

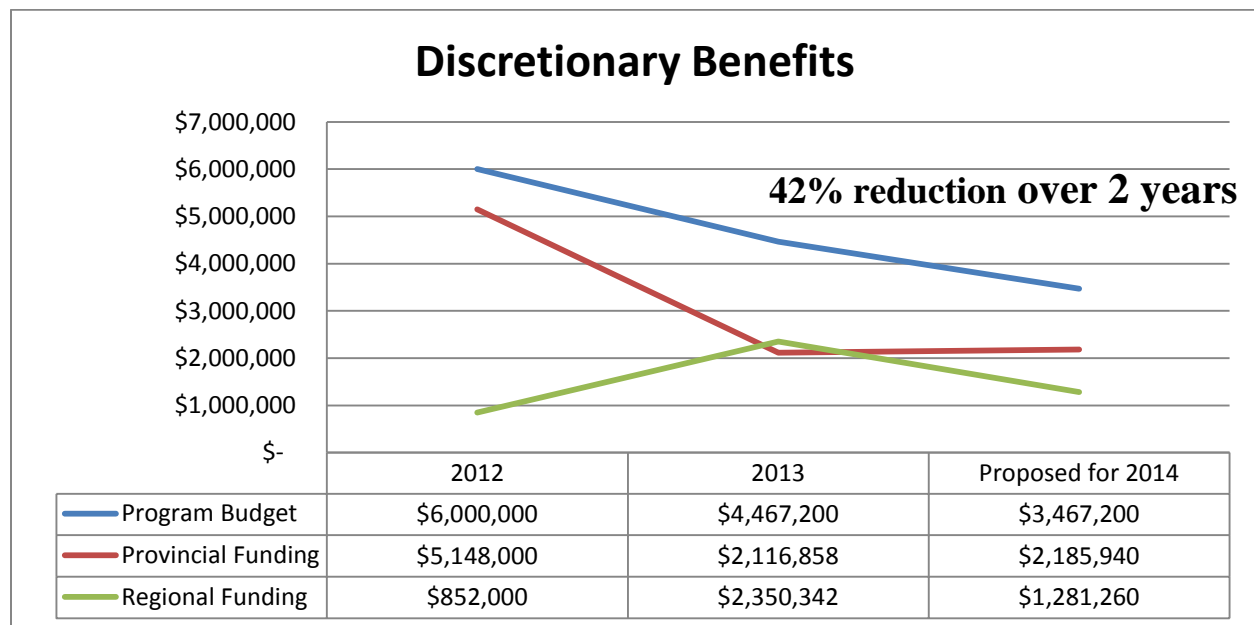
What are discretionary benefits?

Under the *Ontario Works Act*, the Region of Waterloo has the discretion to provide certain health and non-health related benefits to people receiving OW and ODSP¹. These benefits are cost shared between the Province of Ontario and the Region of Waterloo. Some examples of benefits include:

- Emergency food hampers
- Funds to prevent eviction
- Funeral costs
- Interpreter services
- Appliance repair
- Mattress or furniture purchases
- Vision or dental care for adults
- Mobility aids
- Hearing aids
- Bus tickets
- Baby supplies

Why did discretionary benefits change?

Beginning in 2013 the Province capped its funding for discretionary benefits at \$10 per recipient of income assistance. This reduced the province's funding for the discretionary benefits program from \$5 million to \$2.1 million. Regional Council responded to this cutback by approving \$1.35 million in on-going funding and an additional 1 million in one-time funding from the Tax Stabilization Reserve Fund and the Capital Levy Reserve Fund².



It is important to note that at the same time as funding to discretionary benefits was reduced, the Community Start Up Benefit (CSUMB) was cut and partially replaced by a new program called the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI). This change was widely publicized to both recipients and community agencies. This had the unintended consequence of causing widespread confusion and misunderstanding surrounding housing related discretionary benefits, for instance many agencies and recipients were under the false impression that there was no assistance available for eviction prevention¹.

How were discretionary benefits changed?

When funding was reduced staff removed a number of benefits and significantly restricted the eligibility criteria and amounts for many of the benefits.

