



Ombudsman Toronto Report

An investigation into the City's handling of a resident's social assistance overpayments



Ombudsman
Toronto

December 9, 2025



Ombudsman Toronto

Report

An investigation into the City's handling of a resident's social assistance overpayments

December 9, 2025

Ombudsman
Kwame Addo

Acting Deputy Ombudsman
Meredith Gayda



Land Acknowledgement

At Ombudsman Toronto, we have a responsibility to uphold and ensure fairness in our local government. We understand that this must be done with a respectful and culturally responsive approach and we commit to ongoing learning, unlearning, engagement and relationship-building in order to do so.

We acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat Peoples, and that this land is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands. We are here because this land has been colonized and we recognize the ongoing harm done to Indigenous communities by this colonial system, including the effects of broken treaty covenants.



African Ancestral Acknowledgement

Ombudsman Toronto is committed to continually acting in support of and in solidarity with Black communities seeking freedom and reparative justice in light of the history and ongoing legacy of slavery that continues to impact Black communities in Canada. As part of this commitment, we would also like to acknowledge that not all people came to these lands as migrants and settlers. Specifically, we wish to acknowledge those of us who came here involuntarily, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery. We pay tribute to those ancestors of African origin and descent.



Ombudsman's note

This investigation involved efforts by staff across the entire Ombudsman Toronto office. This included primary investigative work by May El-Abdallah, Investigator and Laura Wright, Investigator. It also involved the work of Luke Brown, Investigations Counsel, Anna Gatova, Team Lead Investigations and Resolutions, Marsha Wynter, Complaints Analyst, Melissa Yu Vanti, Communications and Engagement Consultant, Alexandra DiGioseffo, Communications and Engagement Consultant, Jasmeen Toor, Research and Policy Consultant and Janet Eide, Operations Coordinator.

I want to thank management and staff at the City of Toronto's Employment and Social Services (TESS) division for their help as we conducted this investigation. They were hugely helpful in providing documents and information and I appreciate their openness during interviews.

Ombudsman
Kwame Addo

Acting Deputy Ombudsman
Meredith Gayda



Table of contents

Ombudsman Toronto Report

Land Acknowledgement	1
African Ancestral Acknowledgement	2
Ombudsman's note	3
Executive summary.....	6
What we did	8
What we found	8
Recommendations	9
Conclusion.....	9
The City's response.....	10
Ombudsman Toronto follow-up	10
History of the complaint.....	11
About Ombudsman Toronto and our investigation.....	13
Investigation scope	14
What we did	14
Background	16
Ontario Works	17
Toronto Employment and Social Services	17
Social Assistance Management System	17
What we found.....	19
The overpayments.....	20
The overpayments: analysis	33
The internal review	36
The internal review: analysis.....	40
The Risk Management Unit review	41
The Risk Management Unit review: analysis	47
Dina's complaints to TESS.....	48



Dina's complaints to TESS: analysis	51
Conclusion.....	53
The human impact of municipal decisions	54
Communication failures.....	54
Missing, inadequate and incomplete documentation.....	55
Safeguards and supervision broke down	56
Moving forward with accountability and a commitment to fairness	57
Recommendations.....	58
TESS's response to our report	61

Executive summary

“No one tells you anything and then now ... you’re going to go after me for this huge amount of money ... I just stopped functioning at that point ... they were trying to say that I may be clinically depressed because this stuff was just sending me over the edge.”

Dina



Executive summary

Dina¹, a Toronto mother and resident, complained to Ombudsman Toronto after the City of Toronto's Employment and Social Services (TESS) division told her she had received \$25,546 in excess social assistance benefits² over the past 10 years. TESS had not informed her that she was under financial review. The news arrived without warning, and her benefits were immediately reduced.

