2023. Phase 2 involved Durham, London, Ottawa, Windsor-Sarnia and Kitchener-Waterloo-Barrie which integrated into the new system by February 2024. Lastly, Phase 3 will see major urban centers such as Toronto, alongside the Northeast and Northwest regions aiming to transition by March 2025. Each phase involved a planning period of approximately three months, followed by a nine-month transition period during which the regions adapted to the new service delivery structure. This rollout is designed to ensure that each region can effectively integrate into the unified system without disrupting existing services.⁶

Ultimately, the goal of this transformation is to prioritize the needs of job seekers within employment services, with a particular focus on those enrolled in Ontario's social assistance programs. The government recognizes these recipients face unique challenges in the labour market, as well as broader life stabilization issues that require support and opportunities through these programs. Ontario's social assistance system is structured into two main components: Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). OW is tailored to provide financial and employment assistance to individuals in financial need, while ODSP is designed to support individuals with disabilities, helping them live independently and reduce barriers to employment. Complementing these services, Employment Ontario (EO) provides employment support that is accessible not only to recipients of OW and ODSP but also to the general public. EO ensures employment assistance is available to those who need it, regardless of their participation in social assistance programs. In line with these efforts, the new model has sought to create a more streamlined system that better coordinates resources between EO and social assistance offices.

Before the transformation, employment services in Ontario were delivered through four separate programs—Employment Services, Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, and Ontario Employment Assistance Services—managed by different ministries. These programs served overlapping client groups, often requiring job seekers to navigate multiple systems to access needed supports. This fragmentation raised concerns about the efficiency of employment programs and the accessibility of wraparound services. The transformation aimed to address these challenges by integrating employment pathways under the Employment Ontario umbrella, providing a more coordinated approach. Additionally, a decline in employment outcomes between 2016 and 2018, despite stable or increased funding, served as a catalyst for initiating the current transformation.⁷

In 2021, the government acknowledged, "In reviewing how our social assistance system can better support those in need, we found many of its processes are too bureaucratic, too paper-heavy, and more focused on enforcement and technical aspects than actually helping people improve their lives." It highlighted a systemic issue, stating, "Our caseworkers spend their time on routine administrative tasks which leaves them little time to help people stabilize their lives, support them into the workforce, or reduce their reliance on social assistance."

In response, a collaborative framework between the province and municipalities was developed to ensure that "Employment Ontario caseworkers are focused on employment services while working collaboratively with social assistance caseworkers to support Ontario Works and ODSP clients". This is designed to "free up resources from social assistance offices, which have traditionally taken on the task of ensuring the provision of employment services." It also aims to transform social assistance caseworkers into "an integral part of the support network that helps people stabilize their lives so they can achieve their full potential and job success." Overall, this new approach is geared toward "more people exiting to employment, shorter stays on assistance and fewer people needing to re-apply for financial assistance".⁸ Importantly, this model focuses on process efficiency and support mechanisms, while leaving benefit rates unchanged.

Critical to the effectiveness of these changes is an understanding of who they will affect and how diverse their characteristics and needs may be.⁹ During the 2022-23 period, Ontario's social assistance programs supported over 585,000 cases (families and single adults), including approximately 217,639 under OW and 367,828 under ODSP. These programs collectively aided around 882,000 beneficiaries—individual claimants, their partners and dependent children—accounting for about 7.1% of Ontarians under the age of 65, or one in every fourteen individuals in the province.

6 First Work, [Making It Work: Delivering the Transformation Promise in Ontario](#). Toronto: First Work. July, 2024.

7 First Work, [A Year in Transition: Ontario's Employment Services Transformation](#). Toronto: First Work. 2022.

8 All quotes in this paragraph are from Government of Ontario, [Recovery & Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation](#), 2021.

9 All demographic data presented in this section is derived from Maytree, [Social Assistance Summaries: Ontario](#), May 2024.

Unattached singles formed the largest group of social assistance recipients in both programs, accounting for more than 64% of OW cases and over 80% of ODSP cases. Single parents constituted the second largest group, making up 28% of cases in OW and 9% in ODSP. The most prevalent age group among adult beneficiaries of OW were those aged 18–29, closely followed by the 30–39 age group, with each category comprising approximately 29%. The least represented were those over 60, making up just over 6% of recipients. For ODSP, the 50–59 age group was the most common among adult beneficiaries in 2022–23, accounting for 26% of the total. The 30–39 age group was the least common, representing less than 18%.

The gender distribution among beneficiaries of Ontario’s social assistance programs showed clear differences across categories. For OW, women constituted the majority of beneficiaries, accounting for over 63%. In contrast, the distribution of beneficiaries in ODSP was nearly even between men and women. When considering the heads of households, the data reveals a gender skew depending on the household type. Among unattached singles receiving OW, men were predominant, representing just under 63%, while a similar trend was observed in ODSP with men comprising just under 57%. In contrast, women were overwhelmingly represented as heads of single-parent households, making up 93% in OW and 88% in ODSP.

An average of 9% of OW cases and 10% of ODSP cases reported employment income. In Ontario, after receiving all eligible provincial and federal social assistance, a single individual falls \$17,378 short of the official poverty line, a person with disabilities is \$11,760 below (not including additional disability related costs), and a couple with two children remains \$21,894 below the poverty threshold.¹⁰

These statistics underscore the scale and complexity of the challenges faced by a diverse range of social assistance recipients throughout Ontario. They provide a backdrop for assessing the effectiveness of the Integrated Employment Services model in meeting their varied needs. It is worth noting that not all social assistance recipients are using the new employment-focused model, especially some people with disabilities who may not seek employment services or participate in the labour market. Furthermore, many recipients who may be able to work have not yet engaged with employment services, as addressing their immediate life stabilization needs—such as securing stable housing, accessing health services and meeting basic living conditions—takes priority to ensure they are fully prepared for employment.

Within this context, the new system guides recipients to first access life stabilization supports, if necessary, through OW/ODSP before being referred to EO for employment services. This approach is intended to ensure that essential stabilization needs are addressed before transitioning recipients towards employment readiness. Moreover, a common assessment tool has been introduced across OW, ODSP and EO, enabling caseworkers from each respective program to gather detailed client information. This tool is intended to play an important role in identifying client needs and matching them with the most appropriate services, thereby aiming to enhance the system’s responsiveness.

To date, the availability of comprehensive data on how job-seeking social assistance recipients are experiencing the new model has been evolving. This data is important for assessing the system’s adaptability to the complex realities faced by its users. Enhancing this information is relevant for policymakers, service providers and stakeholders to effectively gauge and enhance the restructured employment service environment. Collecting user-centric data not only highlights strengths and pinpoints areas for enhancement within the model but also reinforces the principles of democratic governance by actively involving service users in the evaluation process. This participatory approach enhances transparency and accountability. Understanding the experiences of recipients can lead to more informed policy decisions, fostering a more equitable and efficient employment service system in line with the government’s commitment to creating responsive social services. As this report’s conclusion notes, independent evaluations have raised a number of challenges in the roll-out of the new model, but have generally not given much place to the voices of program participants.

