

# Ontario Works Policy Directives

## 8.3 Literacy Screening, Assessment and Training

### Legislative Authority

Sections 4, 7(4), 14, 16(2) 44(4) and 45 of the Act.

Sections 26, 26.1, 29(1), 33(1), (5) and (6) and 34(1) of Regulation 134/98.

### Audit Requirements

Documentation is on file to support decisions made. This includes a copy of the literacy screening questionnaire, results, service plan and participation requirements.

Participant follow-ups are documented and have taken place.

### Application of Policy

Participation in literacy assessment and/or literacy training may be needed to assist participants in achieving employment goals and meeting local labour market needs.

All applicants and participants with less than a Grade 12 or equivalent education are required to take the literacy screening questionnaire unless confirmation of a learning disorder can be provided. Any participant can be required to take the questionnaire regardless of their education if literacy is a barrier to securing and maintaining employment.

A literacy screening questionnaire, approved by the Director of Ontario Works, is provided to all delivery agents and is intended to help identify whether an applicant or participant's literacy abilities may be preventing them from obtaining and maintaining employment.

Staff should use existing business practices for determining whether an applicant has completed grade 12 or the equivalent of a grade 12 education in Ontario or in another jurisdiction.

The delivery agent will make a determination about when the literacy screening questionnaire should be taken during the application process.

A referral for a literacy assessment and/or a literacy training program is based on the results of the literacy screening questionnaire and other factors such as:

- the self-declaration of low literacy skills;
- feedback from a placement sponsor indicating low literacy levels; and/or
- barriers to participation as a result of literacy problems.

Applicants who refuse to take the literacy screening questionnaire are ineligible for social assistance. If a participant refuses to take the literacy screening questionnaire or participate in literacy assessment and/or training and they do not have proof of a learning disorder, then the Ontario Works policy on non-compliance is applied.

An applicant or participant may take the approved literacy screening questionnaire in English or French, as appropriate.

Both applicants and participants whose participation requirements would be or are deferred are not required to participate in a literacy assessment or a literacy training program, including an English as a Second Language (ESL) or French as a Second Language (FSL) training program, until their participation requirements become active.

## **Literacy Screening**

The approved literacy screening questionnaire is intended to help identify whether an applicant's or participant's abilities may be preventing them from getting a job.

Applicants are informed of literacy screening and training requirements during the application process.

All applicants and members of the applicant's benefit unit (other than a dependent child of pre-school age, a dependent child attending school, temporary care cases, or applicants over 65 years) are required to take the literacy screening questionnaire if they do not have grade 12 or equivalent and do not have proof of a learning disorder. This includes applicants whose participation requirements would be deferred.

For applicants or participants with extenuating circumstances such as family violence, mental health issues, or substance abuse, the requirement to take the test may be postponed at the discretion of the Administrator until the circumstances of the individual are deemed stable.

Any participant, regardless of education status can be required to take the literacy screening questionnaire if there is reason to believe that literacy is a barrier to employment (except those with certified learning disorders and participants with deferred requirements).

Applicants without Grade 12 or equivalent who may require ESL or FSL training are also required to take the literacy screening questionnaire.

If the applicant or participant requires accommodation to take the literacy screening questionnaire, appropriate arrangements are to be made (e.g., if a person is visually impaired, large print text can be provided, or a sign language interpreter for hearing impaired individuals, etc.).

The completion of the Literacy Screening Questionnaire may take place:

- as part of the application process which may include the Employment Information Session; or
- as an initial employment assistance activity.

It is the Ministry's expectation that the questionnaire is administered within 30 days of initial signing of the Participation Agreement, except in cases with extenuating circumstances as approved by the Administrator.

### **Reviewing the Results of the Literacy Screening Questionnaire**

The evaluation checklist is intended to assist staff in considering whether a referral to literacy assessment and/or training program may be appropriate.

There is no single determining factor (including the results of the literacy screening questionnaire) that indicates a participant should be referred for participation in literacy assessment and/or training.

The development of the Participation Agreement is based on a comprehensive consideration of a number of factors with the primary goal of supporting participants as they move toward self-sufficiency through employment.

If an applicant or participant does not fill in the questionnaire (i.e., leaves it blank) the matter should be discussed in private.

