Suspicion and Surveillance:

Navigating Welfare’s Bureaucratic Maze

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The Social Assistance in the New Economy (SANE) Research Program

Under the Progressive Conservative (PC) government, Ontario has been at the forefront of welfare reform in Canada. At the heart of their efforts is Ontario Works (OW), a compulsory, work-first program that focuses on rapidly attaching participants to available local jobs and which provides “no less and no more than is required to support moving toward the achievement and maintenance of employment” (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1999: DIR 1.0). OW has been credited with dramatic success with more than 600,000 people leaving the caseload since 1995. Beneath the crude statistics, however, little is known about the longer-term circumstances of people who have left workfare or, indeed, of those who remain on a much-changed system. Although there has been a glut of research and evaluation in other countries that have embarked on such radical reform, notably the United States and the United Kingdom, much less is known in the Canadian context. Indeed, in Ontario, there has been a notable absence of serious evaluation by the government with only two snapshot studies of leavers. Consequently, many unanswered questions remain about the impact of welfare reform, in particular how helpful OW has been in meeting participants’ needs and helping them to move into work; how well they are coping financially, and whether or not they subsequently return to welfare.

The Social Assistance in the New Economy (SANE) research program has been established to address many of these unanswered questions about the changing nature of social assistance in Ontario. SANE is a multi-year study, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, which is composed of a number of complementary research projects, investigating:

- The welfare and post-welfare experiences of a longitudinal panel of welfare recipients;
- The economic circumstances of people leaving social assistance;
- The functioning of employment programs in a decentralised policy context; and
- The changing regulatory and legal frameworks of social assistance.

This series of reports draws on the preliminary findings from the longitudinal panel study which seeks to further our understanding of the impact of reform in two significant ways. First, the study provides greater insight into welfare reform as experienced by social assistance recipients themselves. Specifically, it captures the personal stories of 90 individuals who were receiving assistance in Toronto in the fall of 2001. Operating from this bottom-up perspective puts their beliefs about Ontario Works front and centre. Second, while little is known about life on workfare from the perspective of those participating, even less is known about the longer-term experiences of exclusion that people face as they enter assistance, navigate the systems and leave welfare. Those who leave welfare become part of the statistical success story of OW, but away from the glare of publicity, what is the reality of their lives after welfare? And what is happening in the lives of those who remain on assistance? Subsequent interviews will track the new experiences of interviewees so that by the end of the study there should be a detailed understanding of the welfare and post-welfare experiences of our sample of social assistance recipients. By allowing people to talk about their experiences with welfare, and by following them over time, the hope is that this study will yield new insights and contribute to more informed debate about possible future directions for a more humane, efficient and effective system of social assistance.
Bruce’s Story: Welfare has been adapted to make people feel bad for using it

Bruce, a single male in his mid-forties, has been on welfare for three months since his Employment Insurance ran out. Typically, Bruce has worked in relatively well-paid jobs, such as editing, but the only work he has been able to find recently is a minimum wage job in a video store. He has been shocked at the way Ontario Works treats him and makes him feel like a criminal for simply seeking assistance:

... I was asked the same questions at the face-to-face interview as on the telephone but it was much more invasive and made me feel like a criminal for applying for benefits from a system I have been paying into longer than most of those people have been alive. I know it’s bitter but that’s how I felt. It felt like I was being interrogated for fraud and that they were working on the assumption that anyone applying was trying to commit fraud ...

...The face to face interview was almost two weeks after my phone call and they did not tell me on the phone everything that I needed to bring in. I had to bring in the notice of rent increase plus my current rent which was different. I had to bring in my car insurance payment receipt, but it was being renewed and I had not received the new forms yet and they wouldn’t take the previous one. So there were things missing and I was called back for a second interview and told to bring in information relating to my job search, identification once again, any trade certificates or educational background, the employment questionnaire they make you fill out and my resume ...

... There’s a huge list of everything that has to be verified: copies of my hydro bill, copies of my phone bill, copies of my car insurance, copies of my rent. Basically, things that shouldn’t be any of their business, but they assume that you are trying to cheat them. Every month now I have to attach photocopies of my bank book or any receipts to go along with the income reporting statement, even though the income has been strictly loans from my parents with one exception and that was a freelance contract that I got through my brother ...

... I had to go over my agreement with an employment counsellor who really had absolutely nothing to say to me about it. The worker looked at my resume and asked if there was any training that I thought I would benefit from but he was not equipped to assess my skills. If I was just out of school that might have been helpful in directing me, but I’ve been doing job search for over six months, so it was a complete waste of my time. But they make it clear in the letter “unless your file is updated now, your assistance may be delayed.” Now the only reason I call him is if I have a question about my benefits, why they were late or when something goes wrong, or how do I go about doing something but 50% of the time I am given wrong information. He needs to be better trained. I keep getting wrong information and that just makes everything more frustrating ...

... Nothing was good about it. It was degrading, humiliating and I think it was that way on purpose...It seems as though the system has been adapted to make people feel bad for using it (R1#117).
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Introduction

The anger and frustration felt by Bruce as he attempted to navigate the bureaucratic maze of eligibility and participation requirements demanded by Ontario Works graphically reflects the experiences of the vast majority of panel members. Like anybody else seeking social assistance in Ontario now, members of our panel were faced with a system that has been completely transformed in recent years. Indeed, both the purpose and practice of welfare has changed significantly. Rather than being guided by the principles of universality, needs-based eligibility, and rights and entitlements, the emphasis now is on compulsion, sanctions and obligations. As a consequence, social assistance recipients now face more complex and demanding rules and regulations to become, and remain, eligible for assistance. In a previous report, we described the new welfare delivery model in detail and concluded that while the stated goals are to enhance program integrity and improve client services, the real intent is to deny access to social assistance and to remove those who are on as quickly as possible. These goals are met as social assistance applicants are discouraged, diverted and disentitled through cumbersome and complicated application and appeals processes, deliberately confusing procedures and language and excessive and inappropriate requests for information.

Similar findings emerged from our interviews with panel members. However, rather than repeating that detailed program description, the aim of this report is to reflect the perceptions and reactions of social assistance recipients about Ontario Works. As such, the following report is written from their perspective, frequently in their own words and with their concerns to the fore. By structuring the report around a number of recurring themes, it becomes evident that far from the efficient and client-centred program described by the provincial government, the overriding perception of participants is of a program dominated by suspicion and surveillance. Frequently, respondents voiced their anger at the dehumanising, demoralizing and demeaning way in which they were treated. Participants described a remote and inaccessible program which is either cold and indifferent, as they are simply processed with no concern for their personal circumstances, or which instead is threatening and intimidating, with more and more demanded in terms of verification information and participation requirements at the risk of financial sanctions. While more is expected of social assistance recipients, the Ontario Works program, riddled with deliberately confusing and misleading procedures, as well as errors and inefficiencies, seems to offer them less. As a consequence, members of our panel believed that Ontario Works is largely unfair and unhelpful in their attempts to get back into the labour market. Instead, many were resigned to simply going through the motions of participation and any meaningful progress was made through their own efforts and despite Ontario Works.

Key Features and Positive Feedback

Two-stage Application Process

The process of determining eligibility for welfare is now divided into two discrete stages. The “First Stage Preliminary Assessment” is conducted over the telephone through one of seven “Intake Screening Units.” A face-to-face verification interview called the “Second Stage Full Determination” completes the process. The intention is to have fewer ineligible applicants continuing to verification

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interviews and as a consequence to reduce costs and improve the efficiency and quality of services to those who are deemed eligible.

**Stage One: Intake Screening Units (Call Centres)**

The first stage involves the applicant contacting the Intake Screening Unit (call centre) by telephone and completing a preliminary verbal assessment. Applicants have to answer a range of questions about their asset levels, including bank balances, investments and vehicle registration; income they are receiving or are due to receive such as earnings, Employment Insurance benefits, pensions and child tax credits; and bills such as rent or mortgage, hydro, water and property taxes. At this point, applicants are advised if they are potentially eligible or ineligible over the phone by the ISU caseworker. Applicants can then decide if they want to continue with the full financial assessment or voluntarily withdraw. If applicants continue they are either passed on to their local Ontario Works office to complete a full application or they are informed that they are ineligible and must lodge an objection to continue.

**Stage Two: Face-to-Face Verification Interview**

The in-person verification interview includes the review of all the information supplied over the telephone and of any additional information that can be specifically requested. The verification interview determines whether applicants are eligible for assistance. This second stage also includes the signing of a “back-to-work” plan known as a participation agreement. The agreement, essentially a contract between the applicant and the worker, includes information on an applicant’s employment goals, program involvement, academic background, employability skills, trade/apprenticeship qualifications, employment and training, and other skills. Along with their workers, applicants are meant to develop an individualised and flexible “action plan” of specific activities from the range of approved participation activities. The plan, which is reviewed every three months, both informs applicants about their eligibility requirements and sets standards against which eligibility is monitored.

**Streamlined casemanagement**

A streamlined system of case management that makes greater use of technological supports to manage routine administrative functions has also been introduced. The intention is to free up caseworker time so that they can provide more one-on-one support for clients. Such a transformation suggests a more positive, individualised and flexible approach to client-worker relations which is important in at least two regards. First, workers can make a clear break from the traditional ‘policing and processing’ role performed by front-line staff. Second, workers can take advantage of this new environment to forge individual and on-going supportive relationships with unemployed people. Operated in this way, case management can provide the vital ‘missing link’ between seeking and securing a positive labour market outcome.

**Consolidated Verification Process**

The introduction of the Consolidated Verification Process (CVP) for those already receiving assistance is another significant change. The stated aim of the CVP is to reduce the number of ineligible claims, increase the accuracy of assistance level calculations (both underpayments and overpayments), and allow workers to spend more time meeting client needs. CVP has therefore significantly increased the
frequency and intensity of case reviews. Social assistance recipients are required to provide information about themselves, their family and any other household members. Typically, this includes information on family size, income, assets, debts and requires documentary evidence such as divorce papers, immigration papers, bank books and rent receipts, but other information can be requested.

**Participation Requirements**

Participation in one of three broad employment activities is compulsory for the vast majority of recipients to remain eligible for assistance, although some can be exempt, for example, because of caring responsibilities. The Community Participation option provides opportunities for unpaid work in community service placements to increase work experience; the Employment Supports element provides structured job search, basic education and specific skills training to allow recipients to become job ready; and the Employment Preparation component places recipients with local private temporary work agencies to help them find suitable employment.

According to the Ontario government, the cumulative effect of these changes has led to a more efficient, flexible and client-centred social assistance program that is much more responsive to the different needs of recipients. This is certainly true for a minority of panel members. For example, some panel members praised the speed and simplicity of the two-stage application process:

*When I called it was a voicemail giving you options. If you would like to apply, press the various numbers. You go through the system and go through a series of probably 20 or 30 questions. First they cover all your personal information, everything from your phone number, your age, where you live. Then they prompt you and let you know at the end that someone will contact you within 2 or 3 days to set up an appointment in the office to discuss the application and you are told at that point whether you are approved or not. So it was very simple and easy and clear ... Everything is great applying over the phone, no complaints whatsoever. It’s probably a really good time saver letting you know what you need to bring when you’re going to get interviewed. The questions were easy to answer, the recorded voice is clear and it didn’t feel like it took that long. I knew the information that they wanted and it wasn’t anything that I had to dig around for(R1#23).*

In addition, the majority of panel members were supportive of the transition to a more individual relationship with caseworkers. As one respondent expressed it: “Everybody’s different. It’s a great idea to never lose that one on one relationship” (R1#22). For another, it was wonderful to be dealt with “on a personal level ... as a real human being” (R1#98). Indeed, where this approach translated into practice, panel members were generous in their praise for workers who suggested, advised, guided and most of all encouraged them:

*Fantastic. Very encouraging. Very helpful. He’s great. He suggested that maybe down the road if I get a job and need a computer, maybe they can help me get one. He is very positive and encouraging, a great guy ... When I got an interview, he said, ‘Great, let me know what happens’ and when I couldn’t get around, he gave me some TTC tickets. He kind of guides me, otherwise I’m lost (R1#85)*

*I actually had a good talk with my last worker. I was going through hell and just blurted out everything and she called me up and gave me information that I didn’t even ask for in regards to my son, such as different schools. She just took it upon herself to do that and gave me the number. Isn’t that really nice? That really made me feel very good. Somebody took an interest (R1#54)*

*I’m very lucky because I have a very good caseworker. She’s a very helpful lady and she gives me advice and I can speak with her very frankly ... She even advised me to change my glasses for example when she saw that I was reading very badly. She told me to apply for reading glasses. That’s very rare (R1#115).*
Finally, there was a significant minority of panel members for whom the various employment activities were a positive and rewarding experience. They described how their participation was providing them with beneficial practical experience, new skills and, in a handful of cases, had actually led to a job, albeit insecure:

I do soup kitchen for the homeless people. It’s mostly preparing food, serving, chatting with people and just giving them some warmth. I’d like to attend Ryerson University to take social work and I feel that being in this kind of environment, talking to people and networking, it goes towards my practical work. When I go to university, at least I’ll have hands-on experience (R1#57)

I had no computer skills at all. I hadn’t touched a computer before so the introduction is really important before that I knew I needed a computerized accounting course but it seemed so difficult so remote but now it seems a little easier (R1#120)

It’s full time Mondays to Fridays 8-4, it’s permanent though I am on three months probation like most jobs nowadays. If I do well on my three months review in January then the job will be permanent and my benefits will start. I’m paid almost 12 dollars an hour to start and after taxes I am clearing almost $900. So it’s a big jump for me and a big improvement for my life financially (R1#48)

However, for the vast majority of panel members the reality of reform on the ground looked and felt very different. The rest of this report focuses upon their most frequent concerns about the way Ontario Works is delivered in practice.