Dina accepted responsibility for half of the amount. But TESS claimed she still owed the remaining amount, about \$13,000, because she and her adult child had not reported income they had earned. Dina said she had provided TESS with documents showing that this income was exempt because her child was a full-time student. Dina asked questions, resubmitted documents and tried to speak with management in person, but did not receive a fair response. Unable to resolve the issue on her own, Dina turned to Ombudsman Toronto for help. My staff worked with TESS for over a year to try to get answers, but staff was never able to fully explain what happened or what overpayments Dina still owed. I launched this formal investigation to get the answers that Dina needed and deserved.

Our investigation revealed multiple issues in how TESS assessed what Dina owed and how it managed her file, including how it communicated decisions that had significant consequences for her. While the investigation began with one person's experience, its purpose was to ensure that TESS treats not just Dina, but all social assistance clients fairly. TESS made multiple errors in Dina's case which have the potential to impact others in similar situations. We found staff did not comply with policies, sent her inaccurate and confusing communication and failed to keep proper records. I have made 18 recommendations to address these issues and prevent others from facing similar difficulties.

¹ To protect confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms for all the individuals named in this report. This includes the complainant, the complainant's child and TESS staff.

² Social assistance benefits are received through Ontario Works, a provincial program administered by TESS for Toronto residents.



What we did

I launched this investigation into how TESS handled overpayments on Dina's file on April 25, 2025. The investigation focused on:

- whether TESS followed policies and procedures for administering her social assistance benefits
- whether TESS communicated clearly to Dina
- whether TESS gave Dina the opportunity to be heard

Ombudsman Toronto investigators interviewed Dina as well as 15 TESS staff members who were either directly involved in Dina's file or gave us important information about TESS processes. We also reviewed hundreds of documents provided by TESS.

What we found

- TESS has good procedures in place, but staff failed to follow them and could not explain why.
- City staff did not inform her they were doing a financial review of her benefits so the news she owed \$25,546 in overpayments came without warning.
- Before giving her a chance to respond, City staff finalized overpayments and immediately began deducting her assistance by 10 per cent, about \$96 per month.
- City staff did not keep proper records that would have meant thousands of dollars of Dina and her child's income was exempt. Additional mistakes occurred because staff worked from incomplete and confusing information.
- Two separate reviews that act as safeguards failed to catch and correct errors. City staff never spoke to Dina to understand the facts during either review.
- After reversing almost half of the overpayments, TESS still sent Dina a decision letter that said she owed the full \$25,546.
- Dina went to a local office to speak to a supervisor, but after waiting for hours, she left without being seen. This fell short of the division's customer service standards, which state that clients should be able to speak to management within 30 minutes of arriving.
- Management's involvement was marked by delays and inaction. For two years, supervisors and managers took no action to correct about \$2,400 in overpayments that were assessed incorrectly. TESS did not reverse the overpayments until after I launched this investigation.



Recommendations

My 18 recommendations are designed to strengthen TESS's processes concerning overpayments, financial reviews, related safeguards and communication.

My recommendations call for TESS to:

- Inform clients when TESS is doing a financial review of benefits, what to expect from this process, and the potential consequences of not providing the required information.
- When they reassess overpayments, share the reasons and provide clear and accurate information, regardless of whether the overpayment amount increases, decreases or stays the same.
- Ensure staff consistently follow the division's processes for internal reviews and appeals, and take reasonable steps to independently verify overpayments, including reviewing evidence, calculations and other relevant information and ensuring it is accurately documented in the case management system.
- Provide better supervision, and regular and ongoing training and guidance to staff on case management, documentation, overpayments, financial reviews and internal reviews.

Conclusion

TESS staff have a difficult job to do. They manage more than 150,000 social assistance cases, many of which are complex. They serve some of Toronto's most vulnerable residents, while navigating a complicated case management system. In my opinion, TESS overlooked the person at the centre of this case, and as a result, Dina was treated unfairly.

TESS has good processes in place, but this case shows how important it is for staff to follow them consistently.

Torontonians who receive social assistance benefits deserve fair treatment, fair process and fair outcomes. Dina deserved clarity from TESS after suddenly finding out she owed thousands of dollars to the government, but was never able to understand why. A key component of fairness is being able to participate in a process that impacts you. This did not happen in this case and it had a huge impact on Dina.

