

SAMS: MORE THAN A “GLITCH”

OPSEU’S CONCERNS REGARDING THE
SOCIAL ASSISTANCE MANAGEMENT
SYSTEM (SAMS)

Ontario Public Service Employees Union
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Introduction

The Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU) represents 130,000 public service workers across the province of Ontario. OPSEU members work in a variety of sectors including the Ontario Public Service, community agencies, colleges, the Ontario Liquor Control Board, municipal offices, school boards and mental health services.

OPSEU represents approximately 2,000 front-line staff working in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and the Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities Program (ACSD). OPSEU also represents approximately 200 front-line workers who deliver the Ontario Works (OW) program in Lanark County, Leeds and Grenville, Lennox and Addington, Hastings, Grey County and Timmins.

In Ontario there are 895,052 beneficiaries of social assistance. This number includes 448,515 beneficiaries of the Ontario Disability Support Program and 446,537 beneficiaries of the Ontario Works program.¹

Social Services Solutions Modernization Project (SSSMP)

In November 2009, the ministry launched the Social Services Solutions Modernization Project (SSSMP) to “enhance the delivery of social assistance through technology and business renewal.”² The centerpiece of this project is the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS), a common case management platform for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW).

As conceived by the Ministry of Community and Social Services, SAMS is intended to streamline business processes and increase efficiency in social assistance service delivery province-wide. It is viewed by the ministry as a modern and flexible alternative to the previous case management system, Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT).³

The SSSMP was developed in part to address concerns raised by the Auditor General in 2009 audits of the Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works. The Auditor General noted several key concerns with the administration of both social assistance programs including issues determining appropriate financial eligibility; long delays in issuing program eligibility decisions; and a lack of internal accountability controls in SDMT.

The push for new case management software also forms part of the Ontario government’s overall Major Applications Portfolio Strategy (MAPS). Under MAPS, the government is moving to modernize infrastructure and information technology applications which are near “technological obsolescence.”⁴

The benchmarks of the MAPS and SSSMP strategies provide the yard stick under which to measure the success of SAMS. As such, the province promised that the implementation of SAMS would:

- Improve customer service through new online services and enhanced service tools.
- Streamline business processes.
- Facilitate timely implementation of policy and program changes.
- Provide for effective management of client data and other information to support service planning and delivery.
- Facilitate increased audit capacity and accountability.⁵

To date SAMS has failed to deliver promised flexibility and functionality. Full implementation of online services tools has yet to be realized; technical problems have prevented the development of new and streamlined business processes; data conversion issues have compromised client data integrity; and the heavy use of workarounds undermines SAMS’ audit capacity and accountability.

The experience of front-line workers provides indisputable evidence of SAMS’ failure to deliver the province’s stated objectives. Since implementation, OPSEU members in the ODSP and OW programs have been scrambling to navigate a myriad of technical problems and institute workarounds to mitigate the impact on the nearly 900,000 beneficiaries of provincial and municipal social assistance supports.

Value-for-Money Analysis

Development and Implementation

The development and implementation of large scale IT projects are high-risk, but offer real potential to improve service delivery. Given SAMS' failure to achieve benchmarks set by the Ministry of Community and Social Services, it is clear at this time the costs of SAMS far outweighs any perceived benefits.

Funding for the development and overall implementation of the SAMS is the responsibility of the Ministry of Community and Social Services. In 2011, the Auditor General noted that the cost of SAMS was expected to be **\$165 million**, with an additional **\$37 million** in maintenance costs up to the implementation date.⁶ However, this initial estimate was based on a planned 2013 program launch. The intended implementation date of June 2013 was subsequently delayed three times with each change to the timeline increasing the development costs for the province and its municipal service partners.

Software flaws and data conversion issues ultimately delayed the launch of SAMS until November 2014, adding an additional **\$37 million** to the pre-implementation price-tag of SAMS.