Overview: Suspicion and Surveillance

The most frequently voiced complaint of panel members concerned the climate of suspicion and surveillance surrounding Ontario Works. Jane’s experiences with the program vividly illustrate this. Now in her early forties, Jane (R1#69) fled an abusive relationship and moved to Toronto to stay with her father. When her meagre savings ran out, she turned to assistance as a “social safety net and stepping stone to the rest of my life. Not as a lifestyle. Not as my goal.” However, her experiences with Ontario Works have left her feeling “violated” and “humiliated.” From the moment she first applied, she was treated like a criminal, rather than a single mother who genuinely needed help:

I moved to Ontario from B.C. in April. I didn’t apply for assistance right away because I had some money, but not much. When things were looking scary, I decided to contact them, because I have two babies and I need diaper money and all kinds of things. I was staying with my dad and his wife, but they live in a two-bedroom apartment and I’m forty. I can’t expect my parents to be taking care of me and my kids. So I applied and I was basically treated like a criminal from the get-go. I was reprimanded for not applying right away when I came, even though I explained to them that I didn’t think that I would be eligible at that time because I had some money. No matter what I tried to say and no matter what information I was giving, I was treated very poorly. I’ve never had this kind of experience before where it was assumed that I was committing fraud rather than just being a single mum who needed some help.

Jane’s experience reflects a widely held feeling amongst panel members that they are treated like criminals from the moment they apply for assistance. In Jane’s case, the grounds for suspicion focused on nothing more than her recent relocation and her decision to retain her maiden name. This raised flags and triggered a barrage of personal questions, covering everything from her sexual life to her financial arrangements. Given that Jane had all the necessary documentary evidence to support her explanation, such an approach appears entirely misplaced:
There were all of these difficulties because I was coming from out-of-province and I was born in the States, even though I’m a Canadian citizen. There was this assumption that I had several identities rather than accepting my explanations that my children have their father’s name and I have my maiden name. I felt really violated. I remembered them asking personal questions about my marriage and the break-up of my marriage. How long my husband and I had been separated and if we had ‘been together’ since we had been separated which I thought was incredibly personal and none of their business. All kinds of questions about my circumstances, my banking information because I had two separate accounts in B.C. It was as if this isn’t normal or something, whereas many married people have separate accounts and joint accounts. So I didn’t really understand all the big brouhaha about that since I had documentation for both accounts. It was a very humiliating experience. It’s humiliating in the first place, to have to be in the position where you have to apply and then to be treated, not with the respect and compassion that one in that position really needs, but with disdain and disrespect. It was just a really dehumanizing experience for me.

In fact, Jane’s story resonates with numerous other panel members accounts and speaks to the demanding and punitive nature of an unnecessarily suspicious and excessively intrusive Ontario Works regime. Understood through their experiences, it makes no difference how much information respondents like Jane supply, nor what the specific circumstances are which supposedly raise suspicions about eligibility. More fundamentally, the eligibility obstacles --- the myriad rules, regulations and bureaucratic demands --- have been raised so high and have to be met so often, that it is only a question of time before they fail to clear one of them.

So it is then, that Barbara (R1#59) and Bernard (R1#02) were also treated like “liars” and “crooks.” Like Jane, Barbara, in her early thirties, was both new to the social assistance system and compelled to seek help after leaving an abusive relationship. With two young children to support, she turned to welfare, but was left shocked and angry by her experiences. At first she was advised that Ontario Works would need to contact her ex-partner to seek financial support before they could continue with her application. Although this was later withdrawn, Barbara did experience the same intrusive requests for information as other applicants, despite the fact that she was in an emergency situation and it was much harder to collect the necessary documents:

They asked me a lot of personal questions. How long I wanted to be on it? Why I wanted to go on it? I told her because I’m not working now and I have no means of income … I gave them information about my daughter who was in an accident. They asked me to sign a paper saying that if any money came through from the insurance they could take it. They even sent a letter to my lawyer saying I agreed … She asked me about the kids’ father. My son’s father died and I don’t know where my daughter’s father is. I told her my son’s father died when he was 3-years old. She wanted proof. So I said “I have the death certificate to prove it” and I had to take that. She was trying to say that I was lying about certain things. I was so mad about it. I wanted to say “I don’t want to go on it,” but I had to because I have no other income.

Unlike Jane and Barbara, Bernard (R1#02) has an extensive history with the social assistance system. Seasoned assistance recipients like Bernard are perhaps less shocked at the way they are treated, but they remain similarly frustrated and angry. In his early forties, Bernard has returned to welfare “every second or third year” for much of his adult life and has remained on welfare for a couple of months each time before securing work. His experience makes him acutely aware of the realities of his labour market situation and of the social assistance system that he must navigate each time:

It’s a hassle, believe me it’s a hassle and unfortunately I’ve got too much experience involved in this. I wish it was the first time, but it’s not. Hopefully it’s the last time. It can be very intimidating. What gets me is no matter what documents you provide, no matter what you tell them, you go in there and you’re guilty until proven innocent. It’s like they’re looking at you and “she’s scheming,” or “he’s doing this.” That makes it hard for people like me. That’s the feeling I get. That’s the way they look at you and treat you.
For Bernard, the inequity of this approach is compounded by his health problems. These limit the nature and duration of the work he can do, but there is little recognition of his particular circumstances when he meets with his caseworker. On the contrary, rather then treating him as an individual with a very different set of circumstances to Jane and Barbara, he is judged as guilty in just the same way:

My caseworker just seems disinterested and if I raise a concern or something he looks at me and says, “This is my interview. This is how I’m conducting things” … It should be a little more understanding. We all go in there with different situations and we’re not all crooks. We’re not all out to milk the system. They’ve got to be a little more compassionate and sympathetic especially in cases like mine where there are health issues. I’ve provided them with documents from my doctor and other specialists but I still just get the air of “You’ve got to get back to work regardless” … They should be giving me a little more space. They’re causing me tension and anguish. I don’t want to sound all gloomy. It’s not like that all the time, but it can be, especially when you’re going through what I’m going through. They should back off a bit. I’m not just sitting at home waiting for a call. I’m out there looking for work … They treat you like you’ve got something to hide. You’re not a first class citizen. They should treat everybody as individuals. We’re all innocent until proven guilty.

Although this treatment causes extreme frustration, Bernard’s experiences teach him that there is nothing he can do to improve the situation. Underpinning every invasion of privacy, every inappropriate remark and every request for information is the stark threat of having his benefits delayed, reduced or even cut off completely:

Some workers are very hard to get along with. One cut me off for no reason at all. I had to contact my supervisor and plead my case with her to get back on. So I can’t be too aggressive in what I say because I don’t want to jeopardize my entitlement.

Carol (R1#105), shared similar fears of being cut off unfairly. Like Bernard, she faces multiple barriers to work. Carol, also in her forties has been on welfare longer than she cares to remember. She first sought assistance when she was prematurely widowed still in her twenties. She subsequently returned when an abusive relationship ended. Carol now struggles to raise two teenage children alone. Both have both been diagnosed with learning disabilities and behavioural problems, while she suffers from chronic anxiety and is also being tested for learning disabilities. Instead of providing the help she requires, Carol believes that Ontario Works is “a very cruel system” which “beats you up rather than supporting you.” Her analysis is grounded in the reality of her treatment. Although Carol’s doctor has determined that she is not fit to work, the strict rules of Ontario Works do not recognise this diagnosis. As a result, Carol faces the same highly pressurized context as other recipients. While she may or may not be ready to return to work, the climate of suspicion and surveillance does nothing to move her closer to that goal:

The workers are cold and controlling and it just generates this fear and anxiety because at any turn they can cut me off. I have only this much time to have all these things in place … It makes me feel very small, very humiliated. I just wanted to forget the whole thing and just walk out. I felt very controlled like I hadn’t been given any freedom to do what I wanted to do. I had to be accountable for every penny that I spent and tell them everything I was doing … It’s not support, not at all. It’s control. If you don’t do what they want they withdraw it … I tried to discuss my anxiety issue once and I was cut off.

So long as people are in receipt of Ontario Works, such constant pressure is applied to prove and reprove eligibility. Consequently, the humiliation Carol describes, just like the dehumanizing experience Jane described earlier, is neither unique, nor a one-off affair. Indeed, each of Jane’s meetings with workers has been dominated by requests for information and documentation. Rather than
discussing how to help her, it seemed to Jane that the prime purpose of these enquiries was to try and uncover a reason --- any reason --- to remove her from the system:

I have to say that with each person I have talked to, the intake worker on the telephone, the first worker that I had, then the woman that replaced her, and then the new worker when I moved, I have had to take in all my paperwork. That’s everything three times in six months! I call that harassment ... They have asked me for every piece of documentation possible. It’s extremely invasive. Extremely invasive for a little bit of help... I’m really surprised at the attitudes of people who went into social work wanting to help people and end up in these positions. Burnt out and not moving on. It’s time they move on. If they’re going to be as demeaning, dehumanizing and demoralizing as their attitudes are. I wonder whether they have quotas on how many people they can get off welfare. I think they might have a bonus program or something.

And yet Jane obviously needs help. With two young children, one of whom has behavioural problems, life remains extremely stressful. There is constant hardship and she worries continually about whether she can feed her two young children the right amounts and quality of food each week. In this vulnerable situation, the prohibitive rules of welfare make little sense to Jane. On one occasion, for example, she reported to her worker that her family had bought some groceries to help feed her children. The worker threatened to cut her off, declaring that if her family can help her she has no need for welfare. Such harsh rules not only betray the claustrophobic environment in which assistance is delivered, but they also raise pressing questions about the focus of Ontario Works, in particular, the balance between recipient rights and responsibilities. Amongst panel members, there was a weight of testimony to the rigid rules and the rigorous and excessive information requirements that are necessary to access assistance. So for example, Angela (R1#42), a mother of three, described trying to stay on assistance as being like “an interrogation” in which “you have to constantly prove yourself.” In her mid-thirties, Angela has overcome a drug addiction and is getting her life back on track. As she explains, she would warmly welcome the support of a concerned caseworker:

I’d like to talk regularly about my employment situation, about how I’m going to eventually get off and eventually get work and those kinds of things. What options are available to me, if there is start-up money. I’d like to have that presented to me as an option because it’s an incentive as well. It’s about getting back on your feet. Working together to get back into the workforce or back into school and getting your life back.

On the contrary, however, Angela has to contend with “condescending workers” who enforce a rule-bound system which seems devised to undermine her efforts to make progress and improve her circumstances. For Angela, one rule is particularly punishing:

The thing that really bothers me is the amount of money you’re allowed to have in your bank at one time. You might be saving up for an emergency or to buy a new wardrobe so that you can get that real good job, but you can’t. You’re only allowed to live on the edge, because if you have over this much, they’re going to take your welfare and cut it off. You can’t save for your children’s education. You can’t save to try and start your own business to get off welfare. You have to do it the way they tell you to do it or else. I don’t think that’s fair. If you expect me to better myself, then let me better myself. Don’t say, “You can’t do this, this and this.”

Alexis (R1#116), meanwhile, a young single mother with one child, explained that she was compelled to attend four eligibility interviews in less than six months. Just as Jane and Bruce described earlier, this constant surveillance and scrutiny makes her feel like a criminal:

I had one in May and then one in July and then after my child was born, so in July again. Then I have one next week. That’s four. I have to send in all of my updated information in order to get my cheque. They held my cheque last month because they didn’t have some information so now I have to go and bring them all those things that I just sent. When I called them I asked them what they want me to bring. But when I got there, there were one or two
things that they didn’t tell me to bring. So I had to go back. It makes me feel like a criminal. I feel like they are always trying to catch me, but I’m not doing anything wrong.