If the applicant or participant does not have the capacity to complete the questionnaire, the applicant or participant should be directed to indicate on the questionnaire that they are not able to complete the test. Discussion of accommodation needs may take place at this point, if appropriate.

### **Literacy Assessment and Training**

A participant may be required to participate in a literacy assessment, or a literacy training program or both.

Ontario Works delivery agents have a range of options for providing the

assessment, including:

- requiring all referrals for assessments to go through a local centralized assessment provider;
- providing on-site assessment; and
- referring participants to a literacy provider in the community who performs assessments.

Since many literacy training programs are part-time, literacy training requirements will often be combined with other Ontario Works requirements (i.e., job search activities, community placements, etc.). Literacy training and other employment activities should not exceed 140 hours per month for participants with requirements.

A participant may have more immediate needs that should be addressed prior to addressing literacy needs (e.g., housing, life skills).

### **Case Management and Protocols with Literacy Training Providers**

Delivery agents are expected to work with their local literacy training providers to establish or build on local protocols for:

- referral of participants for literacy assessment and training;
- mechanisms to project anticipated rates of referral, including identification of potential peak referral periods;
- information sharing (e.g., assessment results, attendance, and progress information, etc.);
- case management, including how Ontario Works staff and the literacy assessment and/or training provider will communicate and work together over the entire period of a participant's involvement in literacy training;
- agreement of the literacy training plan by the literacy training provider, Ontario Works staff and the participant; and
- processes for working with specific subgroups, including participants who require accommodation or have ESL or FSL needs.

### **Supports for Participation**

As with other Ontario Works employment assistance activities, supports are to be provided to participants to facilitate participation in literacy training programs. Supports can include assistance for transportation, fees, school supplies and child care.

Administrators in First Nations and northern communities have the discretion to exercise flexibility when approving employment activities and/or expenses based

on cultural and geographic considerations in order to support employment outcomes for clients.

Many Literacy and Basic Skills agencies provide participants with funding to assist with child care and transportation costs. Delivery agents are expected to work with local providers to coordinate supports.

## **Learning Disorders**

Applicants or participants with proof of a learning disorder certified by a qualified medical doctor or a psychologist registered with the College of Psychologists of Ontario cannot be required to take a literacy screening questionnaire or participate in literacy assessment and/or literacy training.

However, applicants and participants with a learning disorder should be encouraged to participate in literacy training since many people with learning disorders want to - and can - benefit from these programs.

Administrators cannot refuse or reduce assistance for people with proof of a learning disorder if they do not comply with a request to take the literacy screening test or participate in literacy assessment or literacy training.

If it appears that a participant is making reasonable efforts to participate but is not in an appropriate program or is having difficulties because of a suspected learning disorder, it may be decided, in consultation with the participant and literacy training provider, that the participant should be referred to another program (i.e., ODSP) or should participate in a different employment assistance activity. The Participation Agreement would be amended accordingly.

If a participant refuses, or fails to make reasonable efforts to participate in literacy assessment and/or training, and if the Administrator has reason to believe that the participant may have a learning disorder, the Administrator may give the participant a reasonable period of time not exceeding 90 days to obtain proof that they have a learning disorder.

The costs of obtaining the necessary written proof from a qualified medical doctor or psychologist should be covered from existing funding sources (e.g., OHIP for doctor's visits, and discretionary health-related benefits to cover the cost of completing medical forms).

If the participant obtains proof within the 90 day period, then the Administrator cannot cancel or reduce the participant's assistance.

While not required to participate in literacy testing and training, applicants and participants with certified learning disorders are required to participate in other mandatory employment assistance activities.

## **Re-applications**

In general, there is no need for applicants re-applying to Ontario Works to re-take the literacy questionnaire. Delivery agents will establish local protocols for dealing with an applicant who has previously been an Ontario Works participant and has already taken the literacy screening questionnaire.

Key considerations for determining whether literacy is a barrier to employment for re-applicants could include:

- whether there is a decline in literacy abilities since the last time the literacy screening questionnaire was administered;
- whether the re-applicant has already completed a literacy assessment and literacy training program and whether these were helpful for him/her;
- whether the re-applicant has new or different employment goals; or
- whether local labour market conditions have changed.

## Service Path