Additionally due to the project delays, municipal partners delivering the Ontario Works program incurred significant additional costs due to training, re-allocation of staff, and lost productivity. To assist municipalities with these additional costs, the ministry

announced in December 2013 that it would provide administrative relief in the amount of **\$3 million** to their Ontario Works and First Nations delivery partners based on each delivery agent's share of the standard Ontario Works caseload. This funding was intended to assist with additional costs associated with "re-tooling peripherals, meeting technical specifications, organizational and business process changes, delivery of training and other allowable Ontario Works administration costs."⁷

In August 2014, the Minister of Community and Social Services confirmed to OPSEU that the overall design and implementation of SAMS was expected to cost just under **\$250 million**. This figure included the Online Application for Social Assistance launched in May 2011.⁸

A review of the *Public Accounts of Ontario* for the period 2009-10 to 2013-14 reveals approximately **\$160 million** in payments to 78 vendors that participated in the development and implementation phase of the project.⁹ This is **\$80 million** less than the **\$250 million** cited by the Minister in her August 2014 letter to OPSEU. Although some of this figure can likely be attributed to additional staffing and training costs, it remains unclear what additional costs make up this difference.

The additional costs incurred by municipal partners during the development phase suggest that the **\$250 million** figure cited by the government does not tell the whole story. It would not be unfair to suggest that cost-overruns at the municipal level add an additional **\$20 million** to the pre-implementation price tag of SAMS.

Post-Implementation

Post-implementation SAMS problems have been expensive. Both the province and its municipal partners have incurred significant additional costs due to the sheer volume of technical complications introduced by the SAMS software. These costs are primarily associated with additional staffing and overtime; additional training; incorrect benefit payments; and other expenses such as IT spending and T5 errors.

OPSEU estimates that post-implementation technical flaws have added an additional \$110 million to the overall cost of SAMS.

Provincial Post-Implementation Costs – approximately \$86.5 million

Additional Staffing and Overtime - \$5 million

In January 2015, the ministry confirmed that it will spend **\$5 million** on unanticipated costs such as overtime and additional staffing.¹⁰

Incorrect Benefit Payments - \$20 million

In November 2014, the ministry reported a single “glitch” in SAMS cued up **\$20 million** in overpayments to 17,000 social assistance recipients. The ministry suggested that only 6,000 of these overpayments were deposited into client’s accounts.¹¹

Further overpayments have been issued in each pay-run since SAMS was launched in November 2014. Additional overpayments have occurred in a significant number of “one-off” cases as well. The total value of all these overpayments is unknown.

Other Expenses - \$61.5 million

On December 8, 2014 the ministry committed an additional **\$5 million** in one-time funding to Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) to assist with the costs of implementing SAMS at the local level. Each service manager received \$50,000 in base funding with the remaining funds distributed by caseloads.¹²

In January 2015, the ministry indicated it would spend **\$11 million** on “operating funds for the system.” Additionally, it confirmed that it would spend **\$40 million** between January and October 2015 on “post-implementation transitional operating costs” including IT staffing and IBM support to run SAMS.¹³

In February 2015, the ministry revealed that it would be engaging a third-party advisor to evaluate SAMS. This advisor would be asked to provide recommendations to improve processes and service delivery and offer a strategy to improve the system overall.¹⁴ This review is expected to cost approximately **\$300,000**. The third-party was later confirmed to be PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).¹⁵

It remains unclear if the contract for the third-party review was tendered or sole-sourced to PwC. OPSEU submits that a review of the procurement process should be initiated to ensure the government has followed all procurement regulations before awarding the contract to PwC.

On March 19, 2015, the ministry announced it would be providing its municipal partners with an additional **\$5 million** in “one-time” funding to assist with ongoing implementation costs.