When the City upholds principles of administrative fairness – clear communication, transparency, timeliness, access and respect – people can trust that they have been treated fairly.



A strong public service requires that it be accountable for its decisions. TESS staff we interviewed care about their work and the people they serve and recognized they could have done better. The City has accepted all of my recommendations.

The City's response

The City has accepted all of my recommendations and provided a thoughtful and detailed response. I was encouraged to learn about the measures that TESS is already undertaking to address my recommendations.

Ombudsman Toronto follow-up

TESS will update my office quarterly on how it is implementing my recommendations. We will follow up with the division until I am satisfied that the implementation of my recommendations is complete.

History of the complaint

“Review after review after review and you suddenly decide to go back into to my file to 2012 ... so what were you doing for the 10 years you kept bringing me in every six months? What were you doing?”

Dina



History of the complaint

1. Dina³ received financial assistance from Ontario Works between 2006 and 2023. Ontario Works is a provincial social assistance program that provides income for basic needs, including food and housing, as well as other health benefits and employment supports. In Toronto, the City of Toronto's Employment and Social Services (TESS) division administers Ontario Works.
2. In January 2023, TESS told Dina she owed \$25,546 in overpayments, covering the period from 2012 to 2022. This was the first time Dina learned that TESS believed she had been overpaid for the past 10 years. TESS told Dina that a significant portion of this overpayment, \$22,654, resulted from unreported income received by Dina's child, Alex, who is a dependent adult. TESS immediately began deducting a portion of Dina's monthly financial assistance to recover the overpayment.
3. Dina was concerned about TESS's decision. She told us she had already provided TESS with information about Alex's enrollment in post-secondary studies which meant at least some of their income was exempt from TESS's calculations. Dina told us TESS asked her to bring the same documents multiple times over several years because TESS staff misplaced them.
4. Dina asked for an internal review of the overpayment decision. During the internal review, no one from TESS contacted her to hear her side of the story. Instead, in April 2023, TESS confirmed its original decision, informing Dina that she still owed the full amount.
5. Dina also told us TESS changed the amount she owed without confirming this to her in writing. She told us she tried to raise her concerns to TESS, but she did not hear back from the supervisor and the manager on her file. Feeling frustrated and without answers from TESS, Dina brought her concerns to Ombudsman Toronto.
6. For over a year, my office made inquiries with TESS to understand what happened on Dina's file. While TESS was cooperative and responsive to our requests, they were unable to clearly explain what happened. The information TESS gave us was also confusing and contradictory at times. Staff could not tell us exactly what Dina owed and why different amounts were communicated to her.
7. I launched this investigation on April 25, 2025, to find out what happened and to get answers for Dina.

³ To protect confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms for all the individuals named in this report. This includes the complainant, the complainant's child and TESS staff.

About Ombudsman Toronto and our investigation



About Ombudsman Toronto and our investigation

8. Ombudsman Toronto is an independent and impartial accountability office with the authority to review and investigate complaints about the administration of the City of Toronto and most of its divisions, agencies, boards and corporations. The focus of the office is on administrative fairness, ensuring there is a fair process, fair outcome and fair treatment in City decisions or processes.
9. When the principles of administrative fairness — clear communication, transparency, timeliness, access and respect — are upheld, people can trust that they have been treated fairly. These principles are the foundation of accountable government and essential to maintaining public confidence in the City of Toronto.

Investigation scope

10. My investigation focused on how TESS determined overpayments and conducted financial reviews and internal reviews for an Ontario Works client, Dina. The investigation also focused on how TESS staff communicated with Dina throughout these processes.