However, while the rules and regulations have been dramatically increased over recent years and are always in evidence, there is a common perception that precious little substantive help is offered in return. So it was for Jane:

With each of these interviews, I have asked for information, telling them that I am not from Ontario and I am not familiar with the systems here. I don’t know what I or my children are entitled to. The only answer I am ever given is, “Go to the resource centre”... Ontario Works has not been helpful at all with my children. At one point I was having some real challenges with my son. We’ve had a huge transition, moved across the country and he misses his Daddy and his friends. It’s a huge, huge transition and I’ve had major behavioural stuff to deal with. In one of my interviews I asked the woman what was available and she said “Go to the resource centre. We don’t deal with that. All we’re concerned about is you getting a job.” Wow! There is just no holistic thinking whatsoever.

Again, this criticism that Ontario Works is short-sighted and uncoordinated was a consistent one. More than this, though, it is also counterproductive. The suspicion and surveillance directed at panel members only serves to breed suspicion and resistance in return and undermines any positive efforts to build supportive and trusting relationships. Her experience, for example, left Jane feeling distrustful of the system and meant it was much more difficult for her to confide in her worker and establish a genuine dialogue to move her towards her employment goals. Her concerns were echoed by Angela who lost trust in her workers because of the way she was treated:

The workers act as if I don’t know what they’re talking about, as if I’m stupid and I haven’t got an education ... Just because I’m on welfare it does not mean that I’m a lower human being ... If you’re not caring for me, why the hell do I care about what you’re saying to me? You want me to do what? No! I’m not going to do that. You’re not giving me reasons to trust you. You’re supposed to get your client’s trust.

If clients feel they have a worker on their side they are more likely to open up and share confidences which may hold the key to making progress. However, as Carol explains based on personal experience, where the relationships are strained, unresolved problems are simply being stored up for the future:

You need somebody who is aware of the real issues and needs of women. A lot of women aren’t ready to go into the workforce because of abuse, lack of education or shame and humiliation. You need someone who is aware of these issues. All of this is hidden so in reality people are being forced to do something they are not ready to do.

This may be especially true for those most vulnerable clients who face health or addiction barriers, but is equally the case for others who need help addressing problems in other aspects of their lives, such as identifying appropriate childcare or transportation. The only way to explore these issues is through an ongoing and honest dialogue. When client-worker relations start from the belief that applicants are guilty of fraud the impact is to erect walls that do not readily come down.

Jane’s experience with the Ontario Works regime, just like those of the other panel members described here, is of a frequently invasive and humiliating system that demands much, but offers little in return. As the following accounts demonstrate, instead of the promised client-friendly system, the majority of panel members experience a social assistance system dominated by a climate of suspicion and surveillance. From the demanding application process, through strained relationships with caseworkers, to the ongoing requests for eligibility verification, respondents are subjected to continual demands and intrusions which they describe as dehumanizing, degrading and demoralizing. In addition, panel members describe having little input into their back-to-work plans and being compelled to participate
in a range of employment activities that do nothing to improve their employability and simply waste their time. The cumulative effect is to create a claustrophobic environment, where participants feel as if they have no room to breathe. This micro-management of poor people’s lives runs counter to the stated aims of fostering independence. Significantly, however, it is effective in meeting a less publicly stated ambition. The creation of this system of this bureaucratic maze, with its continual verification, successfully cuts the caseload in two ways: people are either deterred from making or maintaining a claim or else one administrative rule or another removes them from assistance. Either way, people with legitimate claims are denied the support they need.

Navigating the Bureaucratic Maze

For a large number of panel members the social assistance system resembles a bureaucratic maze, consisting of an incomprehensible labyrinth of rules and regulations. This has perhaps always been the case, but with the adoption of Ontario Works and the introduction of more complex application and participation requirements, the social assistance system has become even more demanding and punitive. Eligibility interviews are perhaps the most striking example of this bureaucracy in action. The first face-to-face interview applicants experience is literally an interrogation, verifying every aspect of their personal and financial lives in such detail that it is hard for them not to feel their privacy has been invaded. Sheila (R1#23) was one of the many panel members who found this interview “intimidating.” Sheila was four months pregnant when her husband walked out, leaving her facing mounting unpaid bills, regular trips to the food bank and, ultimately, eviction. The comfortable family home was replaced with cramped and overcrowded accommodation. Like many panel members, Sheila, a 37 year old with two young children, never believed that she would need to apply for assistance. However, in desperate need, she turned to Ontario Works for support. During that first meeting with her intake worker, she was bombarded with question after question:

How many children do you have? Do they live with you? Have you received any support? Do you have any court orders? Do you have those documents with you? Do you have all your documents with you? Birth certificate? Health card? Who do you live with? Do you pay rent? How much is your rent? What are your bills? Who do you owe? They need to see bank statements for the last 3 months. If I have X amount of dollars then I will not be eligible for welfare. If I come in to any money then I will have to tell them about it. If I move I have to tell them about it. If I receive money from my ex-husband I have to tell them about it. If I receive money from anyone. It’s endless.

Sheila, like all the panel members, recognised the need to supply sufficient information to confirm identify and eligibility for assistance. However, participants expressed frustration and anxiety about the amount of information requested; the time and cost associated with providing information; the inappropriate nature of some requests; and the frequency that information was demanded. The fact that so much time was spent gathering and verifying information, confirmed the belief of panel members that the main purpose of Ontario Works was to monitor rather than assist them. The constant fear of being cut off or suspended, meanwhile, further aggravates the climate of suspicion and surveillance already described.

The sheer volume of information that is demanded can be mind-boggling and seems to go far beyond what is required to determine eligibility. Applicants are required to submit a huge range of paperwork to meet various needs. To confirm their identity for themselves and their family, they have to provide birth certificates, citizenship or landed papers, health and social insurance cards. To establish their asset levels, they have to declare and provide supporting documentation for bank balances, investment
information, vehicle registrations, and insurance papers. To determine earned and pending income, they have to produce evidence of wages, Employment Insurance benefits, support payments, child tax benefit, pensions and Ontario Student Assistance Program. To verify expenditure, they have to submit information relating to mortgage and rent payments, as well as hydro and water bills and property taxes. Based on the experiences of panel members, in practice, numerous other supporting documents are also demanded. Indeed, the list of information is so extensive that many people would have difficulty readily providing all the necessary documents and this was equally true of many panel members. For example, Nadia (R1#66) and Thomas (R1#115) explained that sometimes it was practically difficult either to find documentation or simply to remember all of their financial activities exactly:

Basically they want to know everything. They ask for your rent or letters from your landlord stating you do live here. How much rent and bills you pay. You need your bankbook updated. They ask you a whole bunch of questions like if you have any loans, and this and that. Any assets. They ask you to bring your health card, I.D. card. I tried to have all the information, but sometimes I just can’t find it.

You have to bring IDs, proof of rent, gas and electricity bills. Recently I had an appointment with a worker who wanted to know everything about my financial situation. He wanted to know every detail, all the bills, all the paperwork. There were hundreds of questions and forms. Finally after 3 or 4 meetings explaining my circumstances I was accepted. It was very hard to explain all the financial things. I’m not an accountant. I don’t put down every single expense. Sometimes I can’t remember. Sometimes it takes 2 days to think. It’s not easy.

In the case of Sheila, as she had a court order against her ex-husband and she lived with her parents, even more paperwork and even more questions were deemed necessary:

They had to figure out how much it would cost to feed my children. They asked me if I receive financial support from my parents. I don’t, but I had to bring their tax papers because they are owners of the house ... I brought all the documents I thought were necessary. At that time there were probably a couple more things that they admitted I wouldn’t have known to bring through the telephone interview, like if you own property. My grandfather before he passed on gave me some property in New Brunswick. I did bring in my tax property statement, but it wasn’t the document they were looking for. They needed some documents that run with that tax statement. They also said that the forms I brought in pertaining to child tax credit weren’t sufficient. So there were 2 or 3 items that were missing and I had to come back to the office and provide them at a later date. Having to go back to the office, all the paperwork, the fact that things are unclear, made it really frustrating.

Simply reviewing this amount of information can take a great deal of time as well. Sheila’s interview, for example, was scheduled to last between thirty and forty minutes, but ended up lasting almost an hour and a half as every aspect of her life was put under the microscope. Such a long and demanding interview was confusing and energy-sapping. It left Sheila feeling as though her life was “an open book. Everything from A to Z was scrutinized.” At the same time, however, she knew the had no choice but to continue because the consequence of failing to provide all the information demanded was being found ineligible. As it was, the additional bureaucratic demands meant that there was a significant delay before she was deemed eligible.

Sheila, of course, was only just entering the bureaucratic maze. Such eligibility interviews continue for as a long as assistance is required. Previously subsequent case reviews were time based. Case reviews are now prioritised on the supposed ‘risk’ of an applicant committing fraud. Risk factors include high accommodation costs in relation to income, receipt of social assistance for 36 months or more, another person residing at the participant’s address and a Social Insurance number beginning with a ‘9’, indicating permanent resident status.
Charlotte’s Story: The road is so narrow, there’s no room to breathe

Charlotte is a single female in her mid-thirties who has worked in accounts and administration all her adult life. She finds the ongoing repetitive demands for information ridiculous and unnecessary and thinks the compulsory activities are a complete waste of time, even interfering with her own efforts to find work because they take up so much of her time:

...Degrading, demeaning is the word when you’re dealing with the worker. I understand he’s doing his or her job, but the way they talk to you it’s like you’re a criminal or you have no right to bother them...

...There’s a review every three months, it’s constant. It’s as if I’m not looking for a job. I don’t want to be sitting on social services. It’s ridiculous because it’s the exact same information: my birth certificate, my passport, citizenship. They want me to bring my bank accounts. I can understand that, but they want me to bring my social insurance number when it doesn’t change. My identity is not going to change. My birth certificate, my passport, every three months. It’s ridiculous and unnecessary. I don’t want to be walking around with all these important documents you never know what might happen. It’s just a waste of time. It’s degrading and demeaning. I understand people have done things, so it is a bit restricted. But now, the road is so narrow that there’s no room to breathe...

...Ontario Works doesn’t provide any new skills. I visit the service centre quite often, at least three times a week. I’m there for two or three hours. You have absolutely no idea! It’s been pretty much a year and a half of going to it almost every day. It’s very difficult ... I believe it’s a waste of time. It’s pretty much to keep these bastards off my back. It’s that plain and simple. I’ve gone through a five week program where I’ve done exactly what I’m doing with this other Ontario Works course. It was five days a week for five weeks. Before I went once a week for eighteen weeks and it took just over an hour and a half to get there just for a one hour session...

... When I was told about going into the program at first, I thought I’d have a one on one meeting with some guy, but a whole group turns up. It’s a weekly group meeting. I felt that was a bit misleading. I’m not saying that I expected to go there and they’re going to find me a job, but you should be able to work with an individual and they’re assisting you more in that direction ... All you do is just talk to some instructors and they ask you what you’re doing to find a job. What methods are you using? What about your resume? I’ve done all that in my five week program. So it’s ridiculous. But to keep welfare off my back I do it. It’s a waste of time. It keeps them off my back to go through the motions and do the program...

... The instructor is saying they get a lot of jobs coming in from different places and they send your resume, but they can’t force these people to get you a job. I just hope and pray something will happen, but I’m not very confident (R1#118).
These criteria are so broad that almost everyone on assistance faces constant investigation. Each interview not only increases the scrutiny of recipients, it also increases the possibility of payments being delayed as more information is requested. Sheila, for example, had her cheque reduced or suspended five times in just over 6 months because of problems associated with administrative requests:

I’ve been cut off or had money deducted five times. I’ve had to call the office each time to find out why. One time they lost my paperwork and they cut me off. Another time they deducted money from my cheque because they lost the paper I submitted from Revenue Canada.

There were numerous other stories of excessive bureaucratic request leading to delays and suspensions. Gloria (R1#03), for example, a single female in her late forties, faced repeated delays. Gloria was told to apply for Unemployment Insurance (UI) even though she knew she had not worked enough hours and would be rejected. Instead of working with UI to quickly establish the grounds for Gloria’s claim, the social assistance worker simply despatched her to navigate another burdensome administrative process on her own:

I hadn’t applied for unemployment insurance at that time because I hadn’t worked enough hours, but they wanted me to apply. I had to get the separations papers from the place I worked. I never did receive the papers and it took me three weeks to get the papers from them because they had to get it from Montreal. It took a long time to get that sorted out and in the meantime they wouldn’t give me any assistance. After it had taken three weeks to get that, then I could apply, but I had to wait for the unemployment office to tell me that I didn’t have enough hours and that I didn’t qualify. Then I had to get those papers and go back to welfare. It took a long time for me to actually get any assistance.

This lack of coordination was another frequent complaint and suggests that the claims of the new system to seamlessly integrate different third party databases are hopelessly exaggerated, or, more worryingly, that such cooperation is simply for surveillance purposes rather than streamlining processing. Either way, the bureaucratic burden placed on Gloria imposed additional unnecessary delays and it took more than six weeks before she received any money. Almost all the panel members reported having to provide extensive financial and non-financial evidence to maintain eligibility and similar delays with processing and payment were a common occurrence. However, while they could sometimes be made to wait weeks through no fault of their own, again and again, participants like Faye (R1#96) and Eileen (R1#54), voiced their frustration at the lack of time they were allowed to produce the requested information:

They want everything. Everything. They give you a certain amount of time and if you don’t bring it in, your cheque is on hold. I made sure I got it updated and I faxed it off to my worker, but it’s ridiculous because they already have your information right there in front of them. My worker had it right there in front of her. All my information, all my personal stuff. They know it, they can verify this stuff. They have everything up to date in front of them so I don’t understand why they even have to ask.