On March 20, 2015, the ministry confirmed that more than 500,000 T5 statements were printed with errors. The cost to remedy these errors is estimated to be **\$175,000**.¹⁶

Municipal Post-Implementation Costs - Approximately \$25 million

Additional costs have proven to be particularly acute for municipal service partners. Unanticipated costs can be problematic for municipalities as they have limited revenue streams and the *Ontario Municipal Act* requires them to run balanced budgets. All financing for financial obligations and disbursements in a fiscal year must be covered in the budget.¹⁷

As a result, the Association of Municipalities Ontario (AMO) has called on the ministry to cover all of the post-implementation costs of SAMS until the system is stabilized.¹⁸ To date the ministry has issued two “one-time” allocations of **\$5 million** to municipal service partners to assist with additional costs.¹⁹

The full extent of additional staffing and overtime costs for municipalities is unknown however; several municipalities have indicated that these costs are significant. Recent reports suggest that municipal service partners are spending millions on additional staffing, overtime, additional training and erroneous overpayments.²⁰

Avoidable Costs

These significant additional costs incurred by the province and its municipal service partners could have been avoided if the ministry had heeded the concerns raised by its front-line workers in advance of SAMS’ implementation in November 2014.

Local champions and learning facilitators from the ODSP and OW programs noted issues with SAMS software prior to the launch of province-wide training sessions in January 2014. Municipal service partners informed the ministry that training technology provided by SSSMP was plagued with performance issues. Despite SSSMP’s awareness of performance issues they forged ahead with training.²¹

OPSEU members continued to identify serious flaws with program functionality during training sessions in the winter and summer of 2014. These concerns were communicated to project staff and OPSEU leadership discussed ongoing technical problems with management at the Ministry Employer Relations Committee (MERC).

Additionally, 40 of 47 Ontario Works delivery sites raised concerns with project staff regarding SAMS functionality in the winter of 2014. Unfortunately, SSSMP pressured ODSP and OW offices into proceeding with training and testing despite program flaws.²²

Despite serious concerns with program functionality and site-readiness the ministry launched SAMS in November 2014.

It should be noted that ministry did not pilot SAMS prior to the province-wide launch in November 2014. A pilot project could have facilitated the identification of program flaws that manifests in the course of regular service delivery and provided the ministry the opportunity to correct these flaws in advance of full implementation.

Problems with Curam Software in Other Jurisdictions

OPSEU submits that the problems experienced with Curam software in other jurisdictions should have raised concerns and caused the ministry to do its due diligence to ensure the SAMS software did not contain similar flaws prior to launching the software province-wide in November 2014. The ministry's inaction has led to significant and costly consequences for thousands of social assistance recipients and certainly added to overall price tag of SAMS.

Greater diligence in addressing pre-implementation program flaws could have saved taxpayers as much as **\$110 million** in known post-implementation costs.

In January 2014, Curam software was blamed for technical problems with health insurance exchanges in Maryland, Minnesota and the District of Columbia. In Maryland, these problems resulted in lost applications.²³ In D.C., Curam software was struggling to calculate subsidies in connection with complex family situations.²⁴

In response, Governor Mark Dayton of Minnesota wrote to the CEO of IBM to outline the serious issues with the software: "Your product has made it impossible to provide Minnesotans with any reasonable customer service. Our Call Centre wait times have averaged over 50 minutes... The cost to address them and make sure consumers will have coverage on January 1, 2014, is excessive and unacceptable."²⁵

In Maryland, state Information Technology Secretary Isabel FitzGerald and Health

Secretary Dr. Joshua Sharfstein stated that Curam was "much less mature out of the box than the company had promised" and that "the product is still not fully functional or completely delivered." They also reported that the number of defects continued to grow, even after monthly fixes.²⁶

The problems in Maryland, Minnesota and the District of Columbia occurred almost a year before SAMS was implemented in Ontario. Moreover, the problems experienced in these jurisdictions are markedly similar to the program flaws in SAMS.