What we did

11. My office interviewed 15 staff members from TESS, including caseworkers, supervisors, managers and directors. The staff we spoke to were either directly involved in the case or provided us with important contextual information. We conducted a comprehensive review of hundreds of documents, many of which contained multiple attachments. These documents included detailed case notes as well as relevant emails from City staff.
12. We spoke to Dina several times and reviewed the documents she gave us. We also spoke to other municipalities about their processes and practices for handling Ontario Works reviews and overpayments.
13. We did not conduct a detailed accounting to determine the accuracy of the overpayment amounts applied to the client as that is not our role at Ombudsman Toronto. Rather, we looked at:
 - whether the City followed policies and procedures for administering Ontario Works
 - whether it communicated clearly
 - whether it gave the client the opportunity to be heard



14. While the province's legislation, regulations, policies and procedures establish the rules for Ontario Works and set out the City's obligations, our review considered the fairness of the City's application of policies and procedures related to Ontario Works. We did not consider the fairness of provincial requirements because the province is outside of my jurisdiction.

Background



Background

15. This section provides a summary of Ontario Works, TESS and the Social Assistance Management System (the provincial case management system for Ontario Works cases). These descriptions are not exhaustive — they are intended to provide the reader with basic information to help understand the report.

Ontario Works

16. Ontario Works is a provincial program that provides financial assistance for basic needs, including food and housing, health benefits and employment supports to people in need. Eligibility is based on income, assets and residency. Clients who receive monthly financial assistance must regularly report information to their caseworker such as their income, assets, address and banking information. While Ontario Works' overall structure and requirements are relevant to this investigation, the recommendations I make in this report are only about the City's administration of Ontario Works.

Toronto Employment and Social Services

17. The City of Toronto's Employment and Social Services (TESS) division administers Ontario Works for Toronto clients. The division has the largest Ontario Works caseload in the province and handled 152,539 cases in 2024. In 2025, the division had just over 2,000 staff members.