In the sections that follow, we detail findings from an anonymous online survey conducted by our research team with nearly 1,200 primarily Ontario Works (OW) and some Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) job-seeking social assistance recipients across the province. Conducted between July 1 and December 1, 2024, the survey focused on a non-random sample to explore the impact of the new Integrated Employment Services on life stabilization and employment-related trajectories. For more detailed information about the survey methodology, please see the appendix.

¹⁰ Maytree, 2024.

The survey, comprising approximately 50 questions, was organized into five sections. The first section collected social assistance and demographic data, including participants' duration of access to OW or ODSP, their current employment status and weekly work hours, frequency of support receipt and any referrals to EO. It also gathered additional details such as age, gender, ethnic background, geographical area of residence and estimated monthly living costs.

The second section inquired into recipients' personal perceptions of their experiences with the newly introduced common assessment tool used by OW/ODSP, focusing on their understanding of the process, their comfort levels with sharing personal information about their circumstances, the tool's effectiveness in capturing their overall situation and needs, the empathy and support provided by caseworkers, the clarity of subsequent steps and their views on whether the assessment led to improved support services.

The third section examined the life stabilization supports offered through OW/ODSP, assessing how information about these supports was communicated, recipients' ability to access the supports they needed, the types of supports received and their overall experiences with accessing and receiving these supports. It also evaluated the respect and understanding demonstrated by support services staff and the impact of these supports on managing life challenges and preparing recipients for employment.

The fourth section collected responses on the experiences with EO's new common assessment tool, focusing on recipients' comfort in sharing employment details, the relevancy of the assessment questions to their job search needs, consideration of personal circumstances like commuting limitations and caregiving responsibilities, the caseworker's understanding of their employment goals, the clarity of follow up steps provided after the assessment and information on how to appeal decisions regarding their readiness for work.

The final section solicited recipients' opinions on the employment services they received from EO, probing whether these services assisted them in securing and maintaining employment. This included inquiries about their access to employment support services, concerns over potential loss of OW/ODSP benefits, the timing of employment search relative to life stabilization, the adequacy and personal relevance of the information provided about available resources and how well the services accommodated their personal circumstances, past work, and educational experiences. It also assessed the quality of resources like job search assistance and skills training, the variety of training or job preparation options available, the ease of job searching through the services, success in finding and being placed in employment, the alignment of job placements with their skills and education, assistance in setting long term employment goals and their freedom to decline recommended plans or placements.

Each section, except for the first, concluded with a voluntary comment section where recipients could share their experiences relevant to any of the topics covered under the specific section in question.

In the following part of the report, we share the findings of our survey, broken down into five sections. Each section of the report includes the exact wording of the survey questions and responses as they appeared in the survey to ensure clarity and to provide readers with precise context for understanding the responses and findings, except where indicated otherwise in a note. Quotes from recipients, primarily from participants unless otherwise indicated, are included where relevant to provide further context and insights that may be useful for informing policy improvements and tailoring services to better meet the needs of participants.

Social Assistance and Demographic Profile

1.1. Since 2021, did you apply to Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) as a new applicant or returning client?

	Frequency	Percent
Ontario Disability Support Program	140	11.76
Ontario Works	1,050	88.24
Total	1,190	100.00

From 2021 to 2024, a total of 1,190 applications for social assistance were recorded within our non-random sample in Ontario. The majority of these, 88% or 1,050 applications, were for Ontario Works (OW), while the remaining 11% or 140 applications were for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). This distribution reflects the focus of our study on social assistance recipients capable of employment, particularly their experiences with life stabilization supports offered by OW/ODSP, alongside job services provided by Employment Ontario (EO) under the Integrated Employment Services model.

1.2. If you applied to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) since 2021, please indicate your household situation:

	Frequency	Percent
Adult Dependent of ODSP Recipient	2	1.43
Disabled, Single Household	110	78.57
Disabled, with Non-disabled Partner	8	5.71
Double Disability Household	19	13.57
Non-Disabled Partner of ODSP Recipient	1	0.72
Total	140	100.00

Among the 140 respondents who applied to ODSP since 2021, the majority, 78% (110 individuals), identified as living in a disabled, single household. Double disability households accounted for 13% (19 households), while 5% (8 households) comprised a disabled individual living with a non-disabled partner. A very small number were adult dependents of an ODSP recipient or non-disabled partners of an ODSP recipient, making up 1% (2 individuals) and 0.72% (1 individual), respectively. This data highlights the prevalence of single disabled individuals within our sample of ODSP applicants.

1.3. Which of the following best describes your current employment situation?

	Frequency	Percent
Available for Work (Conditional)	744	62.68
Employed 10-20 Hours Weekly	121	10.19
Employed 20-30 Hours Weekly	14	1.18
Employed 30+ Hours Weekly	17	1.43
Employed <10 Hours Weekly	291	24.52
Total	1,187	100.00

Note: Available for Work (Conditional) appears in survey response as: "I am not employed now, but I could be employed in the future with the right support and circumstances".

Among the respondents, 62% (744 individuals) report being conditionally available for work, indicating they are not currently employed but could be with appropriate support. Additionally, 24% (291 individuals) work less than 10 hours weekly, pointing to significant underemployment. The remainder are split among those working 10-20 hours weekly (10% or 121 individuals), 20-30 hours weekly (1% or 14 individuals), and over 30 hours weekly (1% or 17 individuals).

1.4. If you are employed now, do you still receive income supports from Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) monthly?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	68	13.18
Yes	448	86.82
Total	516	100.00

Excluding 669 responses from individuals who indicated they were not currently employed, among those employed, a significant majority, 85% (397 individuals), still receive monthly income supports from OW or ODSP. This indicates that despite having employment, many individuals rely on these programs to meet their financial needs, reflecting the potential issues of underemployment or low wages in the current job market. Only 14% (68 individuals) do not receive such supports, possibly indicating a more stable financial situation post-employment.

1.5. Since 2021, how often have you needed to access income supports from Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)?		
	Frequency	Percent
Continuously	914	76.94
Once	170	14.31
Twice	65	5.47
Three or more times	39	3.28
Total	1,188	100.00

The majority of respondents in our study, 76% (914 individuals), have continuously needed to access income supports from OW/ODSP. A smaller proportion accessed these supports only once (14% or 170 individuals) or twice (5% or 65 individuals), while 3% (39 individuals) accessed supports three or more times. This data highlights a significant dependence on social assistance programs among the majority of the respondents.

1.6. Have you been referred to Employment Ontario (EO) to look for job opportunities		
	Frequency	Percent
I don't know if I have been	22	1.85
No	729	61.31
Yes	438	36.84
Total	1,189	100.00

Three in five of the survey participants have not been referred to EO for job opportunities, while 36% (438 individuals) confirmed they had been referred. A small fraction, 1% (22 individuals), were unsure if they had been referred.