They want proof of school attendance, birth certificates, bank accounts, all kinds of stuff. Over and over and over again. They gave me a time limit. If I didn’t comply by that time limit, they said that I would be cut-off or suspended.

The merits of such stringent time limits are questionable at best. While it is certainly the case that faster processing of information works in the interest of recipients, there is no evidence that this is motivated by such concerns. As we have seen, frequently the necessity to contact third parties for information result in unnecessary delays. In addition, banks and credit card companies can and do refuse to provide
documentation because it has been archived. As Evonne, (R1#53), a divorced female in her early forties, explains, the costs associated with obtaining various documents are equally problematic:

*I requested emergency aid, but the worker requested one paper from me that I couldn’t get. My daughter was in New York and she lost her IDs there. She just came back from September 11th and they only let her back in because she was a minor. They showed me a photocopy of my daughter’s ID from my previous application, so why was it necessary for me to go and spend another $40 dollars to get it?*

Another concern of recipients was the fact that these extensive requests for information do not simply intrude into the private lives of applicants and recipients. Information on other household members, ex-partners and even landlords is also demanded. Gloria was one of many panel members who was told to supply personal information about her landlord and she was adamant that this was both excessive and entirely inappropriate:

*Not only did they want my rent receipt, they also wanted a copy of the landlord’s mortgage. If they ask me for my receipt and my landlord’s name and phone number is on there, then why do they need to see her mortgage? I didn’t think that was necessary. It was an invasion of her privacy. The rent receipt should be enough or they could have phoned her.*

In Gloria’s case, it should have been possible to contact the landlord directly and request any additional information. This would have provided the information far more quickly. Instead, the burden was placed on her again. Jenny (R1#01) and Lisa ((R1#110), two single mothers in their early twenties, were also told they needed additional supporting evidence. For Jenny this included a letter from the parent who evicted her. Lisa, meanwhile, was ordered to provide letters from roommates who had already moved away, meaning her claim was on hold until she could locate them. In both cases, these requests also led to significant delays:

*She wanted a letter from my mother saying I was kicked out. She wanted a letter saying I was in school. She wanted a letter from my friend saying that I was staying there and had to pay so much. Getting all the paperwork took a very long time. It took three weeks before I got any money because there was so much to bring them. They didn’t tell me I had to bring in a couple more papers. I was running around looking for papers from the landlord. She didn’t tell me that I needed letters from the people that I was living with before and it took so long to find those people again. Anyway, the cheque was held until she got the letters and approved them.*

Such examples confirm that the suspicion intrinsic to Ontario Works means that it is not just recipients who are under surveillance, but also anybody who lives with them or even rents to them. Indeed, the perception of participants like Gloria was that Ontario Works simply “doesn’t trust anybody, not even the people who are renting to people on social assistance.” Finally, in addition to the amount and nature of information requested, panel members were also forced to repeatedly provide the same information. For example, Evonne’s (R1#53) frustration became apparent as she listed all the documents she now has to supply every three months. Some of the requested information simply does not apply to her circumstances and it is a nuisance to supply it. However, other information has been provided several times already and is such that it will not change:

*I can’t deal with the repetitive paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. I have to supply things every three month. I just find it a nuisance. I have a list right here. They ask for bank statements updated for the past 12 months, accommodation verification, hydro bills, property tax statements, insurance policies, condo expenses. They already know I have none of these expenses so I don’t know why they keep asking me to bring them. I don’t have them. They want birth certificates for me and my children. Again this is something that they already have on file. The*
social insurance number, they have that on file. The health card number, they have that on file. If you are divorced, they want a copy of the divorce decree. They have that on file at least three times. They also want verification of school attendance, report cards from my kids. Why they want this I don’t know because they are young children -- 6 and 13 -- so they are obviously in school ... I have to bring all this information to every meeting. I don’t understand why they have to see my divorce decree again when I never remarried and I’ve been divorced for 8 years. I don’t understand the real need for it. Why is it every 3 months? What is the real need for this repetitive information? How many times do they need to see the same divorce paper? How many times do they need to see the same birth certificate? They already have this on file and this information hasn’t changed. Why do they need to see it all again?

Evonne’s questions go right to the heart of the Ontario Works philosophy. Exactly why is it necessary to see a divorce certificate three times? How many times is it necessary to photocopy a birth certificate? What benefit is served by repeatedly requesting the same information? Certainly, these demands go far beyond confirming eligibility. In addition, they also weigh down workers and, as we describe below, undermine the client-worker relationship, as workers frequently cannot spare the time to meet clients. As Evonne concludes, the whole process simply creates “unnecessary paperwork for workers and unnecessary work and expense for me.” Seen from the perspective of panel members, it is hard to conclude anything other than the repeated requests for documents, just like all the other bureaucratic requirements, simply provide another barrier to assistance and another opportunity to delay and suspend payments. There seems no other way to explain the experience of Sophia (R1#21), who was asked to provide receipts for everything her family had spent between May and August, including the bills from when they ate at McDonalds. Nor of Stacey (R1#121) who was forced to survive without any money for two weeks when her cheque was suspended. Stacey could not afford to pay the $10 necessary to provide a second doctor’s note after social assistance lost the first. Again, it bears repeating that panel members did not object to genuine enquiries. Criticisms resulted from what they saw as the incredible injustice between unnecessary and inappropriate requests for information, under the threat and fear of cheques being suspended or cancelled and an administrative system that seemed to constantly fall short of their expectations. Ultimately, the common perception, forcefully spelt out by Stacey was that Ontario Works is simply unfair: “They don’t care if it takes you two weeks to prove that they’re wrong. And they always get it wrong in my case. There are lots of rules. They demand so much, but they’re not giving enough in return.”

Cold, Remote and Inaccessible

As well as a demanding bureaucracy, Ontario Works also felt like a cold, remote and inaccessible system to panel members. This impression struck some respondents from the moment they entered the harsh and austere environment of the welfare office. Tom (R1#97), for example, commented on the “tiny cubicles with workers on one side of the glass and clients on the other. All completely separate.” In this context, it is no surprise that eligibility interviews quickly transform into the kinds of criminal investigations and interrogations described previously. Certainly, they immediately reinforce the divisions between workers and clients, rather than nurturing supportive relationships. Cindy (R1#81) still has vivid memories of the shock she experienced two years ago when she first entered an Ontario Works office. Only seventeen years old, and with the scars of an abusive childhood still troubling her, she was seeking the help necessary to complete high school. Despite the severity of her circumstances and the support of professional friends who encouraged her to apply, Cindy still felt uncomfortable seeking assistance:
I was young and I didn’t want to be on social assistance, but I was at a point where I had no choice. How else would I survive? It was very difficult for me to accept the transition to going to social assistance ... I don’t like being seen at the welfare office and being treated like someone who is on social assistance. I see myself as a unique person who lives on social assistance. If you mention the name welfare to anybody, they will have a certain predetermined idea. I disagree with this stereotype, but stereotypes are there. Everybody makes judgments all the time.

Like many panel members, Cindy was reluctant about being labelled a “welfare recipient.” In her eyes, she was an individual whose life had taken a turn for the worst and who now needed some temporary help. Eventually, scared and depressed, she entered the welfare office. What greeted her did nothing to assuage her fears, however, as those same stereotypes and judgements rained down on her. Rather than recognising the unique circumstances of her case, Cindy’s worker treated her as just another disgruntled teenager. To him, Cindy was not a scared individual, seeking help and guidance through a complicated process. She was just another potentially fraudulent drain on resources:

I was staying at a friend’s house who lived in the East region and going to the East York office was the most depressing and scariest moment. It was such a cold place. I met the worker in this booth. There was glass between the worker and me. That’s how you talk. That’s how they treat you. That was my first time and it was really just very shocking and hard to digest. The worker was cold and hard. I’m assuming his years working there made him like that. He was very, very strict in his tone and very hard on me. He thought I was some disgruntled teen that was against him. He actually said to me, “I don’t know what your problem is, but I don’t like your attitude.” I didn’t have an attitude. Maybe it was obvious in my expression that I didn’t want to be there, but that was the truth. I was 17. He should have seen that was the reason that I was uneasy with the whole situation. He should have seen that as a sign to be an adult and to help me.

Cindy’s description of a cold and hard system was typical of the experiences of panel members. While this contrasts sharply with the provincial government’s depiction of a flexible and individualized program, it is not surprising. A prime objective of Ontario Works is to save government revenue. This is achieved in part by operating a more efficient system. One of the ways in which social assistance, as all bureaucracies, can become more efficient is through greater technology, standardisation and centralization. Hence, the adoption of call centres and interactive voice technologies. However, the flipside of these changes is that bureaucracies become even more remote and inaccessible to the clients they serve. By the same token, to become more efficient, workers in bureaucracies must police and process cases through the application of uniform rules and standard procedures. This clearly contradicts government rhetoric suggesting efficiencies will directly benefit clients as caseworkers have more time to develop individual relationships. On the contrary, in this context there is less space for individual flexibility. Based on the experiences of panel members, changes to the service delivery model in recent years appear to have further institutionalized the distance between social assistance and the clients it serves. In particular, panel members expressed numerous practical and philosophical concerns about the transition to a telephone-based application process, as well as difficulties with the new system of caseworkers.

The use of call centres presented a series of problems, with a significant number of panel members stating that they preferred face-to-face contact for a number of reasons. Some panel members explained that they felt “uncomfortable talking on the phone”(R1#95). Others feared that applying over the telephone would lead to “all kinds of mistakes” (R1#67). For others, the face-to-face meeting was better because “you know exactly where you stand. On the phone there are questions you forget to ask” (R1#26). Indeed, one of the problems of the initial telephone contact is that the system is not geared to provide information and answer questions, but simply to gather information. This left some
respondents confused and unsure how to proceed and was one of many problems Gloria experienced. Gloria’s general discomfort with the impersonal nature of the telephone application process was compounded by her fears about the security of providing such personal information over the telephone:

I’d rather be there in person. I didn’t like that aspect. They take all your personal information over the phone and they’re not really helpful in answering your questions. They’re just there to ask the questions and take the information. So it seems very impersonal in that respect.

Based on her experiences with the system, Gloria’s initial frustrations only increased. After trying numerous times to apply via the call centre, Gloria finally got through, but she then had to wait six weeks to secure a face to face interview. While the length of this delay was not typical of panel members, it does confirm the sense of isolation panel members frequently described. Certainly, Gloria’s exasperation at the fact that she had to “keep phoning them and phoning” was typical. As the following examples illustrate, many respondents reported having to call on numerous occasions to access the system and, when they did get through, many found the process drawn out and difficult, complaining that they were kept on hold for long periods before being connected to a screener:

The lines are busy so you have to keep calling back, or when you get and answering machines and you didn’t get a live person. Sometimes it can be frustrating, it may take a day or two to actually talk to a live person (R1#48)

I had to wait about 20 minutes before I actually got through because so many people were phoning in. That’s a big problem, you could become impatient because you phone and there could be hundreds of people phoning at the same time. It took me about 20 minutes. I had to phone a couple of times before I was able to get through to someone (R1#107)

I was on hold for about 25 minutes before they picked up. It was bad that that was only the first step and it was pretty much repeated at the personal interview (R1#117).

Such problems are compounded for those who do not have regular access to a telephone and who are frequently the most in need. There were also more fundamental concerns about the “social distance” of the new system and the suitability of this application method for many of those on assistance. The quest for efficiency has led to the use of call centres which necessitate a move to a more standardised set of questions. Under this ‘one size fits all’ approach, the complexity of individual situations can be difficult to account for. In particular, people with poor English language skills, low educational attainment, and physical and mental health problems often require personal support to navigate bureaucracy and risk being further marginalized by such an approach. Consequently, the difficulties respondents faced negotiating the call centre system were only exacerbated for new immigrants like Rokon (R1#90) and Lana (R1#52), who, with limited English language skills, either struggled on their own or faced conducting an already lengthy telephone interview with the added complexity of an interpreter:

Sometimes when they were asking me questions they forgot that I’m new here. I had to ask them to repeat it again. When you are new here it’s very difficult to do this over the phone. You feel shy. People worry about speaking on the phone.