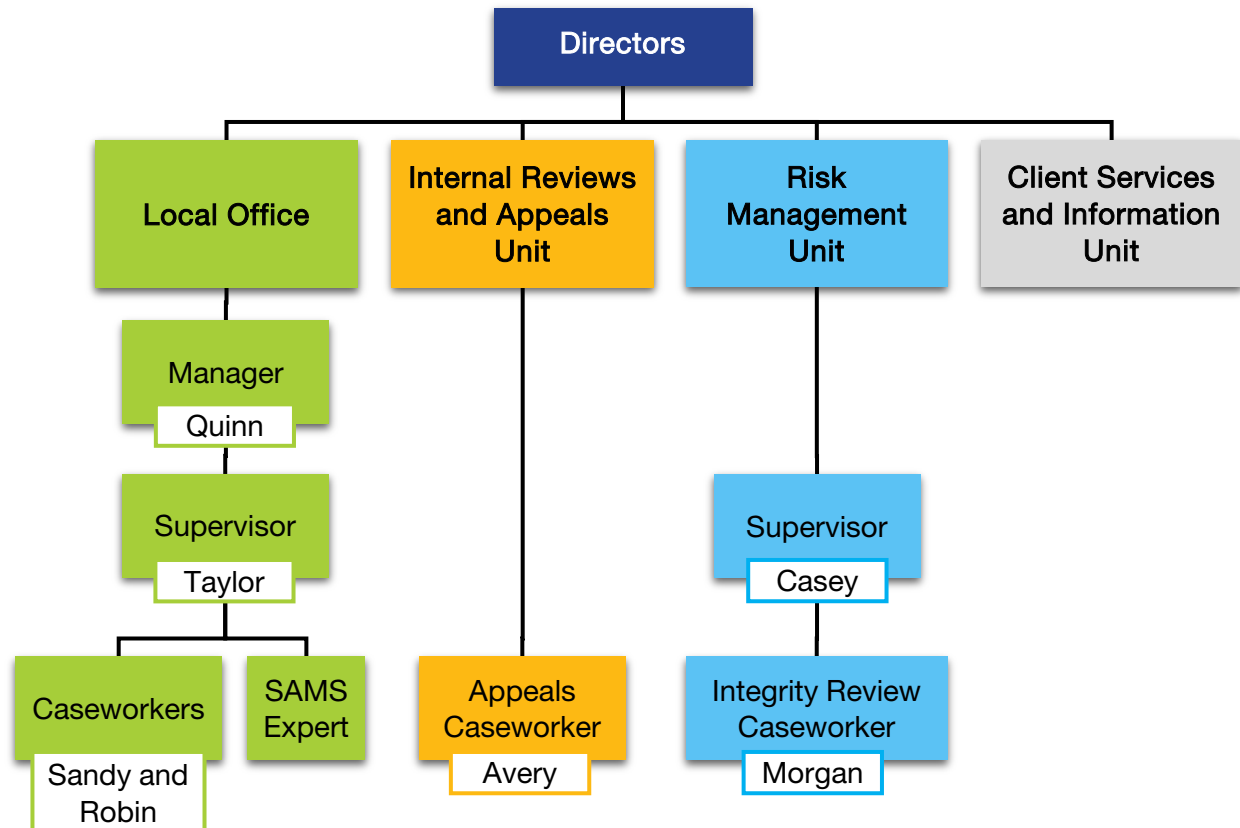
Social Assistance Management System

18. The Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) is the provincially required electronic case management system used to manage Ontario Works files. Implemented in 2014, SAMS contains detailed information about clients, notes and service plans created by TESS staff. This is a large, complex system containing vast amounts of information. Due to its complexity, TESS has several SAMS experts to support TESS staff with SAMS-related questions.



Figure 1: TESS units involved in Dina's case (April 2022 to December 2023)

This diagram shows the TESS units and staff involved in this investigation. It is not a complete organizational chart. Staff who worked on her file between April 2022 and December 2023 are included. Staff who were involved briefly or later are not shown.



- **Local office:** Worked directly with Dina to manage her file and benefits.
- **Internal Reviews and Appeals Unit:** Conducted Dina's request to review TESS's overpayment decision.
- **Risk Management Unit:** Assessed Dina's overpayments as they were more than \$10,000.
- **Client Services and Information Unit:** Dealt with Dina's complaint about the local office's handling of her file.

What we found

“It’s great that there’s documentation, but it should have been a little bit more thorough. Everything should be I’s dotted and T’s crossed ... the whole idea is that if [the caseworker] is not here tomorrow and someone picks it up, they know what to do.”

TESS staff



What we found

19. This section will summarize and discuss the evidence we reviewed about:

- the division's assessment of overpayments for Dina
- Dina's attempt to challenge the overpayments through an internal review
- the Risk Management Unit's review of Dina's overpayments
- Dina's attempts to raise her concerns with TESS staff

Each topic will be followed by my findings and analysis.

The overpayments

Overpayment processes

20. An overpayment is when a client receives more in monthly Ontario Works assistance than what they were entitled to. Typically, the client must pay an overpayment back. The standard deduction is 10 per cent of a client's monthly benefits but may be lower in certain cases.
21. TESS assigns a caseworker to every client and clients must report changes in their financial circumstances to their caseworker. Occasionally, information about a change in a client's circumstances comes to light after the fact, which means an overpayment may be created.
22. Information leading to an overpayment can come from a variety of sources such as:
- details shared in a meeting between the client and their caseworker
 - findings from a financial review
 - findings from a third-party check (when a caseworker checks tax, school, credit bureau or vehicle registration information)
 - the provincial social assistance fraud hotline

Once a caseworker adds new information into SAMS, the system recalculates both the amount of assistance and any overpayment the client owes.

23. If a caseworker determines there was an overpayment, they are to record the following details in SAMS using an overpayment note template including:
- the overpayment amount
 - the period during which the client was overpaid



- the reason for the overpayment
- supporting documents
- the percentage of the client's monthly assistance that will be recovered to repay the overpayment

24. TESS sends a letter to the client explaining the reasons for the overpayment. Although SAMS generates these letters automatically, TESS trains caseworkers to review letters for accuracy before sending them to the client. This letter also informs the client that they can request an internal review if they feel the overpayment is incorrect.
25. Caseworkers can reverse an overpayment if it was calculated in error or if the client shares new information that changes the original calculation.