1.7.a. How long had you been unemployed?		
	Frequency	Percent
Less than 3 months	76	6.94
3 to 6 months	331	30.23
6 months to 1 year	475	43.38
More than 1 year	213	19.45
Total	1,095	100.00

The survey data regarding the duration of unemployment shows that 43% (475 individuals) of the participants had been unemployed for 6 months to 1 year. Another 30% (331 individuals) reported being unemployed for 3 to 6 months, and 19% (213 individuals) had been unemployed for more than one year. Only 6% (76 individuals) had been unemployed for less than three months. This distribution highlights the prolonged periods of unemployment faced by a significant number of respondents.

1.7.b. Distribution of Referral Status to Employment Ontario (EO) by Duration of Unemployment

Referral status to EO	Duration of Employment				Total
	< 3 mos.	3-6 mos.	6 mos. - 1 yr.	1 yr. >	
I don't know if I have been	1 1.32%	12 3.63%	4 0.84%	0 0.00%	17 1.55%
No	36 47.37%	185 55.89%	309 65.05%	123 57.75%	653 59.63%
Yes	39 51.32%	134 40.48%	162 34.11%	90 42.25%	425 38.81%
Total	76	331	475	213	1,095

This table details the relationship between the duration of unemployment and whether participants were referred to EO. Notably, the majority of those who were not referred had been unemployed for longer periods, with 65% in the 6 months to 1 year category and 57% in the more than 1 year category, suggesting a gap in connecting long-term unemployed individuals to EO services. Conversely, among those referred to EO, a relatively balanced distribution appears across different unemployment durations, but still, a significant portion (34%) were in the 6 months to 1 year category. Overall, among the sample, there was only a light skew in the distribution of referrals based on unemployment duration.

1.8. In which area(s) did you reside while accessing social assistance since 2021? Select all that apply.

	Frequency	Percent
Durham	98	8.25
Halton	53	4.46
Hamilton-Niagara	375	31.57
Kingston-Pembroke	18	1.52
Kitchener-Waterloo-Barrie	444	37.37
London	19	1.60
Muskoka-Kawarthas	15	1.26
Ottawa Windsor Sarnia	19	1.60
Peel	118	9.93
Stratford	1	0.08
Stratford-Bruce Peninsula	14	1.18
Toronto, Northeast, Northwest	9	0.76
York	5	0.42
Total	1,188	100.00

Over 68% of study participants, with 37% (444 individuals) in Kitchener-Waterloo-Barrie and 31% (375 individuals) in Hamilton-Niagara, resided in these two regions. As this is a non-random sample, these figures do not fully represent the overall population, reflecting specific regional patterns within the scope of this study.

1.9. How much money per month would you need to cover your basic living costs?		
	Frequency	Percent
Less than \$500	4	0.34
\$500 to \$999	9	0.76
\$1000 to \$1499	411	34.57
\$1500 to \$1999	644	54.15
More than \$2000	121	10.18
Total	1,189	100.00

Note: below the above question in the survey, we provided the following explanatory text to assist respondents in considering their answer: For example, Ontario Bill 185, 2016, called for the establishment of a social assistance rates board. It defined basic living costs as: food, shelter and utilities, transportation, telephone service, internet access, clothing, personal needs items, including personal hygiene products, household cleaning supplies, items and services relating to the educational and recreational needs of children, and any other expenses that may be considered basic necessities.

The majority of study participants indicated they would need at least \$1,500 per month to cover basic living costs, with 54% (644 individuals) estimating their needs between \$1,500 and \$1,999, and 10% (121 individuals) requiring more than \$2,000. A further 34% (411 individuals) reported needing between \$1,000 and \$1,499. This distribution underscores the high cost of living and the substantial financial requirements for basic necessities faced by participants in this study.

1.10. What is your age?		
	Frequency	Percent
18-24	58	4.88
25-34	181	15.22
35-44	415	34.90
45-54	444	37.34
55-64	90	7.57
65 or older	1	0.08
Total	1,189	100.00

The age distribution of study participants shows a concentration in the middle-age brackets, with 37% (444 individuals) between 45 and 54 years old, and 34% (415 individuals) between 35 and 44 years old. This highlights that the majority of social assistance recipients involved in the study are in their prime working years, which may reflect specific challenges in employment and economic stability within this age group.

1.11. What is your gender?

	Frequency	Percent
1. Woman	712	59.93
2. Man	470	39.56
3. Non-binary	6	0.51
Total	1,188	100.00

The gender distribution among the study participants reveals that 59% (712 individuals) identify as women, 39% (470 individuals) as men, and a small fraction, 0.51% (6 individuals), as non-binary. This reflects the broader trends observed in the overall population of social assistance beneficiaries, where women also make up the majority, particularly as heads of single-parent households in OW and ODSP.

1.12. Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?

	Frequency	Percent
Black	34	2.87
East Asian	27	2.28
First Nations, Inuit, or Métis	41	3.46
Latin American	46	3.88
Middle Eastern	23	1.94
Mixed or multiple ethnicities	28	2.36
South Asian	39	3.29
Southeast Asian	17	1.43
White	931	78.50
Total	1,186	100.00

The ethnic composition of the study participants predominantly consists of individuals identifying as white, who make up 78% (931 individuals) of the sample. The remaining 21% (255 individuals) comprise various other ethnic groups.

Due to the absence of a detailed profile of users accessing Integrated Employment Services, it is not possible to assess the representativeness of our sample. However, a review of participant demographics reveals a considerable degree of diversity. Notably, four out of five respondents had been unemployed for a year or less, aligning the sample with the employment focus of the program. Given the relatively low levels of employment observed, particularly in terms of hours worked, some degree of negative bias may be present in participant evaluations of the program.

OW/ODSP Common Assessment Process

2.1. Was the purpose of the common assessment made clear to you from the start?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	511	45.02
Yes	624	54.98
Total	1,135	100.00

Among the 1,135 participants who responded, 54% (624 individuals) understood the purpose of the common assessment from the start, whereas 45% (511 individuals) did not find the purpose clear. This data highlights ongoing communication challenges in effectively conveying the assessment's objectives with a substantial number of clients.

One survey participant shared, *"I didn't really get what we were doing in the beginning. It was all a bit confusing."* Another commented, *"The point of the assessment was explained upfront, which helped me prepare mentally for the questions asked."*

2.2. Given that providing personal information is a required part of the common assessment, how did you feel about sharing details about your life situation with your Caseworker?		
	Frequency	Percent
Comfortable	353	31.13
Uncomfortable	781	68.87
Total	1,134	100.00

Of the 1,134 participants who responded, 31% (353 individuals) felt comfortable sharing details about their life situation with their Caseworker, while a significant majority, 68% (781 individuals), felt uncomfortable.

One survey respondent noted, *"I was really uneasy about telling someone I don't really know all about my personal stuff."*

A different participant remarked, *"I was comfortable sharing information because my caseworker was very empathetic and assured me of confidentiality."*

2.3. How well did the common assessment capture your overall situation and needs?		
	Frequency	Percent
Not well	671	59.17
Well	463	40.83
Total	1,134	100.00

Out of 1,134 respondents, 59% (671 individuals) reported that the common assessment did not capture their overall situation and needs well, while 40% (463 individuals) felt that it did. A significant proportion of participants found the assessment lacking in comprehensively addressing their circumstances, suggesting a need for refinement in the assessment process to better align with the diverse needs and situations of all participants.