I called on my own and had all kinds of problems communicating. The person suggested I get a translator and they gave me a phone number. So when I called the first time I could not apply and the second time the translator helped me. I communicated by myself for most of it but it’s sometimes difficult on the phone so the translator took the receiver, they repeated the question and I answered.
Or those like Richard (R1#71), to whom the inflexibility of the new system made no sense. It would be much quicker for him to go to the office he lived less than five minutes away from. Instead, the telephone system left him irritated as he was kept repeatedly on hold:

_They always put you on hold and you have to listen to some stupid music ... I’d rather talk person-to-person. I don’t like talking to machines. The office was only 5 minutes away from where I was staying at the time. I could have been there in 5 minutes and I had to call and get stuck on the phone. Another time my worker put me hold so I went down there. He says “I’ll tell you on the phone.” I said, “I’m here. You put me on hold, how long can you leave me on hold? I want to talk to you face to face. I don’t want to talk to you on the phone.” He hung up the phone and talked to me there (R1#71)._  

As Richard’s story suggests, similar concerns around access arose within the program as well as with the initial application. Although Richard took matters into his own hands and simply presented himself at the office, many respondents were less assertive and even if they were to follow his lead it is unlikely they would be dealt with. Social assistance recipients are now discouraged from entering offices without an appointment. Instead, they are advised to contact workers over the telephone. The aim is to create a more streamlined and efficient system in which routine enquiries, such as changes in income, are dealt with through an automated telephone system and workers can then set aside more time to deal with individual client needs. However, a frequent complaint amongst members of our panel was that it was now very difficult to access their caseworker too. Caseworkers perform the key role of gatekeeper within the social assistance system. In recent years, much within the provision of welfare in Ontario has been standardised and centralised. Despite this, from the perspective of recipients, front line workers still retain significant powers, especially around access to various discretionary supports and resources which can either help clients stay afloat or facilitate the transition from welfare to work. At the same time, they also have the power to financially sanction claimants and to withhold or withdraw assistance. The nature of the relationship between client and worker is therefore crucial in shaping a recipient’s experiences on welfare, particularly the extent to which they will be helped and supported in their search for work. Despite talk of a more efficient and customer-friendly system, the experiences of panel members suggest that the new approach actually minimises recipients’ opportunities to access workers and get the help they need, _when they need it._

Just as with the two-stage application process, a number of the panel members highlighted that they were disadvantaged by the new system because the cost of maintaining a regular telephone service is beyond their budget. Once calls were placed, panel members reported that they were frequently unable to get through to their worker and could only leave messages, meaning that complex or personal issues had to be explained through a process of “telephone tag.” All of this caused unnecessary delays and a sense of frustration which, as the following examples indicate, was only exaggerated by the fact that when messages were left there was no guarantee as to when they would be dealt with. Again, Gloria’s experience reinforces the point well:

_It’s very hard to get in touch with these people. A lot of the times, if you phone, they never answer their phones or else they don’t get back to you when they say they’re going to. It would help if they were there when you needed to see them or needed to talk to them. But they’re not. They never are._

Susan (R1#39), Javier (R1#16) and Boris (R1#100) were amongst the numerous other respondents who were forced to rely on communicating with their workers by leaving messages. Boris, a Russian immigrant in his early thirties, felt it was almost impossible to discuss his situation with his worker.
Alison’s Story: Ontario Works is a cold program, very detached. You feel like a number.

Alison, now in her late twenties, was three-quarters of the way to completing her MBA when her battle with alcoholism forced her to be hospitalized. She is also struggling to overcome an eating disorder. Her alcoholism has left extensive gaps in her resume which in turn has shattered her self-confidence. Facing multiple barriers to work, Ontario Works has done nothing to help her:

... There’s a general feeling of needing to connect with someone. You feel like your information might just get lost or it’s difficult to ask any questions or get any kind of information. It’s difficult to not meet one on one with somebody. There’s definitely a feeling that you don’t know who you’re talking to ... I prefer to have the one on one to explain things but that’s what you get once you go to intake and then they speed through it. They basically tell you what you’re eligible for, when you should be receiving your next cheque, what your options are in terms of transportation, if you can get a medical pass, that’s about it. I had to ask most of the questions. They just want you in and out as fast as possible...

... There’s a lot of information about Ontario Works that you only know if you find out by chance. The first time I went through the process, I just felt rushed, like I was taking up somebody’s time. There’s a general feeling of just being a number, I didn’t like that ... The Participation Agreement was just something that was shoved in front of me and I signed, I don’t remember it. There was no discussion of a plan towards employment. There was no employment plan, there was nothing like that...

... I recently got in touch with my caseworker and I didn’t even know my file had been transferred. I would call and wouldn’t know who to speak to ... I’ve never met her. I’ve only spoken to her on the phone, and that was when I called her to let her know that I had found some temporary work and what was the next step that I needed to take ... She has no clue about my situation. I don’t like that. I would like to talk regularly about my employment situation, about how I’m going to eventually get off and eventually get work, and those kinds of things, and what options are available to me. For example, if there is start-up money I’d like to have that presented to me as an option because it’s an incentive as well. It’s not just about the money, but in terms of getting you off it and on your feet. We should work together to get back into the workforce and back into school, to get your life back, but there isn’t really any of that. I get the impression that from their side it’s frustrating too because that’s all that they’re able to do, they do the paperwork. They would like it better if they had more involvement with people’s growth in general...

Ontario Works doesn’t do anything for my skills. They have nothing to do with my skills, so there’s no impact. It won’t help me get a job. It hasn’t been discussed...It’s hard to be on welfare, it’s degrading and a lot of people feel that way. Given my experience, without any programs implemented to help you find work or even look towards that or set goals, it makes people stop and if they’re not developing skills through Ontario Works, and if they’re not being given opportunities to have more self esteem to go forward and be trained, then it’s like a spiral effect...

... It’s just a cold program. It’s very detached and you just feel like a number (R1#50).
In a graphic illustration of the inaccessibility many panel members encountered, he was even directed to stop contacting his worker completely and wait until she contacted him:

> It’s very hard to reach my caseworker and communicate with her. If I want to meet her I leave a message on the answering machine: sometimes she calls me back, sometimes she doesn’t. If I could reach her it would be easier for me, but they’ve told me “Don’t call. Don’t come. If we need you, we will call you.”

For Javier and Susan, meanwhile, the inability to adequately contact their workers has meant that they have been unnecessarily cut off on numerous occasions even though they have consistently fulfilled their obligations. Since Javier moved to Canada from Mexico just over a year ago, his financial circumstances have steadily deteriorated. Over the last twelve months, he has had to pay the rent late on a number of occasions, move to cheaper accommodation and disconnect his phone. He now regularly relies on food banks. Withdrawing his meagre allowance because of the inadequacies of the system rather than any error on his part is both unfair and punishing. Susan, meanwhile, is struggling to raise four children on her own. Although she works full-time as a quality control operator in a factory, this does not provide enough to lift her out of poverty and she remains in need of her monthly Ontario Works cheque. Reducing her income not only punishes her when she has done nothing wrong, it also seriously jeopardises the health and development of her children who have been placed on a special diet to counteract the impact living in poverty has already had:

> It’s frustrating to call and only reach an answering machine, to leave a message and not receive a call back for several weeks … I called all the time but had to leave messages on the answering machine. They ended up cutting me off every month. They would send me a letter every month saying that I was being cut off due to lack of information. This happened for three months. I was sending them all the information that they asked for, but I never knew whether I would get a cheque at the end of the month or not.

I left her several messages because I went to my doctor last Friday and the kids and I were placed on a high calorie, high protein diet. I took in the doctor’s letter for her. The amount she put in the computer was wrong. So I called her again and she didn’t call me back. I tried to call her this morning because the diet that I was supposed to be receiving is $150 extra per dependent, but she didn’t give me that. She gave $30 per person. I left her 3 messages today and she hasn’t returned my call… The first problem I had was my baby sitting money. She sent me a cheque one month for $200, but she was only inputting child care for one of my kids. When I called to tell her that it doesn’t pay for me to go to work if I only get $200 dollars, she told me “Quit your job or find a day job because that’s all you are entitled to.” The next months cheque arrived and it was still only inputting for one child.

Such examples underline the impact that a remote and inaccessible social assistance system can have on clients. At its best, a case management approach can overcome many of these problems, serving as a basis for more focused and constructive meetings for participants. The rapport and cumulative knowledge which grows out of successful case management intervention means that meetings can focus on outstanding barriers to work, individual needs and personal progress. For workers, this continuity lends itself to a greater understanding of individual circumstances providing a platform for developing the most appropriate individual strategies for progression. Clearly, however, the inability to contact workers undermines this relationship.

The opportunity of developing more individualized assistance is also undermined by the policy decision to frequently rotate workers. Panel members reported an almost constant churning of caseworkers, or as one contributor expressed it, workers change “as often as the weather” (R1#66). Practically, such continual flux creates a great deal of confusion and uncertainty among clients and increases the likelihood of mistakes. More substantively, it also makes it very difficult to build positive relationships. Tony (R1#76), and Jenny spoke for nearly all the panel members when they explained...
that they would welcome a constructive and supportive relationship with a designated social assistance worker. The reality, however, was very different. For Tony, the rotation of workers simply led to more intrusion as the same questions were asked over again. Instead of the one positive relationship he wanted, he was left with numerous indifferent or even cold ones. Jenny, who has experienced eight caseworkers during her time on assistance, has yet to meet one who fulfilled the supportive role she desires. Most of all she wants a relationship where she is comfortable enough to ask questions about where she stands if her circumstances change. However, as she explains, in the current climate she feels scared to raise many of her concerns because she fears being cut off:

I would like them to take a little bit of interest in me personally. Not every detail of my life, but just to make me feel more comfortable, as if I count as a person. A more personal relationship. I wish they wouldn’t switch the workers so often. Every time you get a new one, they ask you the same questions over and over. They should have that on file. They should see that when they bring up the screen. Nothing seems to be on file. It would be nice to have a personal relationship where you feel comfortable calling them up and letting them know how things are going. But that doesn’t exist. It’s very cold.

Getting information on how to find a job, about schooling, about the subsidized daycare, about pursuing child support, things of that manner. For instance, when the father stays with me I’ve wanted to call and address it with them but I’m afraid I’ll get cut off. There are certain things that you can’t tell them because you’ll be in trouble. I’ve always wanted to, but then he could just leave at any time and I would be left with nothing.

Jenny’s need to open up and talk about the reality of her situation was echoed by Lisa (R1#65). Both recognised that the best way to improve their situation would be through an open and honest dialogue with a worker they could trust. However, the many burdensome rules of Ontario Works and the ever-present fear of sanctions and suspensions meant this was almost impossible and, instead, silence dominates:

They can be very rude, very rude people. The way some of the workers talk down to you. They really do. They talk down to you and make you feel bad. You feel bad enough as it is, applying for assistance You know? “I-am-working-and-you’re-not-type of thing” A real definite attitude. Sometimes you might even want to ask for something, but because of that person’s attitude, you just shut down and you don’t even bother.

As Lisa demonstrates, in this way, the oppressive nature of Ontario Works thwarts the attempts of clients to progress regardless of the individual merits of caseworkers. Panel members recognised that the rigid rules and the remote bureaucracy they encountered also limited the extent that workers could help them, frequently justified with expressions of “they’re only doing they’re job. There was certainly praise for workers who genuinely did their best to help panel members, or simply treated them with respect. However, there were many more accounts where the inequity of Ontario Works was compounded by the actions of overworked, overstretched, jaded and disinterested caseworkers. As we discuss below many panel members were shocked at the threats and intimidation levelled at them by workers. However, at the other extreme and capturing the remoteness of the system explored here, there were also numerous encounters with cold or disinterested workers who did no more than process clients. For example, Susan and Alexis found their workers either distant or cold in both their attitudes and their personalities. While, Susan’s worker always seemed to have a sarcastic comment to share at her expense, Alexis’s lacked warmth and respect for her:

You come in as a single mother and they look down at you. They feel like we should all be working. The first interview I had wasn’t a nice interview. I found she had an attitude. She was talking to me sarcastically, “There’s lots of work out there. You should be able to find a job.” I have 2 little babies. How can I do that?
They could smile. It’s a big thing. It makes you more comfortable if somebody smiles. They were very austere, like robots. They just want to do this and get it over with. I don’t want to use the word polite but morality is a strong issue for me. When people comes to my house I always get up and walk them to the door and I don’t just say bye and make them leave. I think it’s a respect issue (R1#116)

As she described earlier, Cindy’s worker was also cold and hard. Her interactions with him focused solely on emphasizing the rules and regulations of assistance and made no effort to work with her and encourage her:

*My worker tells me the rules and guidelines of social assistance, but there is no initiative on her part to co-operate with me and to encourage me with a plan. It’s always me initiating it. I received the rules and guidelines from my caseworker, but the majority of the planning and how I plan is done by myself. It would be more encouraging if the caseworker was instructed to give you a plan and cooperate with you based on your needs and your situation. But I don’t receive that professional encouragement from the caseworker.*

In fact, the plan Cindy suggests already exists. Provincial guidelines state that the participation agreement, or back-to-work plan, should be devised jointly by applicants and workers as a means to reconnect them to the labour market. On the contrary, however, panel members consistently complained that there was no discussion and they were simply processed:

*It’s just a process you go through so that they’ll send you a cheque. My case worker -- who is a lovely lady -- is covering her ass so the government is not on her case as to why I’m still on assistance. You just go through the process and you sign the paper (R1#17).*

*I did not participate at all. What they did was just show me a piece of paper saying, “This is your Participation Agreement.” It’s a long list and it’s got a lot of fine-print, but basically you agree to look for work, and agree to report any income, and agree to report any changes ... It was more-or-less them just handing me the standard form and saying, “this is your agreement” (R1#04)*

This lack of input by participants means that the resulting “plan of action” has little or no relation to their goals and is certainly not a fair assessment of their skills. As a result, it was seen by numerous panel members as just another administrative hurdle that needs to be cleared before they can access benefits. Indeed, a number of panel members informed us that they simply signed it without reading it. For those who did remember reading it, the agreement typically listed a standard set of activities and goals that reflected little or nothing of their specific circumstances, experiences and skills sets. As a result, the agreement Cindy and others might benefit from, which could serve as a significant reference point in terms of building skills and monitoring progression appears to be seldom developed in practice. Instead, the fact that the vast majority of panel members had little input to their agreements, suggests it’s prime, or even sole purpose, is as a contract to impose and enforce rules and regulations rather than a constructive plan.