Financial review processes

26. The province requires a financial review every 24 months for every adult member of a benefit unit receiving Ontario Works assistance. Caseworkers complete financial reviews, which are meant to ensure clients are still eligible for assistance and that they are receiving the correct Ontario Works benefits. TESS training materials for financial reviews state that the work includes:
- conducting third-party checks, such as verifying information with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and credit bureaus
 - confirming the client's living arrangements and housing costs
 - confirming the client's financial and other eligibility information
 - reassessing the client's service plan⁴
 - documenting the review with a specific template in SAMS
 - documenting the review in additional notes in SAMS
27. If an Ontario Works recipient is the parent of a dependent adult, the dependent adult and parent must also report any income to TESS, including money received from work or student loans. Some of that income, such as student loans, is exempt but still needs to be reported to TESS as it could reduce the amount of financial assistance the client is entitled to.

⁴ Caseworkers develop a plan with each client to address a client's urgent needs and identify next steps to help them stabilize their employment or housing or address their mental health needs.



Financial reviews restarted following COVID-19 pandemic disruption

28. Caseworkers are supposed to discuss financial reviews with the client in person. The province temporarily suspended the requirement for financial reviews in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On September 16, 2022, TESS management emailed staff that the division would restart its financial reviews, effective immediately. The email provided links to resources for TESS staff, including the Financial Review Policy and the template for documenting financial reviews in SAMS.

Dina's financial review

29. Dina started receiving Ontario Works assistance in 2006. In 2012, Dina's child, Alex, was added to her file as a dependent adult.
30. Before 2022, the most recent financial review documented in Dina's SAMS file was from 2010. There is no documentation to show that TESS conducted financial reviews for Dina or her child between 2012 (two years after the last financial review, when the next one should have been done) and 2020 (when the province suspended financial reviews due to COVID). A TESS manager told us general reasons why financial reviews may be delayed, including caseload sizes, staffing issues and challenges meeting with clients in person. However, no one at TESS could explain why there had been no financial reviews noted on Dina's file during this 10-year period. During this same time, Dina and Alex were participating in other types of reviews with TESS, including regular service plan reviews.
31. Caseworker Sandy was assigned Dina's file in February 2022. Caseworker Sandy described the file as "very outdated" with "a lot of missing information."
32. Caseworker Sandy described the previous caseworker's notes: "[Their] notes were really shoddy. [The notes would] just be like, 'oh, client dropped off documents.' Ok, which documents? What are you talking about?... So that other people reading the file 10 years from now will know exactly what happened."
33. Caseworker Sandy told us that Dina's file was on TESS's list of files identified for financial review and that they started the review of her file in April 2022. There are no notes in SAMS showing that TESS told Dina the financial review was happening.
34. Between April and May 2022, Caseworker Sandy ran two third-party checks, an Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) scan and a CRA check, which showed undeclared income for Dina and Alex. Caseworker Sandy added this information in notes in SAMS, but these notes are not in the specific template caseworkers are



supposed to use when completing financial reviews. The template prompts caseworkers to note any documents they review and information they receive about a client. It includes a checklist for third-party checks. It also asks caseworkers to add financial evidence to SAMS and to document whether there is any information the client still needs to provide.

35. On April 18, 2022, Caseworker Sandy noted in SAMS that neither Dina nor Alex declared income to Ontario Works, despite T4 information from the CRA showing Dina and Alex received income for various years since 2012. Caseworker Sandy also noted in SAMS that they had sent Dina a letter asking her for the following information by May 3, 2022:

- copies of health cards and birth certificates for both Dina and Alex
- paystubs for both Dina and Alex for all employers from 2012 to 2022
- proof of federal pandemic assistance payments for Dina and Alex
- proof of their rent costs, including a copy of their lease and receipts for rent paid from 2012 to 2022
- bank statements for all bank accounts for both Dina and Alex for the period January 1, 2012, to present

36. Our review of the file shows that Caseworker Sandy created the letter in SAMS. However, a SAMS expert told us that the letter was “not created properly” and was never sent to Dina:

No, absolutely not. There’s no way that unless this was printed and put into another envelope and hand-addressed, there’s no way that the client got this documentation ... I don’t know if this was hand-delivered to her. It was not mailed to her. There’s no way that that letter was mailed to her and got to the client. I don’t – there’s no notes to indicate [that the letter was hand-delivered to Dina].