One recipient wrote, *"The assessment didn't really capture all the complexities of my situation. It felt like just checking boxes which doesn't reflect my daily challenges."*

2.4. Did you feel your Caseworker understood your personal needs and offered appropriate support?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	425	37.48
Yes	709	62.52
Total	1,134	100.00

A significant majority of respondents, 62%, felt that their Caseworkers understood their personal needs and offered appropriate support. This suggests that many are experiencing positive interactions and receiving the necessary assistance from their Caseworkers, despite the large number reporting feeling uncomfortable in sharing information and finding the assessment ill-fitting. However, there remains a substantial proportion, 37%, who believe their personal needs are not being fully met or understood. This highlights a significant area for improvement in ensuring that all clients receive the personalized and effective support they require.

A participant noted, *"I really appreciate how my caseworker took the time to understand my personal situation and at least tried her best to look for services that would be useful to me and available."*

Another remarked, *"My caseworker seemed rushed and not paying attention to the changing details of my living situation. The support offered wasn't really relevant or enough given my challenges."*

Similarly, a different participant shared, *"My case worker did not take the time to get to know me, my circumstances, my areas of strength. Very quickly I learned that it would be only a matter of time until my case worker would change."*

2.5. Were you provided with clear next steps or follow-up after the common assessment?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	747	65.93
Yes	386	34.07
Total	1,133	100.00

There is a significant gap in communication following the common assessment, with 65% of respondents indicating they were not provided with clear next steps or follow-up. This suggests that a majority of individuals were left uncertain about their future interactions or what to expect next from the service. One respondent in this situation commented: *"After the assessment, I was left without knowing what to do next exactly. I felt more confused and uncertain about the future of my case so I had to contact them for more information and get estimated timelines. They are always very busy and it's not easy getting answers to questions."*

On the other hand, 34% did receive clear directions, indicating that some parts of the service are managing to effectively communicate follow-up steps. Ensuring that all clients receive the same level of clarity and direction post-assessment would be a commendable goal.

2.6. Did the common assessment lead to better support services for you?		
	Frequency	Percent
I don't know	279	24.60
No	737	64.99
Yes	118	10.41
Total	1,134	100.00

The data reveals that almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents felt that the common assessment did not lead to better support services for them. Another quarter, (25%) of participants are uncertain about the impact of the assessment, while only one in ten felt that it led to better support services.

Given the goals of the program, this disjuncture between assessment and sense of support is a problem with likely impacts on the ability to sustain the trust and motivation of participants. It would be useful to understand from caseworkers whether they share this assessment or if it reflects a misunderstanding of the process. Solutions could involve reevaluating the criteria used during assessments, improving the training for assessors, or better aligning the assessment outcomes with available support services to ensure that more clients benefit from tailored and effective support. If the issue is misunderstanding, then communication and explanation need to be improved.

"It felt like they didn't really get what I need. I was hoping for more help that fits my situation."

"Nothing really changed after that talk. Still the same old problems. The support I need either doesn't exist in my area or there's really not enough of it to make a difference in my life."

OW/ODSP Life Stabilization Supports

3.1. Were you provided with information about the available personal supports through electronic messages or printed materials, in addition to verbal explanations from your Caseworker?

	Frequency	Percent
No	848	71.50
Yes	338	28.50
Total	1,186	100.00

A significant majority of respondents, 71%, reported that they were not provided with information about available personal supports through electronic messages or printed materials, in addition to verbal explanations from their caseworkers. This highlights a substantial gap in the communication strategies employed by the service, where reliance on verbal explanations alone may not be sufficient for ensuring that all clients fully understand the support options available to them.

"I never got any emails or papers about the help I could get. Everything was just said out loud and fast, and it's hard to remember all that."

"I was not even aware there were certain services."

"According to my [ODSP] worker, there are no supports available, whether you're trying to return to work or need assistance because you can't work."

"I wish I knew there were other supports like for food and transport. Maybe they weren't available and that's why I wasn't told about them."

3.2. Were you able to access all the person supports you needed?

	Frequency	Percent
I did not need any person supports	50	4.22
No	925	78.06
Yes	210	17.72
Total	1,185	100.00

Over three quarters (78%) of participants reported that they were not able to access all the person centered supports they needed. This could indicate a significant gap in service provision, particularly in ensuring timely access and broader availability of supports, pointing to areas where improvements may be necessary.

"I didn't get the support I needed to become ready for work. There's more that I need to get back to work and there just isn't enough services or income support to make a difference."

"I wasn't able to get much help from OW. I have been getting certain supports from Victims Services and my Community Centre."

"I really needed more help than I got. There were many things I needed but couldn't access due to availability or long waits."

"The assistance I received didn't really address all my needs. I still struggle to manage day to day expenses like food and bus transportation."

3.3. Please select the categories of person supports you received through Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Check all that apply. Please note availability of person supports available may vary across municipalities based on individual needs, level of funding and funding model.

	Frequency	Percent
Cell phone and/or cell plan	25	2.20
Childcare	17	1.50
Food security	282	24.85
Grooming	2	0.18
Housing stability	643	56.65
Not Informed about Supports	19	1.67
Referrals to Counselling Supports	1	0.09
Transportation costs	146	12.86
Total	1,135	100.00

Among the 1,135 respondents, the most commonly received personal support was housing stability, reported by 56% (643 individuals), followed by food security at 24% (282 individuals). Transportation cost assistance was received by 12% (146 individuals), while smaller portions accessed cell phone or cell plan support (2% or 25 individuals) and childcare assistance (1% or 17 individuals). Very few participants reported receiving grooming support (0.18% or 2 individuals) or referrals to counseling services (0.09% or 1 individual). Additionally, 1% (19 individuals) indicated they were not informed about available supports.

This distribution suggests that housing and food security are prioritized supports, aligning with their status as the largest household expenditures for most individuals. However, given the high demand for these essential supports, ensuring their adequacy remains critical. Policymakers may consider evaluating whether current housing and food security assistance levels sufficiently meet recipients' needs, particularly in the context of rising living costs. Strengthening these supports—whether through increased funding, expanded eligibility, or streamlined access—could further enhance financial stability and reduce barriers to employment for those on social assistance.

Other forms of person supports—such as transportation, childcare, and counseling—are accessed by fewer participants, potentially due to limited availability, awareness or eligibility criteria. They may also apply to the specific situations and opportunities faced by individual participants. Ensuring that participants are well-informed about the full range of supports available and assessing whether gaps exist in service provision could help improve access to critical resources that contribute to overall life stabilization. Expanding outreach efforts and enhancing coordination across municipalities may also help address disparities in support availability.