However, unlike Maryland, Minnesota and D.C. where leadership has criticized IBM/Curam for its failure to deliver a functional product, the Minister of Community and Social Services has consistently underestimated the severity of SAMS' problems characterizing them as a "glitch" or akin to problems with her Blackberry.²⁷

Problems with Curam Software in Ontario

Curam software has proven problematic for another program delivered by the Ministry of Community and Social Services. In the fall of 2014, the Auditor General noted that the Developmental Services Consolidated Information System (DSCIS) used in Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) offices and developed by Curam to record personal information and service details for every adult with a developmental disability was flawed and did not record prioritization scores or vacancies on wait lists. The report notes that DSO office staff described the system as a "semi-operational database that was intended to help manage work, but has instead forced them back to tracking information themselves."²⁸

This raises further concern. In January 2011 the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) awarded Curam the contract to develop a new integrated computer system for Children's Aid Societies across the province.²⁹ Currently, the implementation of the new system is delayed with only three of 46 Children's Aid Societies having gone online with the system to date. The ministry has cited problems with data conversion as the key reason for the delay.³⁰ Full implementation is not expected before 2019-20.³¹

OPSEU is not aware of any efforts by the government to recoup the costs of delays from IBM/Curam. If the government had done its due diligence it would have seen that Curam has a track record for delivery products rife with bugs and technical deficiencies.

OPSEU's Concerns

From OPSEU's perspective, there are several areas of concern with respect to the development and implementation which have contributed to SAMS' failure to meet established benchmarks. We believe consideration of these factors is critical when conducting a value-for-money assessment of SAMS. These can broadly be grouped into five core categories:

Procurement

- The ministry was limited by its Vendor of Record arrangements with Curam and Oracle and failed to consider custom solutions that could have been more cost-effective and better suited for social assistance delivery

Training

- The ministry failed to provide meaningful and substantial training in SAMS prior to its launch in November 2014.

Program Integrity

- Technical errors, program inadequacies and the heavy use of workarounds undermined accountability and the integrity of the ODSP and OW programs.

Impact on Clients

- The ministry's failure to implement a functional case management system has had significant and costly effects for recipients of social assistance supports.

Impact on Front-line Staff

- Front-line workers are facing significant workload pressures leading to considerable lost productivity in the ODSP and OW programs. This contributes to both the measurable and immeasurable costs of SAMS.

Procurement

In 2009, the Ministry of Community and Social Services launched the multi-year Social Service Solutions Modernization Project (SSSMP) to "enhance the delivery of social assistance through technology and business renewal."³² The centerpiece of this project is the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS), a common case management platform for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW).

The SAMS software is based on a commercial off-the-shelf platform designed by Curam, a Dublin-based software company specializing in Social Enterprise Management (SEM) solutions. The Ministry of Community and Social Services awarded Curam the contract for SAMS in January 2010.³³ Curam was purchased by IBM in December 2011.³⁴

OPSEU submits that the SSSMP project's first major oversight was that it did not critically examine the ministry's Vendor of Record (VOR) agreement's capacity to meet the needs of social assistance delivery. In selecting successor software to SDMT, the ministry only considered two commercial off-the-shelf platforms: Oracle's Siebel CRM Social Services Suite and Curam's Solution for Social Assistance.

The ministry's evaluation determined Curam's software to be the best fit. However, in making its determination the ministry did not seek the input of front-line staff and the rationale for selecting Curam's solution was not disclosed.

By relying solely on the VOR options, the Ministry did not avail themselves of the capacity to entertain custom designed solutions.

The business requirements for a social assistance delivery software solution can be contained in three modular concepts. A payment administration system for the disbursement of income support and benefits, an eligibility and risk management toolbox for the granting and tracking of case files, and a case planning suite to assist client outcomes and provide a narrative case history to inform service delivery. Aside from the core modules the solution also requires a capacity to have third party interfaces for data sets (e.g. Revenue Canada information) and an accessible out-facing portal for client access.

A custom solution could have been procured that was better suited to interpret the 800 rules and sub-rules unique to the ODSP and OW programs. Moreover, a custom solution may have provided a cheaper, more accountable program with the power to mandate change remaining in the hands of the government, not IBM/Curam.

British Columbia's recent struggles with Oracle's software, rejected by the Ontario government, further suggests that commercial-

off-the-shelf solutions may not be best suited to deliver complex social assistance program.³⁵

Additionally, allowing for greater competition during the procurement phase may have placed a greater burden on the bidders to make a cost conscious bid. By choosing from the VOR, Oracle and Curam were given greater power in negotiations for software and service contracts.