Dina confirmed with us she never received this letter.

37. In a June 24, 2022, email to their supervisor, Supervisor Taylor, Caseworker Sandy wrote that they sent Dina the letter on April 12, 2022, and that Dina called them about it on April 18, 2022. As mentioned already, there is no record in SAMS that TESS sent the letter or of any call with Dina on April 18, 2022. The email to Supervisor Taylor is not recorded in SAMS. The SAMS expert we interviewed told us that, generally, emails are not saved to SAMS.

38. Caseworker Sandy’s May 5, 2022, SAMS note summarizes a discussion with Dina but does not note when the discussion happened. The description is similar to the call Caseworker Sandy said took place on April 18, 2022, and which they outlined in the



email to Supervisor Taylor. According to the SAMS note, Dina told Caseworker Sandy that a TESS supervisor told her she did not have to report Alex's income while Alex was enrolled in school full-time. The SAMS note says that when Caseworker Sandy asked Dina to provide details about Alex's enrollment in school, she said she had already provided this information to TESS and that Alex received OSAP each year. Caseworker Sandy told us that they clarified to Dina that all income must be reported, even if it is exempt.

39. Caseworker Sandy told us they believed Dina when she said she had brought in relevant documents in the past when TESS staff requested them from her, even if the documents were not entered in SAMS: "She always followed through with everything. There was not a single thing that she didn't follow through [with]. So I don't see why she wouldn't follow through for previous caseworkers."
40. We found multiple notes in Dina's SAMS file about Alex's enrollment in school, dating back many years. In 2012, Alex is described as a high school student and from 2013 to 2020, various caseworkers noted that Alex was enrolled in post-secondary studies. However, the SAMS expert told us this information was never properly entered into SAMS by any of these caseworkers.
41. The SAMS expert also told us that in 2020, a TESS support assistant completed an OSAP scan and provided it to Dina's caseworker at the time. According to the SAMS expert, the information from the OSAP scan was not properly saved to Dina's file. This created a problem because when Caseworker Sandy began the financial review in 2022, it showed that Alex had income for several years but did not show anything about school enrollment. The income was exempt because Alex was in school full-time, but Caseworker Sandy did not have any way of knowing this. Caseworker Sandy told us:

Her file – it all showed up as mismatches.... Honestly, if it was well-documented it would never have happened that way. Like, she had to go through the trouble of getting – reacquiring – all that stuff for me again. Which – I felt bad – but all the way back to 2012, I think.

42. Supervisor Jordan, a supervisor who reviewed Dina's file after our office started making inquiries, told us that, by the time Caseworker Sandy became Dina's caseworker, the OSAP information was difficult to find in Dina's SAMS file:

There were pieces of the puzzle that [Caseworker Sandy] wasn't aware of.... If I remember correctly, [the OSAP information] is in the file, but it's buried pretty deep. You'd have to go really far into the notes to see ... that [Alex] was actually attending school to fix those problems.