Benefits no longer available¹

- Mattresses
- Purchase of furniture
- Moving costs
- Baby supplies

“Moving expenses are important particularly when a person is accepted into subsidized housing. This can happen quickly so clients cannot plan for this expense...”

-OW Staff¹

Benefits with restricted access

- Mobility aids and orthotics (\$100 deductible)⁴
- Eviction prevention (require eviction notice, amounts at levels too low to resolve issues, not available if one needs to move due to unaffordable or unsafe unit)¹
- Food hamper amount is capped and does not reflect actual cost²
- The Energy Assistance Program and CHPI were used to pay for late/connection utilities fees. When these funds are exhausted, recipients will need to rely exclusively on the discretionary benefits program²

“\$400 for a single person for rent arrears is too low. Most people cannot even rent a room for this amount...”

-OW Staff¹

“Eligibility criteria are so restricted that hardly anyone qualifies.”

-OW Staff¹

What has been the impact of these changes?

- 72% of staff from community organizations indicated that the changes had an effect on people’s access to benefits¹
- OW staff have noted an increase in stress among recipients because they are no longer able to access needed benefits¹
- Recipients commented on the negative health, economic and social impact of not being able to access dental benefits¹
- The changes have more than likely contributed to increased use of shelters and food banks and caused a strain on local charities that are already operating at capacity
- The 2013 budget for discretionary benefits is estimated to be underspent by \$400,000³

“My worker told me I have to go to a shelter to get last month’s rent.”

-Recipient¹

Next steps

- Recognize that there were a number of factors impacting the use of discretionary benefits during this time of transition. The underuse of the benefit does not reflect actual levels of need in our community for discretionary benefits
- Maintain \$2 million of regional funding to the discretionary benefits program
- Develop a mechanism to measure requests (granted and declined) for discretionary benefits

Proposed budget for Discretionary Benefits as published in Report: SS-13-039³

Ontario Works Discretionary Benefits					
\$ in 000s					
Item	Sept 2013 Y-T-D Actual	2013 Budget	Variance	2014 Preliminary	
Dental for adults	1,045	900	(145)	1,200	
Food hampers	525	700	175	300	*58% reduction will impact availability of emergency food
Vision care for adults	262	320	58	320	
Late payment/connections	9	200	191	85	*Currently using Energy Assistance Program and CHPI which will run out
Funeral costs	377	300	(77)	500	
Travel/bus tickets	147	250	103	200	*Identified as an issue by both staff and recipients
Orthotics	2	50	48	0	*Criteria makes the benefit inaccessible and in 2014 there will be no funding for this benefit
Drugs/medical supplies	149	186	37	175	
Interpreter services	101	170	69	140	
Mobility aids	35	87	52	70	
Hearing aids	14	35	21	20	
Appliance repairs	35	35	0	50	
Furniture/appliance purchase	8	50	42	50	*Unclear what the criteria is
Eviction prevention	151	614	463	300	*Miscommunication on the availability of this benefit and amounts too low
Contingency		440	440	0	
Emergency response	16	75	59	70	
Purchase of mattresses	1	33	32	10	*Only available to replace after bed bugs
Purchase of documents	1	22	21	10	
Total	\$ 2,878	\$ 4,467	\$1,589	\$3,500	

Sources:

[1] Region of Waterloo Social Services (2013). *Discretionary Benefits & Discharge Fund Pilot 2013 Check-In Survey Findings* <http://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/regionalGovernment/resources/JA2013-0906.pdf>

[2] Region of Waterloo Social Services (2013) *Report: SS-13-019. Ontario Works Discretionary Benefits Update.* <http://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/regionalGovernment/resources/SM2013-0618.pdf>

[3] Region of Waterloo Social Services (2013) *Report: SS-13-039. Discretionary Benefits Update.* <http://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/regionalGovernment/resources/JA2013-1206.pdf>

[4] Region of Waterloo Social Services (2013) *Doc# 134449 v.2. Low-Income Residents Benefit List* <http://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/regionalGovernment/resources/JA2013-0906.pdf>