Unfortunately, the Ontario government's ongoing decimation of its internal IT capacity prevented the ministry from turning to qualified Ontario Public Service IT professionals to develop a custom solution through meaningful consultations with stakeholders.

Efforts by OPSEU to get disclosure around the procurement have been denied on the grounds that the disclosure of this information would violate the proprietary nature of the VOR contracts. This has made it particularly difficult to assess whether the product delivered by Curam/IBM meets the criteria established by the ministry in the purchase agreement.

In our view, a review of the agreement between Curam/IBM and the Ministry of Community and Social Services is absolutely imperative. In particular, did the provisions of the contract ensure that technical flaws and system errors were the responsibility of the vendor? Are Ontario taxpayers on the hook for the ballooning costs associated with fixing SAMS?

Training

In the summer of 2013, the ministry engaged front-line staff in ODSP to solicit volunteers to serve as "Local Champions." Champions were provided some SAMS training in advance so that they would be positioned to assist their colleagues in end-user training sessions planned for January 2014.

In Ontario Works, SSSMP provided core training materials and technology, but each municipality was responsible for facilitating training sessions for its staff members. Designated caseworkers were provided seven (7) days of “train the trainer” to position them to serve as learning facilitators for their colleagues.

Training sessions for front-line staff in both programs commenced in January 2014. The curriculum was developed by IBM Canada and Iserve Technology. Training sessions were scheduled over a 13-week period. Training consisted primarily of e-learning sessions (videos and webinars) and self-study. OPSEU members have indicated that training materials were heavily flawed and contained examples that were not relevant to their work. Direct questions about SAMS could not be answered by trainers and were sent to project staff for response. Many members did not receive responses to their issues and concerns.

Municipal training was coordinated by local learning facilitators. Training sessions were conducted using an early version of SAMS which was quite distinct from the version that was launched in November 2014. The training sessions were split into individual modules and the practice environment platforms were limited in scope. Training modules focused on very simple scenarios which rarely occur in the course of regular service delivery.

In March 2014, the ministry decided to delay the implementation of SAMS to the fall of 2014 and rescheduled training sessions for the summer of 2014.³⁶ OPSEU members insist that flaws and problems identified during training played a role in the ministry’s decision to delay implementation. These early training sessions created real concern amongst front-line staff about the program’s suitability to administer Ontario’s complex social assistance programs.

In light of this, on July 11 OPSEU president Warren (Smokey) Thomas and CUPE Ontario president Fred Hahn wrote to Minister Helena Jaczek to outline their concerns with SAMS. In their letter they warned the minister that if significant improvements were not made to the program, the launch in November would be rife with problems and have severe consequences for recipients of social assistance.³⁷

The Minister responded on August 13, 2014 by dismissing the concerns outlined by OPSEU and CUPE and indicated that she is “confident of the value this solution will bring to the clients we serve and to the staff that deliver our programs.”³⁸ To date, the minister continues to defend SAMS and has characterized serious defects as “glitches.”³⁹

Refresher-training commenced in the summer of 2014. Training sessions once-again consisted primarily of e-learning and self-study sessions. OPSEU members were expected to spend approximately eight (8) hours per week training themselves in SAMS in addition to performing their normal work duties. No overtime was provided to facilitate training. Some work-load relief was offered, but this merely amounted to shifting priorities, such as setting aside evidence verification processes and shifting bulk vendor invoices to central staff for payment.

OPSEU members continued to identify deficiencies with training materials and expressed concerns with the functionality of SAMS. In September 2014, staff began training in a “site-readiness environment”, essentially a practice version of SAMS that would permit them to perform specific job functions.

This training environment proved flawed. Specific functions were broken into mini modules. Modules frequently froze and did not function as intended. Front-line staff identified

further functionality problems and were concerned by the systems inability to perform important job functions. Functions that did work proved to be onerous and time consuming.

