

Transforming

Ontario's

Social Assistance Delivery System

BY ART DANIELS AND BONNIE EWART

Ontario's thirty-year-old social assistance system was in dire need of reform. Caseloads had almost tripled, annual costs had risen from \$1.3 billion in 1985 to \$6.8 billion, and business processes were largely paper-based and labour-intensive, leaving little time for caseworkers to serve clients. The technology supporting the system had become outdated and beyond repair, leading to error and fraud.

In 1995, the Ontario government set a goal of creating efficient programs that would save taxpayers money and provide excellent customer service, information on demand, and modern technology. Through the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, the *Business Transformation Project* (BTP) was created. Through the implementation of the BTP, the Ministry would reform the social assistance delivery system.

The BTP worked closely with private sector consultants, municipalities, and frontline delivery staff to design a system that will provide excellent customer service and save taxpayers money.

The project is already a resounding success, with significant improvements in customer service as well as savings to taxpayers in excess of \$378 million. These achievements are the result of a new design that relies on technological enhancements to reduce error and fraud.

As part of the system reform, the ministry introduced two new social assistance programs - the provincially-delivered Ontario Disability Program and the municipally-

delivered Ontario Works program. Recognizing the need for private sector expertise, the ministry signed a contract in January 1997 with Accenture (formerly known as Andersen Consulting) to establish a unique partnership in the Business Transformation Project. The contractual arrangement, called Common Purpose Procurement, requires Accenture to invest its own resources, work side-by-side with ministry and municipal staff on the project, and recover its investments only as savings are achieved. There were no up front costs to taxpayers.

Objectives

The purpose of the BTP is to:

- Replace an outdated delivery system that was unable to support new social assistance programs;
- Develop cost-effective and efficient business and technology solutions to modernize delivery of programs, improve client service, reduce fraud, and save taxpayers money; and
- Introduce the system to over 200 sites across the province, thereby

freeing over 7,000 staff to spend more time serving recipients.

Other key goals include providing fast, accurate eligibility determination and standardized practices to ensure that people receive the same treatment everywhere in the province. The new system will ensure that eligible people receive benefits at the right time.

The BTP developed the design for the Service Delivery Model (SDM) through extensive consultation with municipalities and frontline delivery staff. In all, more than 1,000 people participated in the project. Implementation is occurring in two phases. The first, completed by December 2000, included: the successful introduction of an automated eligibility review process; an automated telephone system to provide information to clients about their cases; and seven municipally-operated call centres across the province for intake screening. The second phase will be fully implemented in January 2002.

First Phase

The following features were implemented as part of the first phase of implementation:

- **Automated Eligibility Review**

A new process for reviewing and verifying current social assistance cases has been introduced to all provincial and municipal offices. It has proven to be highly effective in identifying

Results

The Service Delivery Model design was confirmed in August, 1999, after extensive consultation with all stakeholders. Key features of the new system include:

- On-line Internet-based technology;
- Use of third party sources to verify eligibility (e.g. Employment Insurance, Canada Customs and Revenue Agency);
- Telephone screening for eligibility via seven call centres;
- An automated telephone system to provide clients with information and allow them to report changes; and
- A common province-wide database, which helps to detect fraud and allows recipients to transfer their entitlement across municipalities.

overpayments, underpayments, ineligible recipients, and cases requiring fraud investigation. To date, nearly 283,000 cases have been reviewed. Of these, accuracy of payment was confirmed in 72% of reviews; 3% received an increase; 9% saw a decrease; and the remaining cases were withdrawn or terminated. As of September 2001, total provincial savings were in excess of \$378 million of which more than \$266 million was attributed to eligibility review. (In addition, there were more than \$93 million in municipal savings (due to cost sharing) for eligibility review and other project initiatives.

• New Application Process

A new process for taking social assistance applications has been introduced at seven municipally operated call centres, or intake screening units. Each call centre is responsible for telephone screening for all the municipalities within its designated region. At the call centres, trained workers take callers through a social assistance application via a telephone interview. If applicants are not eligible, they are informed during their call and are advised verbally and in writing of the process for appealing this decision. If applicants

are potentially eligible, workers initiate third party checks and schedule face-to-face intake verification interviews at the applicants' local office. By the end of November 2001, over 528,000 calls had been received by the call centres, with 80% of calls answered within 60 seconds.

• Automated Telephone System

This system is connected to the central database and allows recipients to access information about their cases in English or French via touch-tone telephone. As of November, almost two million calls have been made to the new system, which is available between 8:00 am and 9:00pm, Monday to Friday and 12:00-5:00pm, Saturday and Sunday. In future, recipients will be able to report their earnings on this system.

Second Phase

The second phase implementation of the remaining components of the new technology – such as the calculation of eligibility, cheque production and payments, and tracking and reporting mechanisms – is currently nearing completion.