Despite government talk of an enabling program focused on identifying individual solutions to individual problems, from the perspective of panel members Ontario Works is more remote and less accessible for clients. Embedded in the call centre technology, this marginalization is also personified in the attitudes and demeanours of workers who frequently appear distant and disinterested in their clients circumstances. The client-worker relationship is integral to the delivery of a flexible, client-centred program. While poor client-worker relationships have always been a feature of social assistance, and some degree of individual failing is always to be expected, the accounts of panel members suggest more significant cleavages, with the distance between social assistance and the clients it is meant to serve growing wider. It is likely that these have been exacerbated by large worker
caseloads, the heavy administrative requirements of the new system and the focus on continual verification. In these circumstances, workers are frequently overwhelmed, undertrained and unaware of ways in which they can help clients. Such factors may account for the cold and indifferent attitudes of workers. However, there were also numerous complaints by panel members about the aggressive and demeaning attitude of workers and it is to these that we briefly turn below. Although these may represent a minority of social assistance workers, from the perspective of many panel members, their attitudes and actions not only cast a disproportionate shadow over the entire program, they also accurately reflect and reinforce the punitive nature of Ontario Works.

Threats, Intimidation and Punishment

Michelle (R1#122) was one of the many panel members who complained bitterly about the contempt with which workers treat clients. A former welfare worker, Michelle speaks based on her experience with the social assistance system from both sides. Indeed, it was her loathing of the system and the attitude of her colleagues which forced her to leave:

_The people I worked with made me sick to my stomach. I couldn’t deal with the way they treated people so I resigned my position. It’s almost like they’re little cops. They’re act like the money is out of their pocket and they resent that. That’s why I didn’t like working for the welfare department, because I’ve never seen such miserable, bitter people in my life, treating people like shit. I didn’t fit protocol because I treat people with respect and dignity._

In her late thirties, Michelle has now been on welfare for three years, although much of this time was in a different province. She was forced to move to Toronto to escape an abusive situation and eventually ended up in the shelter system. Coupled with the fact that she has been hard hit by the death of three family members in the last year, including her mother, this has made it difficult for her to work. She does, however, volunteer regularly both within the Ontario Works program as well as outside it for her own humanitarian interests. She also uses her knowledge of the system to advocate on behalf of the fellow residents of her rooming house. Michelle’s familiarity with the system means that she deals with workers from a position of strength. Frequently, Michelle is more knowledgeable about the rules and regulations than they are and on a number of occasions she has vociferously and successfully challenged discretionary decisions concerning dietary supplements, clothing allowances and transport tokens. As a result, social assistance seeks to deal with her as quickly, and quietly, as possible:

_When I walk in, they see me. There can be a line right out of the door, but they see me. They want me out because I’ll stand there and I’ll give it to them straight because they know I come from their side of the counter … They know I’m not going to put up with their shit. There’s nothing like having 2 supervisors and 3 workers pouring through the legislation books, trying to find the different areas that I’m looking for. They come back, “Yes, you qualify for this, this and this.”_

The prevailing climate of suspicion and surveillance, however, means that most clients are treated very differently. Michelle spoke passionately about this, vividly describing how the excessive bureaucratic demands described in detail earlier appear designed to make life as difficult as possible. New technologies could be deployed to facilitate claims, but instead vulnerable people are sent scrambling around the city at their own expense. In Michelle’s experience, rather than meeting the needs of the clients they serve, Ontario Works seems to take pleasure in “screwing people around” and “pushing them down.”

_They don’t listen to you. They’re always trying to angle it: “You’re giving me a story, you’re doing this, you’re doing that.” They’re really screwing people around. Especially if they are in a vulnerable position, that’s when_
they’re preying on them. They seem to have got a lot of real sick people working in that department ... They like to try and screw everybody around and make life as difficult as possible. Every 3 months they want an updated bankbook and they want all this other information updated too. They have access to all the other government offices. They should immediately have all that information downloaded, instead of putting these people through this ... They're making these people run around to get all this information. They have no access to funds to get there. This city is spread out. How do you get from downtown to St. Clair and Yonge without any transportation? They're playing with people. They're really pushing them down. It's like these people are getting off on it. You should treat everyone with respect and dignity. I don’t care who they are or what they are, but these people don’t seem to understand that ... They should be getting the access from the banks, getting them to sign the form, getting them to fax all the information over to them directly. They should make it easier. They’re working for us. We’re not working for them. They’re not giving us anything out of their pocket. That’s what they don’t seem to understand.

As we argued previously, failing to develop an individual relationship is ultimately counterproductive, as many barriers to employment remain hidden. Like a number of panel members one of the barriers to employment Stacey (R1#121) identified is her lack of suitable clothes and her run down appearance. In the words of one respondent, “You don’t want to look like a welfare case when you’re walking into a job” (R1#42). A severe back injury forced Stacey to lose both her job as a superintendent, as well as her home, and she was forced to enter a shelter and turn to assistance. Now in her early fifties, Stacey is desperate to work, but her recent experiences have left her despondent. At a recent interview for a position as a receptionist, Stacey was struck by the contrast between the other candidates and herself: “My hair was all white. I looked terrible. I didn’t have the money to do my laundry. I didn’t have a nice outfit. I got there and I saw all these nice girls and I looked like hell.” Regular and supportive conversations with an individual worker may well have identified Stacey’s concerns, which were eroding her self-confidence and undermining her efforts to find work. A resourceful worker may even have unlocked government or community funds to provide Stacey with work clothes. However, rather than finding solutions, the workers Stacey encounters seem intent on demeaning and intimidating her:

The front desk girl makes me feel like shit. I don’t want to go there at all. One day I walked in there and I had this warm fur jacket on. She goes, “You’ve got a fur coat, what are you doing?” I said, “No, wait a minute. This fur coat cost me $5 at Goodwill. It’s all full of holes, come and see.” That’s what they are like. Another worker said to me, “You dress very nicely. You’re not doing too bad.” That’s what they do. They degrade you.

Panel members reported numerous similar incidents: taunts that they are not doing enough to find work, sarcastic comments about there being plenty of jobs, and even being shouted at and humiliated because they had limited English language skills. For example, Kate (R1#58) found it hard to comprehend the overtly aggressive attitude she repeatedly faced from her worker. A sole support parent, Kate faces a constant struggle to balance the demands of her child with those of Ontario Works. Although she works a couple of hours a day and volunteers seventy hours a month, her worker is pressurizing her to do more:

I’m a single parent. I have a 9 year-old son. I do require help from them. It’s not as though I’m sitting around doing nothing. She knows I’m working, she knows I’m volunteering, but she’s telling me that’s still not enough. She’s very bossy towards me. She makes me feel like I’m hardly doing anything. I could understand them getting angry with me if I was doing nothing, but I’m doing 70 hours volunteering a month. In their eyes that’s not enough. So it’s like they’re pushing me and telling me what to do. She has a very firm voice: “You have to do this, this and this to our standards” ... I just find it very frustrating that they’re being so bossy with me. I’m trying my best, but looking for work is not easy. They’re basically saying, “That’s not good enough. You have to do more.” It really frustrates and upsets me. There are times when I come home and I get so mad that I just sit down and cry. It really bothers me that they’re not being supportive. They seem like they really don’t care. They’re there to do their job and that’s it.
Recent immigrants, Javier and Rokon were left equally demoralized by their experiences of being shouted at and humiliated by workers. As an immigrant from Mexico, Javier was told he was required to bring somebody who can speak English to his initial meeting. A highly educated and skilled worker with a good level of spoken English, Javier decided to attend alone. As soon as his worker saw this she refused to meet with him. It was only after he persuaded her and proved his comprehension level that she went ahead with the application. As Javier explained, “People have different levels of education and some can handle this interview alone. You cannot treat everyone the same.” Rokon (R1#90), a married male in his mid-forties, also experienced numerous problems with the attitude of his worker, leading him to question why she was working for social assistance:

Maybe it's that they are tired of dealing with different people of different races and that's why they treat people poorly. I am pleased to be getting assistance, but it is humiliating when the workers shout because there are people from different races who don't understand English. They are trying their best, but the workers yell at them and humiliate them in public.

My worker was not good, she was notorious and badly behaved. She was shouting unnecessarily. I’ve called her many times and left messages but she never returns my calls. I don’t understand why she does not respond. Somebody is always suffering because this caseworker is rude, shouting, insulting, using bad language. Immigrants are allowed to come to Canada, but then they suffer at the hands of their caseworkers. Why is she a caseworker?

Similarly, Kate’s individual circumstances are ignored. Instead of recognizing that she is struggling to make ends meet, volunteering and working while raising a child, her worker frequently threatens her with being financially sanctioned or even suspended:

Basically they threaten me. It’s like if you don’t do this requirement you will be suspended or cutoff. They get me so frustrated, but I don’t want to get mad or yell at them because I’d be afraid of them saying “You’re going to treat me like this, we’ll you’re cut off.” I can’t afford to do that. But at the same time, they have to understand that I’m a single parent. I am trying my best. I’m trying to make ends meet and they’re just being bossy, really bossy to me … Do what they say to their standards and if not you will be cutoff or put on hold. I feel threatened by that. But I can’t turn around and tell them that because they’d probably figure I’m being sarcastic, being rude to them. I want to express my feelings but it’s hard to do that because I don’t want to be cutoff. They’re just there to do their job and be the boss. They don’t really care about their clients. They enjoy their position and they don’t care about our needs and how we’re feeling. That really upsets me.

A compounding factor in panel members’ frustration is that these threats and punishments often seem to be the result of nothing more than petty-mindedness and personal vendettas. For example, Zema (R1#79) found her meeting with her caseworker rescheduled when her arduous bus journey led to her arriving five minutes late. Her punishment was to be kept waiting for six hours. On another occasion, she denied her access to a course saying she wasn’t qualified, only to subsequently, offer her the same course two weeks later:

She is so mean to me. One day I was explaining to her why I was five minutes late. You have to take three buses to get there. Then she moved me from 9am to 3pm. She left me sitting there. Another time I found an ad for a course and I told her my education and my background would fit the course. She said, No. You are not allowed.” She hung up. She called me back two weeks later and offered me that same course (R1#79)
Tony’s Story: Why is it called Ontario Works when they don’t provide work or training?

Tony is a single, European aged 30. Although he has been unable to find work in recent years, he previously worked in the restaurant business for more than 15 years. Naturally shy, working in such a busy environment brought out the best in him. In recent years, his confidence has suffered and he has found it harder to compete for jobs with younger workers. The longer he is unemployed the more difficult it seems to find an opportunity and the threatening environment of Ontario Works does nothing to help him:

... They’re very, very hostile. They see a relatively young guy, who looks healthy and they think, “Why aren’t you working?” It’s been a very negative experience. They treat me like a low form of life. I feel threatened. You feel defensive already because they have the power to threaten you. And they use it. It’s just so nasty. They say “We’re going to hold back your cheque; we’re not going to give you this and that unless you do this and that.” They hold it over you. It’s a really ugly threat. It’s not the way I would operate. If I was a worker I would be very insistent that these are your obligations, but I wouldn’t hand out threats because I know people are down so low already. I just wonder why some of these people are social workers. Why are they? They’re supposed to be helping people not punishing them...