3.4. How would you describe your experience with accessing and receiving person supports?

	Frequency	Percent
Difficult seeking, quick provision	162	14.44
Difficult seeking, slow provision	888	79.14
Easy seeking, quick provision	17	1.52
Easy seeking, slow provision	55	4.90
Total	1,122	100.00

Note: The response options in the table and their corresponding wording in the actual survey are as follows: "Difficult seeking, quick provision" appeared in the survey as "Difficult to access but provided quickly once accessed." "Difficult seeking, slow provision" appeared in the survey as "Difficult to access and slow in being provided." "Easy seeking, quick provision" appeared as "Easy to access and provided in a timely manner." "Easy seeking, slow provision" appeared as "Easy to access but slow in being provided."

This question implicitly distinguishes between accessing and receiving supports by evaluating participants' experiences with both the ease or difficulty of navigating the system to identify and request supports (accessing) and the timeliness or delay in actually obtaining those supports after they were requested (receiving).

Among the 1,122 respondents who answered, four out of five (79%, 888 individuals) reported experiencing difficulty both in seeking and receiving supports, with slow provision once accessed. A smaller proportion, 14% (162 individuals), also found it difficult to seek supports but reported quicker provision upon access. Only 1% (17 individuals) described the process as easy with quick provision, while 4% (55 individuals) found it easy to access but slow in receiving the supports. These results highlight significant challenges in both navigating and receiving timely assistance, emphasizing the need to streamline access pathways and reduce delays in service delivery. There is an obvious need to ration scarce resources, but the reported experience is not one of being empowered and supported in taking steps towards employment.

"It's always a battle to find out what help is actually available and even harder to actually get it. The system is too slow, barebones and confusing."

"I've had to fight tooth and nail for most assistance. From going into the office to be answered or acknowledged, to calling different cities to confirm the information I was given."

"The services provided were few and not really adequate. I had some of my needs addressed but was not able to get access to decent mental health care."

"They make it so hard to find the right place to ask for help with accessing supports. And when you think you've done everything right, you end up waiting months. Then you find out it's not really available or enough to really help you. It's exhausting and frustrating."

3.5. Did support services staff members show respect and understanding towards your situation?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	350	31.39
Yes	765	68.61
Total	1,115	100.00

Among the 1,115 respondents, over two thirds (69%, 765 individuals) felt that support services staff members showed respect and understanding toward their situation, reflecting a commendable level of positive interactions and professionalism in service delivery. However, 31% (350 individuals) did not share this perception, highlighting the need for enhanced staff training and communication to ensure all clients feel respected and understood. Given the difficulties identifying and getting access to services revealed in the previous question, the relatively positive results indicate that support services staff are not generally seen to be blamed for these difficulties.

"I felt respected by the staff, which made a tough situation a bit easier to handle."

"Some staff were nice, but others didn't seem to understand my situation at all, which made me feel uncomfortable."

"Throughout my time accessing supports I have had really unpleasant conversations where staff have asked me questions that came in the form of micro aggressions. I knew it wasn't right to say the things they said but it wasn't worth making a complaint because I worried I'd be even more limited in accessing support."

3.6. Overall, did the assistance you received from Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) help you to better manage your life?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	884	74.41
Yes	304	25.59
Total	1,118	100.00

Only one quarter of respondents (26%, 304 individuals) reported that the assistance they received helped them to better manage their lives. Conversely, three quarters (74%, 884 individuals) indicated that the assistance did not lead to better life management. This discrepancy underscores the need for a review and potential enhancement of these programs to ensure they are effectively supporting individuals in achieving greater stability and improved life management. Such insights emphasize the necessity of evaluating where current person-centered supports may be inadequate and exploring specific targeted interventions or policy adjustments that could more effectively meet the needs of clients.

"The financial help is way too low to cover basic stuff like rent and food, which are very expensive now. This leaves me constantly struggling to make ends meet. It's really tough to get back on your feet when you're stressed about money and exhausted from trying to address your minimum needs. Finding a job on top of that is so hard and overwhelming. The economy and job market are brutal right now."

"OW doesn't adjust quickly to changes in circumstances. I cannot access new supports if my living condition changes."

"Communication from ODSP can be terrible. You never know if your benefits been cut for some reason until it's too late and trying to fix that is very stressful and slow."

3.7. Did the assistance you received from Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) help you become more ready for employment?

	Frequency	Percent
No	936	78.79
Yes	252	21.21
Total	1,118	100.00

Over three quarters (79%, 936 individuals) of the 1,188 surveyed reported that the assistance from OW/ODSP did not adequately prepare them for employment, while only 21% (252 individuals) believed it did. This indicates a pressing requirement for these programs to prioritize life stabilization as a foundational step to achieve employment readiness. By focusing on stabilizing participants' basic life conditions first, these programs can create a more effective pathway to workforce readiness, enhancing both immediate and long-term employment outcomes for beneficiaries.

"Need more support to have permanent employment. Cover my basic expenses for a month or provide decent housing, food and transportation for a short time so I can focus on getting a job to get myself off assistance. It's too hard meeting basic needs, and same time looking for AND finding work, especially now given living expense and job market."

"I need more funds for a cheap phone, new work clothing and transportation to be able to job hunt. There isn't enough to do this. You don't even get enough for rent and food."

Employment Ontario Common Assessment Process

4.1. How comfortable were you sharing your employment details with your Employment Ontario Caseworker when being assessed for employment services?

	Frequency	Percent
Comfortable	112	24.78
Uncomfortable	340	75.22
Total	452	100.00

Out of the total responses, 732 participants indicated that they had not been referred to or interacted with Employment Ontario services, and thus were excluded from the analysis focusing on comfort levels with sharing employment details. For the 452 respondents who did interact with their Employment Ontario Caseworker, only one quarter (25%, 112 individuals) reported feeling comfortable sharing their employment details, while a significant majority of 75% (340 individuals) felt uncomfortable. This level of discomfort is higher than for the OW/ODSP assessment, despite these participants having been referred based on their employment readiness. This highlights a notable discomfort among participants when discussing employment details, suggesting a need for improved communication strategies and enhanced support mechanisms to enhance trust and comfort in these interactions.

"I didn't feel comfortable sharing my work history with the caseworker. It felt like they were judging rather than helping. Also felt I needed more privacy."

4.2. How well did the questions in the employment assessment match what you needed for your job search?

	Frequency	Percent
Not well	281	62.03
Well	172	37.97
Total	453	100.00

In the employment assessment, 62% (281 individuals) of respondents felt that the questions did not align well with their job search needs, while 37% (172 individuals) believed the questions were well-matched. This indicates a significant portion of participants found the assessment misaligned with their specific employment objectives. A reevaluation of the assessment tools to ensure they are effectively tailored to diverse job-seeking contexts and individual career goals would be worth exploring. Alternatively, if respondents' views reflect a misunderstanding of the assessment process, then better explanation and communication is needed.

"I felt like my case worker didn't really get what I'm looking for in a job. There wasn't much support that felt right for my situation."

"The questions they asked didn't really match what I needed finding a job. Felt like they were using a one size fits all guide."

4.3. How well did the employment assessment take into account your personal circumstances, such as your health, caregiving responsibilities, transportation issues, etc.?