When SAMS was launched in November, many front-line workers felt dissatisfaction with the inadequate training provided by the ministry. In December 2014, OPSEU conducted a survey of its members working in the ODSP and OW programs. 76 per cent of survey respondents indicated that SAMS training was inadequate or insufficient. 36 per cent of respondents indicated they received less than twenty (20) total hours of training prior to implementation.

This is a critical point. If front-line workers had been provided meaningful and comprehensive training in advance of SAMS implementation the impact of technical problems and the resulting decline in productivity may have been less acute, with fewer negative outcomes for social assistance recipients.

Program Integrity

In his 2009 audits of the ODSP and OW programs, the Auditor General highlighted ongoing integrity concerns with the SDMT software. These concerns included unexplained system errors and omissions related to client information; a lack of internal controls that could allow SDMT users to issue “bogus receipts or fraudulent payments”; heavy use of system workarounds to perform critical functions; and an inability to manage the employment assistance function, a key component of the Ontario Works program.⁴⁰

OPSEU submits that technical flaws and inadequacies in the SAMS software continue to undermine program integrity and has added a significant burden on front-line workers.

As the ODSP and OW programs are “last resort” income support programs, clients do not have the economic resilience to endure delays in payments without experiencing hardship. As a result, the primary focus of front-line staff has been reduced to ensuring clients receive their income supports. This is primarily being achieved through the use of workarounds.

In ODSP, caseworkers have been utilizing the “legacy benefit” tool as a means to issue payments to clients that SAMS otherwise refuses to issue. The legacy benefit tool was never intended to be used for regular service delivery. It was integrated into SAMS to issue pre-January 2013 payments “to accommodate existing SDMT converted benefits that are either retired or will no longer be available as a selection in SAMS.”⁴¹ Essentially, its use is intended to capture one-off issues and issue payments should an order from the Social Benefits Tribunal (SBT) or other decision maker determine eligibility existed for a benefit that no longer exists (e.g. Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefits).

Use of legacy benefit began as an employee driven work-around but, due to the quantity and severity of payment related issues with SAMS, this workaround became a standardized solution in Ministry tip sheets and troubleshooting efforts. A “how to use legacy benefit” user sheet is included in the current SAMS User Guide available to ODSP and OW caseworkers.

As legacy benefit does not categorize the payments to the appropriate benefit type, there is limited integrity for funds issued and increased problems for fixing the client file once an IT solution remedies the initial problem(s) that prevented the payment from issuance. This adds a significant workload burden and makes other tasks such as T5 calculations more complex, requiring manual calculation.

Additionally, legacy benefit amounts need to be reconciled “in relation to cost sharing as well as identifying whether or not the benefit is T-5 eligible.”⁴²

In addition to legacy benefit, caseworkers in the OW program have also been utilizing the “override evidence” tool which is unique to the SAMS interface used by municipal delivery partners. Override evidence essentially forces the system to ignore any and all information in the system and issue the amount determined as correct by the caseworker. In so doing, this tool ignores all legislative rules embedded in the software and necessitates a complicated and time intensive process to ensure proper entitlements are issued.

The use of the legacy benefit and override evidence tools for regular service delivery raises considerable accountability concerns. Both these functions make it difficult to track the purpose or rationale behind the issuance of funds. When conducting file reviews it may in fact prove impossible to determine the reasoning behind each decision unless clear notes are included in the files. Given that SAMS was intended to reduce reliance on caseworker notes, this could prove to be a considerable problem going forward.

Moreover, one municipal partner has reported that due to problems with erroneous payments it is not able to determine its “actual monthly expenditures” and that this is affecting the completion of “accurate year-end financials.”⁴³ It is not clear if this is a province-wide issue, but it raises concerns that technical flaws are preventing the ministry and its municipal service partners from determining the amount of money that is being paid out in error.

The ongoing use of workarounds is not optimal and will continue to undermine program

integrity and increase the cost of service delivery until the system is stabilized.