... I found a five-month training course and my worker told me the organisation would contact me. She called me yesterday and said “Did you get back to them?” “Nobody called me.” She didn’t call me back so I called them and she had already made an appointment for me without asking if it was convenient. When I spoke to her she insisted I be there. Then she started to scream at me. She was very, very nasty. She said, “we’re going to put you in a one-month program and we’re going to give you anything that comes along. We’re going to push you out there.” She got very angry at me. “If you’re not serious about it and you’re not interested in working, I have 300 people waiting on the list.” These are people that are supposed to be helping me. It’s really hard to handle that. Then when she gave me the information for this place, she wouldn’t give me the right name. She didn’t give me the right address. I had to sort it all out myself. I asked her for the telephone number and she said “No, the appointment has already been made. You don’t need it.” I told her I just like to have all the information together and she got nasty and slammed the phone down on me. This is pretty common. I understand the pressure’s on them. They’re under pressure, but I don’t understand why they are extremely nasty...

...You’re punished, constantly harassed by them and there’s no training. If they want you to participate in a work program, then they should provide one. They put you into the lousiest job possible and it’s not permanent. You’re going to be out in 3 months. The system works like that. I know from speaking to other people, it’s all about getting you off the system. It’s not about giving you proper training so you have a good trade and you’ll never go back on the system again. There’s no investment in people. It’s a short-term solution. It’s like putting a bandage on a bad wound. And it’s frightening. If you’ve been on the system for a while and they shove you into a job that just doesn’t work out, they won’t easily let you back on again. It’s not much, but at least it’s some security. I don’t think their goal is to help you in any way. It’s just to get you right off the system ... I don’t know why it’s called Ontario Works when they don’t provide you with work and they don’t provide you with training (R1#76).
This seems especially true when panel members described being threatened with sanctions when they had done nothing wrong. For example, Stacey was forced to go without eating properly for almost a month when documents she had submitted were lost. Her assistance was cut off and she became sick. She only maintained her accommodation and survived through that period without more serious health problems when an elderly neighbour, himself living in poverty, helped out. Stacey’s situation was made worse by the vindictive attitude of her worker, who refused to speak to her during this time and later even demanded a letter proving where the extra income had come from. Stacey recognised that workers were under a lot of pressure. However, compared to the pressures she faced on a daily basis they paled into insignificance:

_The worker said it was left on somebody’s desk and he couldn’t find it. That’s what he told me later. Meanwhile I was supposed to get welfare and I didn’t get it. I went 3 weeks waiting for them to decide what’s going on. I starved. I was sick for a while. I had to use a food bank. This old man, a friend of mine has nothing, but he says to me, “I can’t see you on the streets again. I’m going to pay your rent and you’re going to pay me whenever you can.” So when I got my cheque, I bought him groceries and I cooked and cleaned for him. Then they wanted to know who my friend is that lent me money. They want a letter from him. Your whole life is turned inside out for $400 a month. It’s just disgusting. It’s a real bad system. They make mistakes and right away they take your money. The worker was very abrupt, very ignorant, very rude to me. I had no money for a month, but the guy kept hanging up. Rude. They don’t let you finish. “You people just want more money.” I lost it with him and told him to shut up. I had to apologize like crazy. I said to him, “I’m sorry, but I’m under a lot of pressure too. I’m on the streets.”_

Although panel members talked openly about these experiences, it appears that many incidents go unreported. In part, this simply reflects their fear of further repercussions in the form of sanctions or even being cut off. Perhaps even more worryingly, many respondents seemed resigned to being treated like this. The climate of suspicion and surveillance is such that they expect nothing less than hassle and invasion in every aspect of their dealings with social assistance. Such experiences expose the short-term focus of Ontario Works. Investing in suspicion and surveillance might get people off assistance quickly. However, investing in skills and training is the only way to secure a more permanent break from assistance. Unfortunately, as we describe below, based on the experiences of panel members the opportunities for real skills training are few and far between under Ontario Works.

Unfair, Unhelpful and Inefficient

While more is expected of social assistance recipients, the Ontario Works program, riddled with errors and inefficiencies, seems to offer them less. Participation in one of three broad employment activities is compulsory for the vast majority of recipients to remain eligible for assistance. However, as we noted earlier, participants frequently reported that they had no input to their ‘individualized’ back-to-work plan. Moreover, no matter which employment activities they participated in, Ontario Works was considered largely unhelpful in their attempts to get back into work. Typically, panel members indicated that they only benefited from the additional $100 supplied to help with the transport costs of those taking part in volunteer activities. As a consequence, members of our panel believed that Ontario Works is largely unfair and unhelpful in their attempts to get back into the labour market. Instead, many were resigned to simply going through the motions of participation and any meaningful progress was made through their own efforts and despite Ontario Works.

Panel members reported numerous errors and inefficiencies within the system which they often suffered as a result of. This was certainly true for Marie (R1#33) and Lana (R1#52).
Evelyn’s Story: You’re just a warm body. They get slave labour

Evelyn, a divorced fifty year old, went from a highly successful career as an equity trader in the stock market, earning more than $70,000 a year, to scraping by on welfare. After losing all her savings investing them in her own company, she struggled to find work for three years before “coming to the end of my rope, declaring bankruptcy and turning to assistance.” She was stunned at how little Ontario Works does and how isolated it is from business:

…I’ve never been on welfare so I knew nothing about it. My impression was that they assessed what you could do and the government had thousands and thousands of jobs available. I thought Ontario Works found people like me that fell into a crack, assessed what they can do and matched their skills with something in government. I didn’t expect them to give me a job, but thought they would have leads. I thought that someone like IBM would phone the government and say “We need to hire thirty five telemarketers by Thursday.” Then Ontario Works goes through their list. “We have these people with these skills. Get them a job.” Why wouldn’t they be talking to businesses? But Ontario Works does nothing...

… They seem to have this idea that we’re all the same people each of us has exactly the same problem. It’s set up for people that have been on the system for thirty five years, not set up for me ... I went to a course and the instructor asked me immediately, “What are you doing here?” I’m not a person that doesn’t have any skills. I need to find a job, but what they are doing is trying to help people that have never had a job and help them send out resumes. I could have set up his resume for him so I had no business being there...

…I found a paralegal course and was about to start when I was offered a job through my bankruptcy lawyer’s cousin. When I started one partner was stuck in the US because of September 11, but another guy met and hired me. I opened twenty-seven new accounts for them. I could do the job. Finally, the second partner gets back and sees how old I am. The woman who does the pay cheques calls me in and gives me the income tax form and says “Make sure you put your birth date on there.” I was fired two days later. I’m not stupid. That’s ageism... I was totally depressed. My course had already started. Now, they’re trying to push me into volunteer work. To keep receiving $527 a month plus $100 for travel, I have to do at least 40 hours a month. She told me there was a book with places that require volunteers and I wrote four or five names down that interested me. Another book had places that wanted 40 to 60 hours per week. For that they give me $620 a month. That’s called slavery. I would rather be cut off. People are taking advantage. That’s not even minimum wage. It’s against the law ... I’d be very happy to do volunteer work but I refuse to do 40 to 60 hours a week. They don’t care about what I’m like. They don’t care. You’re just a warm body. Here, do this! They get slave labour...

…I applied at Starbucks they have ads, No Frills grocery cashiers, and they don’t hire me. Maybe it’s because insurance costs would go through the roof, all I have to do is slip on a banana peel and they have a liability on their hands. Anyway, they aren’t hiring me. Why wouldn’t they I know how to count. I’m presentable. It doesn’t make sense (R1#19).
Marie, a single mother to two young children, explained that she was suspended after information she supplied was not entered into the computer system. Lana, meanwhile, was suspended when the information she submitted was lost:

*I went in December last year and my worker didn’t put the information in the computer. I got a letter in February stating that I was suspended. Then I didn’t receive my cheque because she didn’t update my phone number and she didn’t get in contact with me. I had to go back in March. In December she had told me I had 6 weeks to get daycare and go back to school. I went back in March because that wasn’t in the computer.*

*I had an interview early in October. My worker asked me to fax a copy of my diploma. I sent it to him within the week but in early November I got a letter from him that he did not receive my documents. Now I am suspended until I send him another copy. I just made another copy, went to the office and gave it to the receptionist. I was afraid that he wouldn’t receive it. I don’t know what happened but I was scared because I did not want to get suspended.*

Anna (R1#80) was another who had numerous problems with suspensions. In her late thirties, Anna has been on assistance for two years since she had a miscarriage. She was subsequently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and is still struggling to overcome this. She also has two children, one of whom has a brain injury and demands a huge amount of her time. Anna works when she is able to, but the demands of her family mean that she is excluded from many jobs. She is often called away from work to be with her son and although she has an understanding employer now, the insecurity of her labour market status means her reportable income changes all the time. This has caused numerous problems. On one occasion she was cut off because she was unaware she had to submit the income sheet when she had not worked at all. On another occasion, she called to let them know that she did not work, but the message got lost and she was cut off anyway. Now, Anna tries to hand in her report each month, but “once in a while they still don’t get it from downstairs to upstairs” and she is suspended again. In Anna’s experience, the whole system seems “muddled” and after all this time they still remain unaware of the complexities of her situation:

*You get a form to fill out to say whether you’ve made any money. This particular month I did not make any money so I did not fill it in. My cheque didn’t come. They don’t call you. You just don’t get your cheque … Another time, I got a letter saying that my cheque has been suspended because I hadn’t been giving confirmation of where I work and I didn’t submit my sheet. I had left a message the week before stating that I didn’t work at all and I didn’t have a cheque at all because my son was very, very sick. Then I called again the next week and my worker said she got the message after that letter was already sent out. It all seems really muddled. I asked if it says in my file that my son has a brain injury. She said “No, it says there are issues with you, but they haven’t stated what issues they are.” So, they didn’t have a damn idea that I have post-traumatic stress disorder and they didn’t know anything about my child.*

Such experiences contrast sharply with the demanding expectations placed upon recipients and, as a result, they are understood as more than a collection of individual mistakes. Instead, panel members saw them as deliberate practices designed to facilitate the delaying or withdrawal of benefits. They also act to confirm the widespread belief that there is no accountability for mistakes made by workers. When panel members failed to report a change in circumstances or to provide some documentation, they were punished, but when their information was repeatedly lost, or they were poorly treated, there was no liability. This sense of injustice was only exacerbated by the numerous examples of workers either providing the wrong information or no information at all. For example, Kathy (R1#17), a single parent in her mid-fifties, worked for more than twenty-five years before being struck down with health problems meaning she is unable to work. Although she has applied for Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) she told us that she is “still going through the process four years later.” As she talked
more it became clear that part of the delay was the fact that she had been on welfare for more than 18 months before she was made aware she could apply for disability. When Kathy found out she was justifiably outraged. Her caseworker simply told her, “I don’t have to supply that information. You have to find that out for yourself.” Kathy’s conversations with other recipients confirmed that they also knew little or nothing about resources that are available:

I was really pissed that I was not told about it. And when I mentioned it, I was also pissed that she said I don’t have to supply that information. You have to find that out for yourself ... They should tell you more about your options. They have something in the office, but people don’t tell you anything. When you walk around you find a lot of very interesting stuff. I understand the time thing. They can’t go through every booklet they have on the wall, but they should let people know about it. I know other people who are dealing with them and I say, “Do you know about this? Do you know about that?” They’ve never heard about it.

Andrea (R1#34) was also shocked to discover how unhelpful social assistance is. Andrea, a separated mother with two young children, was an office worker for around 15 years prior to being incapacitated through depression. The impact of this illness overwhelmed her, confining her to bed for months on end and undermined her confidence and self-esteem. Like Kathy, she was unaware that there was a specific program she could turn to. Her initial interactions with Ontario Works were “very cold” and she felt like she was “dealing with a computer,” confirming the distant bureaucracy described earlier. As a result, Andrea was distrustful about how her illness would be treated and she was scared to open up because “there’s always that threat hanging over you that you’re going to end up on the streets.” However, once she met a compassionate worker, everything seemed to change:

There’s a real problem interacting with them and telling them the true story. I didn’t feel like I was dealing with a person. It was a bureaucracy and I was just a statistic. Once I met somebody human enough to tell, I came right out and said “I have depression.” After that it was easy to tell everybody and everybody was nice. It was all abrasion, abrasion, abrasion, then “she’s depressed,” nice, nice, nice. But I was still the same person ... They’re not really interacting with you as a human being. You are just another case. That’s not true. People are not just a case, especially when you hit a situation like this, regardless of whether it’s through depression or disabilities. If people don’t want to work there’s usually a problem there. They should be more aware of that. They really try and get tough on people. That’s the wrong approach because no matter why anybody is in there they’re all struggling and experiencing a very difficult time. They have a lot of worries and there’s a lot of problems. Getting tough on them is simply going to add to the strains they’re already experiencing. It’s just like kicking somebody when they’re down. It’s not going to make them get up. It’s going to make them stay down on the ground.