	Frequency	Percent
Not well	357	78.98
Well	95	21.02
Total	452	100.00

In assessing how well the employment assessment considered personal circumstances, over three quarters (79%, 357 individuals) of respondents felt that these factors were not adequately taken into account. Refining the assessment process to more comprehensively incorporate and address the varied personal circumstances that can impact an individual's job search and employment potential is worth exploring.

"The assessment didn't account enough that I have no reliable transportation, which limits where I can work. They need to consider these things."

"Not met. Required remote work as only option due to severe physical disability. Was offered in office jobs, all were refused."

"The needs and goals of a single parent with full legal and physical custody of a young child who has had issues and is also being dragged through court by the abusive ex are not fully understood or supported. There is nothing in place to help cover the cost of a psychoeducational assessment or therapy for the children, nothing to give the mother a break, nothing that offers a solution or a clear path forwards towards a balanced future where a parent is expected to work fulltime and be a parent to a neurodivergent child fulltime."

"They need to realize not everyone can do standard 9-5 jobs. My caregiving responsibilities for my elderly parent was completely overlooked. It's also that employers aren't going to accommodate people with less flexible schedules or special needs. The job market is also a mess."

4.4. Did you feel your Caseworker understood your employment goals and offered appropriate support?

	Frequency	Percent
No	167	36.87
Yes	286	63.13
Total	453	100.00

Regarding whether caseworkers understood and supported participants' employment goals, a majority of 63% (286 individuals) reported positively, feeling that their Caseworkers comprehended and provided appropriate support for their employment objectives. However, 36% (167 individuals) felt that their Caseworkers did not effectively understand or support their goals.

"My case workers have done their best despite everything. There was one or two who weren't great but most of them get how tough things are for us. They know the system doesn't give enough money or support and there aren't enough jobs, especially ones that fit our needs. Even though they understand all this, it doesn't mean I'm happy with the services or my situation."

4.5. Were you provided with clear next steps or follow-up after the assessment?

	Frequency	Percent
No	350	77.09
Yes	104	22.91
Total	454	100.00

After the assessment, less than a quarter (23%, 104 individuals) reported that they were provided with clear next steps or follow-up, whereas three quarters (77%, 350 individuals) did not receive clear guidance. This indicates a substantial gap in communication, highlighting the need for improvement in ensuring that all participants are fully informed about their next steps following an assessment.

"After the assessment, I was left without any instructions on what to do next or if I should expect to hear back or receive something. I felt lost and had to follow up to get more information and guidance."

4.6. If you disagreed with the assessment of your readiness for work, were you informed about how to appeal or challenge this decision?

	Frequency	Percent
No	66	14.67
Yes	384	85.33
Total	450	100.00

When participants disagreed with the assessment of their readiness for work, 85% (384 individuals) were informed about how to appeal or challenge this decision, while 15% (66 individuals) were not. This shows that the majority were aware of their options to contest the assessment, suggesting effective communication in this aspect of the process.

Employment Ontario Employment Services

5.1. Have you accessed any employment support services?

	Frequency	Percent
No	56	12.33
Yes	398	87.67
Total	454	100.00

Out of the respondents, 88% (398 individuals) reported that they had accessed employment support services, while 12% (56 individuals) indicated they had not. It is possible that those who answered "No" were still in the process of trying to access services or were actively seeking them but had not yet received any assistance.

5.2. Were you worried that you would lose your Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program benefits if you did not access employment services?

	Frequency	Percent
No	388	85.46
Yes	66	14.54
Total	454	100.00

Out of 454 respondents, 85% (388 individuals) were not worried about losing their benefits if they did not access employment services. However, 15% (66 individuals) were concerned about the potential impact on their benefits. This indicates that while the majority of participants feel assured about their benefits, a subset remains apprehensive.

"I didn't feel pressured about losing benefits for not using services. I was more worried about how relevant and available the services would be for my situation."

5.3. Did you feel like you needed to get your life stable before you were encouraged to start looking for a job?

	Frequency	Percent
No	310	68.13
Yes	145	31.87
Total	455	100.00

Just over two thirds of respondents (68%, 310 individuals) did not feel the need to stabilize their life circumstances before starting to look for a job, whereas 32% (145 individuals) felt that achieving life stability was necessary before seeking employment. This suggests that while a majority are ready to engage in job search activities, a significant portion believe that addressing foundational life issues is crucial for their readiness to enter the job market. Enhancing support for life stabilization could therefore be beneficial for these individuals, helping to better prepare them for successful employment outcomes.

"I felt like I needed to straighten out my life first like manage a sudden health issue and figure out a way to get around affordably, before jumping into a job search. I just need a little bit of time to get myself grounded. It's not like I want to live in poverty and receive OW."

5.4. Were you provided with detailed information about the different employment resources or services available to you through electronic messages or printed materials, in addition to any verbal explanations from your Employment Ontario Caseworker?

	Frequency	Percent
No	387	85.24
Yes	67	14.76
Total	454	100.00

Out of 454 respondents, 85% (387 individuals) reported that they were not provided with detailed information about the employment resources or services available through electronic messages or printed materials, in addition to any verbal explanations from their EO Caseworker. Only 14% (67 individuals) received such detailed information. This indicates a significant gap in the communication of available employment support services.

"I really would have appreciated more information about the supports available and receive them in hard copy or in an email so I can refer to them."

5.5. Did the employment support services consider your personal needs and circumstances when assisting you?

	Frequency	Percent
No	281	62.31
Yes	170	37.69
Total	451	100.00

A majority, 62% (281 individuals) reported that the employment support services did not consider their personal needs and circumstances when assisting them. In contrast, 37% (170 individuals) felt that their personal situations were adequately taken into account. This feedback indicates a substantial portion of participants found the services lacking in personalized attention.

"Yes, I've accessed the services and they provided some guidance, but it often felt generic and not tailored to my specific needs."

"The services didn't really consider my personal situation, like my caregiving responsibilities and my part time availability during certain days and hours."

5.6. Did the employment support services consider your past work and education experiences when assisting you?

	Frequency	Percent
No	69	15.23
Yes, basic skill review	372	82.12
Yes, detailed skill review	12	2.65
Total	453	100.00

Note: The survey responses were worded as follows: "No," "Yes, they considered my experience and education, but not in much detail" (reported as 'Yes, basic skill review'), and "Yes, they paid close attention to my skills and experiences" (reported as 'Yes, detailed skill review').

Only 15% (69 individuals) reported that the employment support services did not consider their past work and education experiences when assisting them. A significant 82% (372 individuals) indicated that their experiences were considered, but only in a basic review. Furthermore, a mere 2% (12 individuals) received a detailed review of their skills and experiences. This distribution suggests that while most employment support services acknowledge the past experiences of job seekers, the depth of consideration is generally superficial, with only a small fraction receiving thorough attention.

"They quickly went over my work history and skills, but it was all pretty basic. Nothing thorough to really match me with a good job."

"I told them I have a degree in graphic design and years of experience but I got job listings for warehouse work that was also far away from me."