Impact on Clients

When SAMS was launched in November 2014, OPSEU members working in the ODSP, OW and ACSD programs immediately identified serious problems and flaws in SAMS’ ability to deliver critical program supports. Consequently, the impact for recipients of social assistance was felt immediately.

The first pay-run in late November (ODSP) and early December (OW) saw thousands of social assistance recipients receive incorrect sums, or no payments at all. The ministry was quick to report that these problems were the result of a “*single glitch*” which was subsequently being repaired. However, by December 10 the ministry had confirmed that additional payments had been issued in error. By mid-December, it was estimated that more than 36,000 Ontario families had been paid incorrect sums due to technical problems with SAMS.⁴⁴

By the end of December, the ITS Help Desk had received more than 10,000 separate incident tickets reporting problems with the program. This provided a clear indication that SAMS problems were not the result of a single “glitch.”

Subsequent pay-runs in December, January and February continued to generate payment issues for recipients. Media reports covered stories of social assistance recipients being evicted from their homes and of clients receiving far too much or not enough.⁴⁵

Although the number of affected clients has declined in recent months, problems with the program persist. The impact to clients has been mitigated to an extent through the heavy use of

workarounds by ODSP and OW caseworkers. However, caseworkers continue to struggle with data conversion errors and payment accuracy issues. These issues still lead to erroneous payments and incorrect eligibility decisions.

The consequences of underpayments have been heavily reported in the media however, erroneous overpayments will certainly cause undue hardship for many recipients of ODSP and OW supports.

For example, the *Ontario Disability Support Act* outlines the structure of the rules-based framework under which SAMS operates. However, SAMS inadequacies have resulted in a change of policy with regard to the collection of overpayments.

As SAMS cannot distinguish between collectable and uncollectable benefits the ministry has changed its policy to make all benefits collectable. This is of significant concern with respect to dollar-for-dollar expense related benefits such as Mandatory Special Needs (MSN) and Medical Transportation as these benefits are now recovered at a five per cent rate on all entitlements. This adds a hardship that could be found to be a breach of the intent of the ODSP Act.

In addition to problems with income supports and other program benefits, many 2014 T5 statements have been affected by SAMS. T5 statements reflect income received from social assistance. Due to the large number of clients that received incorrect sums many T5 statements for the 2014 tax year contain incorrect income information. This may potentially impact clients' entitlements to provincial and federal tax benefits, the Trillium Benefit and the Ontario Child Tax Benefit.

On March 20, 2015, the ministry confirmed that more than 500,000 T5 statements were printed with errors. The cost to remedy these errors is estimated to be \$175,000.⁴⁶

Impact on Front-line Staff

OPSEU members take pride in their ability to provide assistance to Ontario's most vulnerable citizens. Unfortunately, SAMS has undermined their ability to deliver a reliable public service and there is legitimate fear that SAMS has undermined public confidence in social assistance program delivery.

The direct result of this is both monetarily and emotionally significant. Program fixes, lack of accountability and lost productivity all contribute significantly to the direct and indirect costs of SAMS.

Immediately after SAMS was launched in November 2014 OPSEU members identified serious problems and flaws with the program. These included:

- Critical data for more than 78,000 cases failed to convert from the previous system. This resulted in caseworkers having to manually resolve each case. A monumental task for caseworkers and for recipients.
- Basic program functions did not work. Caseworkers were unable to login, issue extended health benefits, add or delete dependents, add or delete trustees, and update address information.
- Lengthy delays in the processing of program supports (e.g., payments and benefits).

- Data entry taking 2-3 times longer in SAMS than in SDMT.
- The SAMS browser is not compatible with other ministry programs like child care and requires workarounds to address incompatibility.
- SAMS automatically issued letters to clients providing inaccurate information about their files. This resulted in a significant increase in call volume.
- SAMS automatically deposited erroneous payments into client's bank accounts. This was a product of data conversion errors tricking the system into thinking clients were owed arrears.