What struck Andrea most was the short-sightedness of this approach. On the one hand, Ontario Works adopted a very tough stance insisting clients meet numerous eligibility demands, participate in courses and seek work as quickly as possible. At the same time, however, workers did not attempt to assess client skills properly and did not provide them with sufficient information about the courses and training opportunities that were available. Instead, Andrea found out snippets of information from a variety of sources, including workers, other clients and her own research. Significantly, Andrea felt that even when information was provided the context was entirely wrong. As she explains, it is no surprise recipients struggle to identify any positive information about courses that are available, buried as it is within the bureaucratic demands of verification interviews:

They really have to understand that their approach does matter. One, their attitudes stink and withholding vital information is just foolish, especially if they want to get tough with somebody and help them get a job. They never looked at my resume. Maybe if they had from the beginning, they would have said, “Here are programs you might benefit from.” But they never brought it up, I did and that’s not right. I should have been made aware of it from day one. They need to improve their communication skills and they need better training. We should be told from day one “We’re helping you. You’re on assistance and you have to be looking for a job. We have these courses.”
They should also be made aware of the potential to make any extra income, whether it's through volunteering, whatever programs they have because they don’t do that. One person gives you a little piece of information, another person gives you another little piece, but it goes in one ear and out the other because they do that during those meetings that occur once every 3 months. You can’t decide when you are in there and you’re talking about, “Do you have this asset?” and “How many people live with you?” You spend all your time doing that and you don’t have the time to sit and think about what kind of courses you want and need.

Based on her experiences, Andrea is convinced that workers need more training, not least in how to communicate with clients and certainly in terms of providing them with necessary information about what options are open to them. For example, it was Andrea who identified a computer course that expands her accounting skills and makes her more attractive to employers. On another occasion, her transport supplement was stopped without any indication, making it exceptionally difficult for her to fulfill her volunteering commitment:

I was the one who approached them about it. They never told me, they never showed me exactly what types of programs are available and what they think would be helpful for me. They never brought that up at all ... I was volunteering with the distress center and in July I didn’t get the extra $100. I called them and said “What happened to the extra $100? How do you expect me to get to the distress centre and back?” She said “The volunteering contract has to be renewed every 6 months.” They never told me that. I had to go that day, but I didn’t have the money because they didn’t provide it. They should warn you the month before, “We understand you’re doing the volunteer work with the distress centre, make sure that you get a letter from them again saying you’re still participating and bring it in before that 6 months runs out.”

However, while more accurate information and a better understanding of the options and resources that are available would undoubtedly help, the experiences of panel members suggest that many of the required activities do little to improve their employability anyway. Frequently the only benefits panel members saw in their participation was the additional $100 transport allowance provided to volunteers. That aside, whether they were involved in job search, volunteering or education activities, panel members reported a consistent story of low quality placements which did no more than keep them busy. Typically, panel members complained that their placements were too basic for their needs, neither matched their skills nor provided new ones to help them access a job quicker, and, worse, only acted as an impediment to their own plans, leaving them feeling frustrated and exploited. Boris, for example, considered his job search activities pointless. He was instructed to attend a resource centre everyday and told to work his way through the telephone directory cold calling a range of businesses in an attempt to secure work leads. He found the exercise pointless and disheartening, but when he asked to move to an alternative placement, he was told that he had to complete the activity:

I had to come to the centre and just pick up a phone book and call these unknown people, talk to them and offer myself as an employee. I tried to do it, but nobody wanted to talk to me. Nobody was interested in me because I was inexperienced and they didn’t know me. I asked my caseworker to find me an agency that could get me a placement, but she said “No, we can only send you to this office again. That’s it.”

Similarly, Claire (R1#62), complained that most of the courses on offer “were basic skills, cooking, parenting, English as a Second Language, things that didn’t apply to me.” Javier suggested to his worker that he use his qualifications and experience to teach math or administration lessons. Instead, he was placed in a homeless organisation as a cleaner. Jane was equally adamant that the poor quality options were of no use to her. Like Javier, she suggested identifying a placement herself, but was also told to choose from courses which bore no relation to her skills and interests:

Ontario Works has not helped one iota with my long-term goals. When I went into the resource centre to find out what kinds of things were available, I was asking them if they not only bought seats in programs, but if someone
sourced out a program, would they consider funding? I was told “No.” I looked through their programs and, I
mean, I don’t want to take basket-weaving, thank you. It’s not a real step up. None of the course they had bought
seats in were real steps. They’re a first step kind-of thing. I already had my goal in mind. They have not been
helpful one iota in attaining my goals.

Those who were volunteering had similar views about the merits of the activities. Sheila, for example,
explained that all she did was clean the kitchens of a homeless organisation. Boris helped out in the
kitchen of his church. Claire was a lunchroom supervisor at a school. And Sophia, a researcher and
professor in Argentina, fulfilled her requirements by assisting a grade one teacher. None of these
activities, the most common amongst panel members, were raising their skills or increasing their
chances of finding work. As well as causing frustration, there were also philosophical objections to the
compulsory nature of participation. Evelyn found it hard to understand her requirement to participate as
anything other than “slave labour.” Other panel members agreed with her contention that they were
being exploited and were just “warm bodies.” Michelle, the former welfare worker, had heard countless
stories about such exploitation and her experience volunteering at a mission only confirmed this:

_They give you nothing and they treat you like dirt. They want you there on time. They want you to go above and
beyond the call of duty. Do this and that. All using your own vehicle. I just didn’t think it was right. You don’t get a
job. You never get a job._

Others, like Jane, indicated that they had volunteered in the past, but they were offended by being
forced into it simply to receive the support that they needed. Their frustration was made worse when
such meaningless activities actually hindered their own efforts to find work:

_I’ve got nothing against volunteering. I’ve volunteered lots on my own, throughout my life. Various organizations
from an underground opera company to artist’s societies to feeding the homeless. That’s not the problem. What I
felt resentful about was that I had a plan. I had a mission. I needed transition time and I felt as though their
bureaucracy and their red tape and their requirements took me away from being able to pursue my path. All the
crap that I had to deal with and the hoops I had to step through._

Having to participate in activities that failed to boost their skills and simply kept them busy not only
meant a lot of running back and forth, which was expensive in terms of time and transport costs, but
also stopped panel members from more productive job search. Anna and Lucas (R1#103), for example,
had also developed their own plans to get back into the labour market and simply needed some support
from Ontario Works. Anna eventually wants to work in the area of family law. There is a long road
ahead, but she has taken a few courses in the past and received good grades. Lucas, a black teenager,
identified and enrolled in a mechanics course which would have provided him with sought after skills.
However, rather than encouraging their independence, both were told that if they continued they would
be cut off.

_I was supposed to start a course at college in January. They told me that they won’t give me any assistance until
then because they want to see what happens. I told them I’m only taking one course and the assistance I get just
pays for the course. But they said they would cut me off until I can prove that. I’m feeling very pushed. I’m really
trying to go to school, but when I’m pressured, my post-traumatic comes up. I was having fainting spells and
passing out. It’s very difficult. I’m going to appointments all the time. I can’t miss time from school because they
will kick me out, but I can’t miss appointments either because I have to go when they say ... I am going out on my
own in trying to get my courses and get threatened that they would cut me off until we know how much funding you
get from that course. How is that helping me? They didn’t even help me apply for this. I have to pay $60 to apply to
college which is non-refundable. Are they helping me with that? No!_
Ontario Works doesn’t help. They push you back instead of moving you forward. When I wanted to reach my goals they didn’t help me. They don’t improve your skills. I was supposed to complete a course for mechanics next January. After I’d already started they told me to bring these papers in. I’d already started taking some tests and then they say “Do this or we cut you from welfare.” You’re supposed to pay $44. I asked welfare if they could pay that for me and they refused. They said if I continue doing it I wouldn’t receive any welfare. So I didn’t do it. They won’t give you any money to try and find a job. I was supposed to finish my course, get a diploma and graduate, but they won’t do it because of $44.

Along with all the bureaucracy, the errors and inefficiencies, the lack of information and the wrong information, having to participate in pointless activities which fall short of their needs and detract from their own efforts, simply confirmed the opinions of panel members that Ontario Works is both unfair and unhelpful. From their perspective, more is demanded of them, and they face stringent sanctions and suspensions if they fail to meet them all, whether through any fault of their own or not. In return, Ontario Works provides little in the way of opportunities for purposeful skills development. In the opinion of panel members, they were compelled to participate in a range of employment activities, many of which did nothing to improve their employability and seemed designed to do nothing more than keep them busy. This meant that many activities were perceived as a waste of time; another bureaucratic requirement to fulfill that took participants from one welfare cheque to the next, but did nothing to help them move into work. As a result, many were resigned to simply going through the motions of participation. Moreover, much of the meaningful progress that was made, such as identifying resources and opportunities, came through the efforts of recipients rather than Ontario Works. However, as Jane, Anna, Lucas, and others discovered, the rigid rules of Ontario Works were never far away and often acted to impede these efforts.

Concluding Remarks

Away from the headlines proclaiming welfare reform in Ontario a resounding success amidst huge caseload declines, and closer to the ground, Ontario Works looks and feels very different. The experiences of the panel members described here are a world apart from the client-centred, individualized and enabling program the provincial government depicts. Instead, from the demanding application process, through strained relationships with caseworkers, to compulsory activities that do nothing to improve their employability, Ontario Works resembles a bureaucratic maze consisting of an incomprehensible labyrinth of rules and regulations. While this has, perhaps, always been true, with the adoption of Ontario Works and the introduction of more complex application and participation requirements, the social assistance system has become even more demanding and punitive and even more remote from the circumstances and needs of the clients it is meant to serve. Embedded in the new call centre technology, this distance is also personified in the attitudes and demeanours of workers who frequently appear either cold and disinterested or threatening and intimidating, as well as in the punitive financial sanctions which underpin every request for information and every requirement to participate. As a result, panel members like Jane are left feeling “dehumanized” by a social assistance system which treats applicants and recipients as potential criminals, rather than people in need of help and, as a result, wastes resources invading every aspect of their lives:

It’s dehumanizing having someone go line-by-line through your bank statement, wondering where you are spending your money and asking you to explain this deposit and that deposit. It’s none of their business if I spend $25 in Shopper’s Drug Mart, or if I happen to have a coffee at Starbucks’s ... The whole system needs to be revamped. It shouldn’t just assume people are fraudulent. There’s fraud in any system. How many people are really committing fraud? Maybe five percent? MAYBE. Is it necessary to treat every single applicant as though they are a fraudulent criminal? No! It’s not.
Instead of investing in skills and training that might secure a more permanent break from assistance, the provincial government has chosen to invest in a policy of continual verification, applying constant pressure to remove people from assistance. This does nothing to reduce the likelihood of recipients needing assistance again in the future. However, more significantly, from the perspective of the provincial government, it has been successful, especially in the context of a temporarily favourable economy, at cutting the caseload and providing Ontario Works with the myth of success. This illusion, however, quickly fades upon listening to the experiences of those at the sharp end of welfare reform. For the majority of panel members, the suspicion and surveillance and the rigorous rules and requirements of Ontario Works trap them deeper in poverty, rather than helping them to move on with their lives. It is particularly damning, for example, that when asked to reflect on the benefits of the system, a number of panel members could only comment to the effect that it keeps them off the streets and “from starving to death”(R1#26). As Jane and Rachel (R1#77), a First Nations female in her mid-thirties, explain from the perspective of those who have to navigate the bureaucratic maze, the purpose of Ontario Works is transparently one-dimensional. The main ambition of Ontario Works is to keep cutting the caseload, regardless of individual needs and the ability to prosper in a labour market increasingly characterized by poverty wages and insecurity at the workplace:

The purpose of Ontario Works is to get as many people off the public purse as possible. That means they don’t care that there are families in shelters that can’t find decent housing, that don’t make enough money to pay the rent even though they’re working full-time on minimum wage.

The purpose is to make the government look good. They couldn’t care less about people. They just try to get people off welfare. They keep saying how many people are getting off assistance. That’s just people giving up or moving and the people who are getting jobs, they are minimum wage jobs. There are not too many people that I know who have actually gotten good jobs from Ontario Works. It’s just making you fight harder for money to survive. It’s like playing with people’s lives.
Bureaucratic Surveillance

In modern societies, the quintessential formal organization is the bureaucracy, defined by Max Weber as a hierarchical entity with power concentrated at the top, that required written rules, information control, and salaried officials. Although the successful functioning of a bureaucracy is dependent on a number of things (e.g., clearcut lines of authority and written rules), its capacity to watch over and keep control over its members is important. Such surveillance is made possible through the accumulation of information and direct supervision. We examine the mixing of work and welfare, the transition from welfare to work, and selected labor market indicators—primarily hours of work and wages—that those in receipt of social assistance face in assuming paid work. Those leaving welfare for work face precarious employment opportunities. Leavers earn lower wages, work fewer hours and consequently have lower annual earnings than non-recipients. Keats makes few explicit allusions to surveillance, but they are memorable, queasily attuned to asymmetries of power. Think of Porphyro’s unsuspected eye in the closet as Madeline disrobes in her bedchamber, or the sly conspiring vision of Isabella’s brothers, or Lamia reconnoitering the nymph’s secret bed before turning informant to Hermes.