5.7. How do you feel about the quality of resources provided by your employment services such as job search assistance (e.g., resume writing, interview preparation) and skills training?		
	Frequency	Percent
Dissatisfied	320	70.64
Satisfied	133	29.36
Total	453	100.00

A significant 70% (320 individuals) expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of resources provided by employment services. Conversely, only 29% (133 individuals) were satisfied with the resources available.

"I used the employment services and while they offered a little help, I think there's a lot more they could do to assist people find work."

"The support provided to me did not address technology at all, and the agency I was referred to was not very helpful and didn't improve my resume. The person assigned to help me had no idea what my job was, or what any of my duties listed meant. It was a waste of government money, and geared toward newcomers with no language skills as opposed to educated Canadians with disabilities."

"I felt stuck with the few choices they offered. None of them were relevant to the kind of work I am looking for."

5.8. How would you describe the options you had for training or job preparation through employment support services?		
	Frequency	Percent
Limited and inadequate options	352	79.28
Suitable choices available	92	20.72
Total	444	100.00

Note: The response "Limited and inadequate options" appeared in the survey as "Options were limited and did not fully meet my needs," and "Suitable choices available" was presented as "I had choices that suited my needs."

Excluding the 10 responses indicating "I did not receive or seek training/job preparation," the analysis of the remaining 444 respondents shows that the majority, 79% (352 individuals), found the options for training and job preparation limited and inadequate. In contrast, only 20% (92 individuals) felt that the choices available suited their needs. This significant discrepancy highlights the need for employment support services to enhance the variety and relevance of their training and job preparation programs to better meet the diverse requirements and career goals of participants.

"The support materials and training were pretty basic and didn't really meet my expectations or how the job market is right now."

"The training options were very limited and didn't meet my needs. Some of the classes were too elementary for my stage."

5.9. Did accessing employment services make it easier for you to search for a job? employment services such as job search assistance (e.g., resume writing, interview preparation) and skills training?

	Frequency	Percent
No	405	89.60
Yes	47	10.40
Total	452	100.00

Out of 452 respondents, a substantial 89% (405 individuals) reported that accessing employment services did not make it easier for them to search for a job, while only 10% (47 individuals) found that these services facilitated their job search. This indicates a significant gap in the effectiveness of employment services in assisting job seekers, underscoring the need for substantial improvements to ensure these services are truly beneficial and supportive in the job search process. Additionally, these findings may reflect broader challenges within the labour market itself.

"Accessing the services didn't really make my job search easier. Still found it challenging to find relevant job openings."

"I didn't feel that the type and amount of services available made any real difference in my job search process."

5.10. Were you able to find employment through the employment support services?

	Frequency	Percent
No	316	69.60
Yes	138	30.40
Total	454	100.00

Out of 454 respondents, more than two thirds (70%, 316 individuals) reported that they were unable to find employment through the employment support services, while 30% (138 individuals) successfully found jobs with the assistance of these services. This data suggests that while a significant portion of job seekers are benefiting from the support provided, there remains a substantial number who do not find these services effective in securing employment, indicating a need for ongoing evaluation and enhancement of how these services meet the needs of diverse job seekers.

"Despite using the service, I couldn't find a job. It feels like a lot of time spent with no results."

"I wasn't able to find work through their services. The support didn't align well with the job market in my line of work. Most of the job openings they suggested were in fast food or retail, which didn't consider my experience in custodial work or recognize I needed a job that offers slightly more pay."

5.11. Did you receive a job referral/placement through employment support services?

	Frequency	Percent
No	333	73.35
Yes	121	26.65
Total	454	100.00

The data reveals that nearly three quarters of respondents (73%, 333 individuals) did not receive job referrals or placements through employment support services.

5.12. Did the job placement you received match up well with your skills and education?		
	Frequency	Percent
Skills crucial for job	5	4.13
Skills helpful for job	70	57.85
Skills not required for job	46	38.02
Total	121	100.00

Note: For the analysis, the response options presented in the survey were categorized as follows: "Skills crucial for job" was worded as "Yes, my skills and education were absolutely necessary to perform the job," "Skills helpful for job" was worded as "Yes, my skills and education were broadly helpful to perform the job," and "Skills not required for job" corresponded to "No, my skills and education were not essential to performing the job." Responses indicating "I did not receive a job placement" (321 responses) were excluded from this analysis.

The data indicates that out of 121 respondents who received job placements, only 4.13% (5 individuals) found that the job matched well with their crucial skills, while 57.85% (70 individuals) reported that their skills were helpful but not crucial for the job. A significant 38.02% (46 individuals) stated that their skills were not required for the job at all. This suggests that a considerable portion of job placements may not align well with the skills and education of the individuals, potentially leading to underemployment or job dissatisfaction.

"They said they would help me find a job in hospitality, considering my background but I've yet to see any actual job placements in my field. Other jobs don't pay enough or the work conditions are terrible."

"I haven't received any actual job referrals that match my situation or skills."

"The only job placement I received was for a position that was far below my qualifications."

"I got a referral for a temporary labor job, which didn't really use any of my administrative skills. It felt like they were just trying to fill positions rather than find a good match."

5.13. Were you assisted in creating long-term employment goals for your job placements and searches?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	435	96.24
Yes	17	3.76
Total	452	100.00

The data shows that 96.24% (435 individuals) of respondents were not assisted in creating long-term employment goals for their job placements and searches, while only 3.76% (17 individuals) received such assistance. This highlights a significant gap in the support provided for long-term career planning within employment services.

5.14. Did you feel that you had the option to decline the employment plan, supports, or job placements recommended by Employment Ontario and its providers?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	58	12.86
Yes	393	87.14
Total	451	100.00

A large majority, 87.14% (393 individuals), felt that they had the option to decline the employment plan, supports, or job placements recommended by EO and its providers. However, 12.86% (58 individuals) felt they did not have this option.

Conclusion

There have been several studies of the Integrated Employment Services initiative to date. These include officially commissioned reports on the experiences and outcomes of the roll-out of the initiative, as well as deeper dives into specific problems such as administrative burden. There have also been community-based reports drawing on the results in the official reports or gathering the experiences of organizations delivering employment services.

While these reports differ in their overall assessments of the success of the Initiative, they converge on a few issues with the roll-out to date:

1. **The common assessment tool:** There are concerns that the tool asks for a lot of information up front, including information that may be quite sensitive, before a relationship of trust has been created.¹¹ There are also concerns that the streaming produced by the tool does not seem to align with client profiles. More generally, the process of assessment and categorization seems to require more nuance and client-centeredness in order to respond to the complex needs of service users.¹²
2. **Difficulties for employment service providers:** The metrics used to flow funding to employment service providers have produced challenges for these organizations, such as requiring heavy use of staff time to manage paperwork¹³ or needing to enroll large numbers of participants at the expense of spending time responding to their specific needs. There are concerns that the system is not sustainable for many service providers and is burning out their employees.¹⁴
3. **Concern that social assistance recipients are getting the short end of the stick** – that the manner in which they are being included in fact leaves them with less access to employment programming than when this was delivered by local Ontario Works offices.¹⁵ More generally, there were concerns that the incentive structure guiding system service managers made them hesitant to provide financial supports to social assistance clients, and to prioritize those who are closest to the labour market.¹⁶

While some studies have held focus groups and interviews with a small number of participants, the voice of participants, and especially participants from social assistance, has been largely absent in the discussion. The aim of this report was to provide more space for these voices by providing the responses to a set of survey questions about experiences with the Integrated Employment Services initiative, many of which relate to the problems listed above.