The new technology offers a Web-centric environment and a single province-wide database. It is replacing the eight social assistance technology systems currently in use. In addition to these features, the system has enhanced case management capabilities to improve current practices and streamline work for staff. The rules are built right into the system, ensuring consistent application. Enhanced eligibility and payment features will make tracking of overpayments/arrears easier and ensure eligibility decisions are made more quickly and with greater accuracy.

The pilot went “live” successfully in Hamilton/Niagara region on May 7, 2001. This implementation was many months in the planning, and encompassed major training, production dress rehearsals, and a major data conversion exercise. The pilot went well, with no major issues surfacing.

The first pay-run, a key milestone, occurred successfully. Staff in the pilot delivery offices have reported a high level of confidence and satisfaction in the new technology. As a result, broader implementation throughout the province began in

Accenture and the Government of Ontario have fully paid for the investment from program savings of more than \$378 million. When the system reaches maturity, it will produce annual savings of \$200 million to taxpayers year after year.

September in three waves with the final wave completed in January 2002.

Overall BTP Benefits

Results to date have already far exceeded the expectations of stakeholders. Although there were a few glitches along the way, it has been widely acknowledged that never before has the ministry been so successful in introducing change to field operations. Schedules were met, implementation difficulties were minimal, field adoption of new processes

Benefits

The anticipated benefits have already been realized. The BTP has been credited with achieving the following benefits:

- Reduced response time and great convenience for clients requesting information about their cases;
- Reduced time and effort expended in determining a potential client's eligibility to receive benefits upon application;
- Reduced fraud through one province-wide database and third party checks to validate information; and
- Significant savings to Ontario taxpayers.

was rapid, and service to recipients did not suffer.

By December 2000, both Accenture and the ministry had already been fully paid for their investment, as the savings from the project had surpassed all costs. As of September 2001, more than \$378 million program savings had been achieved and BTP savings have exceeded all project costs by more than \$35 million. When the new system is fully operational, it will produce savings of \$200 million to taxpayers year after year.

The ministry has been particularly gratified by client acceptance of the new system. In fact, the absence of concern raised by clients is unprecedented for a major change initiative of this kind. The automated phone system is a prime example of the project's success in this regard, in large part because of the consultation that occurred during its development. Initially, there was concern that social assistance recipients would have difficulty using the technology associated with the phone system. The BTP therefore tested the system in its early stages with groups of clients, which resulted in modifications. The fact that almost two million calls have been received by the system since its introduction testifies to its acceptance.

Strategic Alliances

The BTP's success to date has been attributable to critical alliances with Accenture, ministry corporate and field staff and municipalities. The ministry's partnership with Accenture brought private sector knowledge of technology and experience in large scale business redesign that enabled the ministry and municipalities to envision a new, effective way to deliver programs. The unique arrangement allowed the ministry to achieve its program objectives while minimizing risk.

The project's greatest challenge has been management of the change itself. With hundreds of independent municipal organizations involved, as well as the ministry's policy and program delivery branches, it was essential to involve multiple stakeholders in a meaningful way.

At the highest level, the change has been driven by an executive

Showcase Ontario 2001

Showcase Ontario 2001 Awards – Left to Right: John Fleming – Deputy Minister, Ministry of Community and Social Services; Mark Eleoff – Accenture Partner; and Bonnie Ewart – Assistant Deputy Minister, Business Transformation Project.



On September 12, 2001, the Business Transformation Project received two

prestigious awards at the annual 2001 Showcase Ontario Awards of Excellence. BTP received an Award of Merit in the category of Public-Private Partnerships – a significant achievement on its own. Furthermore, the project also received the prestigious Diamond Award which recognized projects that demonstrate innovation, creativity and service excellence. The BTP's success to date is attributable to its partnership with Accenture and critical alliances with ministry corporate and field staff and municipalities. Accenture's knowledge of technology and its experience in large-scale business redesign helped the ministry and municipalities envision a new, effective way to deliver programs. That vision was the Service Delivery Model (SDM). Clearly, this award demonstrates that BTP is a leader in changing the way business is done with partners in the private sector.

team comprising ministry management, Accenture executives, and the project managers. In addition, every effort has been made to ensure that those responsible for the change and impacted by it participated in the design of the system and business practices and of the implementation process. Secondments from municipalities, including senior management, have been central to maintaining a close working relationship. Furthermore, working groups and focus groups of municipal and provincial corporate and frontline staff combined to ensure that:

- The design of the SDM achieves program and policy objectives, and meets the needs of delivery agents;
- Field training programs meet the needs of frontline workers;

- Management processes embedded in the system provide information on a timely basis and permit effective management of the program;
- Implementation works effectively, with continuous learning and adoption of best practices;
- System architecture meets the province's standards and broad IT objectives; and
- The new system meets project quality standards. 🌿

Art Daniels is Assistant Deputy Minister of Quality Service, OPS Restructuring Secretariat, Cabinet Office.

Bonnie Ewart is Assistant Deputy Minister of the Business Transformation Project, Ministry of Community and Social Services.