These issues created significant workload pressures for front-line staff in both programs. Productivity ground to a halt and staff worked long hours and incurred overtime to try and lessen the impact on social assistance recipients. The cost of additional staff and overtime have been significant and have generated particular concern amongst municipalities as they are responsible for covering fifty per cent of the cost of service delivery.

To mitigate the impact on the stakeholders, the ministry and its municipal partners have reduced the role of caseworkers to the core function of ensuring recipients receive their monthly entitlements. Job functions such as eligibility verifications, overpayment recovery, medical reassessments, client orientation meetings, employment support and new applicant screening have either been suspended or given very low priority. These all have potential for financial impacts to ratepayers municipally and provincially.

Moreover, these offsets provide little in the way of relief but do serve to undermine program

integrity and facilitate a growing backlog that will create significant workload pressures in the future.

For example, in the OW program, Enhanced Verification Reviews, which normally occur on a regular schedule, have been suspended until September 2015. Enhanced Verification Reviews ensure OW recipients continue to be program eligible and receive appropriate entitlements. Part of the reason for this decision is it remains unclear how the Enhanced Verification function will operate in SAMS. Similarly, in ODSP, the Eligibility Verification Process (EVP) has been suspended as well. Both of these decisions serve to negatively impact clients in the future by generating retro-active overpayments that will need to be recollected.

In both cases, the failure of SAMS has resulted in the suspension of the core accountability functions of both social assistance programs. Until these are reinstated there exists the real possibility that ineligible recipients in both programs will continue to receive program supports they are not entitled to or denied. Moreover, once resumed there will be a considerable backlog of reviews to complete adding to unsustainable workload pressures.

The bottom line is that ongoing technical problems, exacerbated by inadequate training, are placing enormous pressure on front-line staff. In this environment caseworkers have very little time to work directly with their clients to resolve problems or ensure their critical information is accurate and up to date.

Additionally, in both ODSP and OW, there has been a sharp increase in the use of sick time and medical leaves of absence. Increased pressures associated with the failed roll-out of SAMS are exacting both a physical and psychological toll of front-line workers.

The overall costs associated with lost productivity and corresponding customer service impacts are difficult to quantify, but if the objective of SAMS was to improve program delivery, it most certainly has not met expectations.

The ministry has implemented a few supports for front-line staff. Unfortunately, these efforts have been limited in scope and have proven largely ineffective.

In December 2014, the ministry launched a hotline for caseworkers to contact when they encountered SAMS related technical issues. However, calls to the hotline could only be made on a weekly basis at a scheduled time. These calls are structured as group calls. Individual caseworkers were expected to stay on the line for the duration of the call and wait for their individual turn to speak with a technical expert. This process proved time-consuming, and rarely resolved the issues experienced by caseworkers.

Conclusion

The implementation of SAMS has failed to meet the program benchmarks of MAPS and SSSMP, undermined the integrity of the ODSP and OW programs and has had serious negative consequences for front-line workers and the recipients of social assistance.

Nearly six months after the program was launched in November 2014, serious technical deficiencies and the heavy use of workarounds are the “new normal.” This is not sustainable. The ministry must find a solution immediately. The serious financial consequences for clients and the ballooning costs borne by taxpayers cannot continue.

It cannot be emphasized enough that this entire situation could have been avoided if the ministry had heeded the warnings of front-line workers and municipal service partners and accepted the fact that the system was inadequate and not functional. The ministry’s failure to do its due diligence on this flawed software could have saved millions and negated the serious impacts for thousands of vulnerable Ontarians.

Without a doubt, the human consequences of this failed project are completely unacceptable. And yet, the ministry has not sought recompense from any of the parties responsible. To date, IBM/Curam continues to receive payments to fix the flawed product they delivered and Helena Jacek, Minister of Community and Social Services; Martin Thumm, Executive Lead for SSSMP; and Richard Steele, Associate Deputy Minister, Social Assistance Operations, all remain in their posts.

Authorized for distribution by:



Warren (Smokey) Thomas, President
Ontario Public Service Employees Union



Eduardo (Eddy) Almeida
First Vice-President/Treasurer

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