11 Goss Gilroy Inc. [Employment Services Transformation Pilot: Final Evaluation Report](#). Ottawa: Goss Gilroy Management Consultants, August 15, 2023, p. 47.

12 First Work, [Insights from the Ground: Promising Quality Services for Ontarians During the Transformation](#). Toronto: First Work, August 2024, p. 3.

13 First Work, [The Weight of Paperwork: A Time Diary Study of the Impacts of the Employment Services Transformation in Ontario](#). Toronto: First Work, July 2024.

14 Community Living Ontario and ODEN, [Tangled in Red Tape: Ontario's Employment Services Transformation is Leaving Too Many Job Seekers Behind](#). Toronto: Community Living Ontario, June 2024.

15 First Work, [Removing Roadblocks: Recommendations for Government and Service System Managers on the Employment Service Transformation in Ontario](#). Toronto: First Work, September 2024.

16 Alexi White and Sam DiBellonia, [Early Signs of Trouble: Findings from the third-party evaluation of Ontario's Employment Services Transformation](#). Toronto: Maytree, June 2024; Goss Gilroy Inc. [Employment Services Transformation Pilot](#), pp. 46–49.

Key Results of this Study

This study surveyed a large number of social assistance recipients who participated in the new system.

A first positive result is that the vast majority of respondents did not feel that they had to participate in employment services or else they would lose their benefits. Participants are therefore engaging on their own initiative and are motivated with their own employment goals, rather than out of fear.

A second positive result is the positive assessment of the caseworkers, both in the social assistance and the employment services stages. Despite relatively high levels of unhappiness with the assessment process and the employment services referrals, this did not seem to colour their assessment of the case workers, who were seen by the majority as supportive and understanding.

There were nevertheless recurring issues that produced dissatisfaction with the Initiative. They are broadly consistent with the concerns raised in the reports cited above, although they go beyond them in some respects. Three significant issues were:

1. **Information:** At a number of different places in the process, a majority of participants did not understand why things were being asked of them, or why they were being offered some options rather than others. Nearly half of respondents did not receive a clear explanation of the purpose of the OW/ODSP Common Assessment, and two-thirds reported not receiving clear next steps and follow-up after completing the assessment. About three quarters of respondents claimed they were not given information about all the available life stabilization support services. Only 15% of respondents who received Employment Ontario services reported receiving detailed information about available resources or opportunities.
2. **Understanding:** Participants have had experience in education, training, and the labour market, and hold employment goals. At various stages, a majority felt that these were not sufficiently understood and integrated into the process. For instance, three fifths of respondents felt that the OW/ODSP Common Assessment did not lead to better support services, and a similar share felt that the EO Common Assessment tool did not capture their needs well.

For respondents who participated in Employment Ontario programs, 95% reported receiving no assistance for setting and following longer-term job and career goals.

3. **Access:** There is an implied mutuality in employment programming, namely that the efforts made to participate are matched with supports to enable that participation and encourage labour market attachment. Participants felt that they did not have access to particularly useful services, and that these services did not help them obtain work. Only ten percent of respondents felt that the OW/ODSP Common Assessment process led to better support services. Over three quarters reported that they could not get access to all the life stabilization supports that they needed. Four out of five participants referred to Employment Ontario felt that they were offered limited and inadequate training and job preparation services, and nine in ten felt that they did not make it easier to look for a job.

Crucially, only one in four of those who had received Employment Ontario services had access to a placement or job opportunity, and fewer than one in three found a job through employment support services.

Recommendations

The survey results cannot be treated as representative as the survey is based on a convenience sample. Given the hours of employment reported by our respondents, it is quite likely that the survey overrepresents individuals whose experience did not lead to the result that they had hoped for and that the Employment Service Initiative aimed for. Nevertheless, four out of five respondents reported employment in the past year, so these are individuals that the program aims to reach.

The most straightforward recommendation from this survey is to improve communication with participants so that they can understand the processes that they are involved in and the reasons for why they are placed in one path or another.

Overall, our participants had positive views of the caseworkers that they dealt with, but felt that many important things were not explained to them. Better explanation and information might help increase trust and confidence in the process, as well as allow participants opportunities to provide relevant information that has been overlooked. In this, we echo First Work's call "for evaluating program effectiveness through participant feedback to address systemic challenges like access to services and long-term barriers to employment."¹⁷

The results reveal frustration about the mismatch between the respondents' understanding of their skills and the programming they received. We do not know enough about the respondents and their individual situations to judge whether their views are fully accurate or represent an unrealistic view of the resources available in the program or the shape of the labour market. **Clearer information and communication as well as more nuanced assessment and categorization tools would help close the gap between participants' understandings of their skills and the assessment provided by caseworkers.** This would ensure that participants' abilities are properly understood, on the one hand, and that the link to the prescribed programming is more clearly explained, on the other.

More generally, our respondents report income needs for basic living costs that are above the current OW and ODSP rates. Three quarters noted that assistance from OW/ODSP is too low to help them manage their lives and does not help them become employment ready. This is not a surprise, given that the current rates are well below the Market Basket Measure poverty line. The fact that the majority of respondents were streamed into life stabilization measures, and that the main measures they were provided were related to housing and food security is telling. The goals of the Employment Service Initiative are working at cross purposes with a social assistance system whose very low benefits put additional hurdles in the way of labour market participation. The need to invest in stabilizing housing and food also means that resources are focused there, rather than on supports more closely linked to the labour market such as transportation and childcare. **Making the Integrated Employment Service initiative more effective for social assistance recipients requires addressing the inadequacy of social assistance incomes.**

¹⁷ First Work, *Making It Work*, p. 95.

Appendix: Methodology

The data collection was conducted through an online anonymous survey available from early July to late November 2024. Informed consent was secured by requiring all participants to agree to the terms of participation through a consent button before starting the survey. Data was only collected from participants who completed and submitted all their responses at the end of the survey. No compensation was provided for participating in the survey.

For recruitment, the research team employed several strategies to reach potential participants. Social media advertisements were used, discussion boards frequented by social assistance recipients were leveraged, and the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction helped circulate the survey within its networks. Additionally, social assistance program staff distributed the survey link within their networks.

The recruitment methods used led to a non-random sample, primarily representing participants accessible through the selected platforms and networks. As a result, the sample does not represent the broader population of social assistance recipients engaged with the Integrated Employment Services system. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the study's findings.

The survey data was analyzed and organized using Stata, a statistical software. All data handling adhered to strict guidelines for data protection and storage to ensure the confidentiality and security of participant information.

The study received ethics clearance from Toronto Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Board.

The survey was collaboratively designed by the research team and the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, with significant input from an Ontario social assistance manager who brought detailed knowledge of the new Integrated Employment Services model.

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