43. Caseworker Sandy also ran their own OSAP scan in 2022 and shared the scan results with Supervisor Taylor in a June 24, 2022, email. In the email, Caseworker Sandy explained income discrepancies they were finding on Dina's file and asked for "further direction on this complex case." Caseworker Sandy wrote that Alex was enrolled in school full-time from 2013 to 2017, but for "May 1, 2017 until present, client should have had income reduced from Ontario Works as [Alex] either dropped out, or attended school part-time only." Caseworker Sandy did not upload documents or evidence in SAMS about Alex dropping out or being in school part-time to support this statement. Caseworker Sandy did not ask Dina for documents or for clarification of Alex's school status.
44. TESS records do not include a response from Supervisor Taylor to the June 24, 2022, email. Supervisor Taylor told us they had a concern about how to deal with overpayments related to Alex, but they could not recall details of the actions they took to address those concerns. There are no SAMS notes from Supervisor Taylor outlining any steps they took or direction they gave.
45. We reviewed emails showing that both Caseworker Sandy and Supervisor Taylor reached out to TESS's Risk Management Unit (RMU) for help with the file between October and December 2022. As will be discussed in detail in the Risk Management Unit section of this report, this unit reviews overpayments over \$10,000. An integrity review caseworker, Pat, from the RMU told us they recalled speaking to Caseworker Sandy during this period. They told us their advice to Caseworker Sandy was:
- Continue your process, work with the client and try to get the information and then failing that, you have to apply the overpayment if there is no information to reduce it.... So that was a conversation we had that [Caseworker Sandy] was going to continue to reach out to [Dina], and failing that, apply it.
46. This conversation and the emails with the RMU are not documented in SAMS.
47. Despite Integrity Review Caseworker Pat's advice to Caseworker Sandy to work with Dina to get the information, no one from TESS documented any conversation with Dina or recalled reaching out to her until she received the overpayments letter on January 18, 2023.

The overpayment assessment

48. Caseworker Sandy created several case notes in SAMS about various potential overpayments they were assessing for Dina. Caseworker Sandy's SAMS note dated January 18, 2023, breaks down the overpayment amounts. However, the SAMS expert we interviewed told us the note was difficult to follow: "This is not generally how this



looks.... [The overpayments are] all broken down into these little individual pieces that are not very cohesive.”

49. This SAMS note provides an explanation for the large overpayment amount.
50. According to the SAMS expert, Caseworker Sandy should have saved information about income in a specific section of SAMS used to record income, but did not.

It’s great that there’s documentation, but it should have been a little bit more thorough. There should be recorded in [the] financial review, what the outcome of the different scans was, if there was a discrepancy why we’re doing it this way.... Everything should be I’s dotted and T’s crossed.... That information should be housed somewhere other than just the overpayment notes. Like, it’s great that [Caseworker Sandy] created an overpayment and the overpayment information should be housed in there. But there should be other documentary [evidence] or other notes indicating what income was added where and for what date. Like we, we need to know – the whole idea is that if [Caseworker Sandy] is not here tomorrow and someone picks it up, they know what to do.

51. Supervisor Jordan, after reviewing the file, told us, “I’m not going to lie, [the SAMS case notes were] hard to read.” Supervisor Jordan described the entries as “stream of consciousness notes.” They said their first review of the file was “tricky” and that it “took a couple of read-throughs to get it.”

The notice of overpayments

52. The next communication Dina received from TESS was a notice of overpayments dated January 18, 2023. The notice, sent by mail from Caseworker Sandy to Dina, lists dozens of overpayments between 2012 and 2022 and states that the overpayments total is \$25,546.⁵ Of this total, \$22,654 is due to Alex’s income. The letter informs Dina that TESS will deduct \$96.30 from her \$963⁶ monthly Ontario Works benefits to pay back this amount. The letter also informs Dina of her right to ask for an internal review of the decision.⁷

⁵ The overpayments listed in the notice actually total \$26,205.20. During our inquiries with TESS, TESS explained that the discrepancy is due to internal reconciliation with deductions that already happened on Dina’s file for previous overpayments. However, this is not explained to Dina in the letter.

⁶ This amount is made up on Dina’s basic needs, special diet and shelter benefits.

⁷ Dina did ask for an internal review, which I discuss later in my report.



53. In the January 18, 2023, notice letter by Caseworker Sandy, they listed three reasons for the overpayments:

Undeclared income for [Dina] that appeared on T4 Slips as provided to the Canada Revenue Agency for the years 2018, 2019 and 2021. Income averaging was applied to the total amount of income (divided equally between 12 months) ...

Undeclared income for [Alex] that appeared on T4 Slips as provided to the Canada Revenue Agency for the years 2012, 2017, 2018 and 2019. Income averaging was applied to the total amount of income (divided equally between 12 months). [Alex] was NOT registered in school FULL time (confirmed by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities) ...

Undeclared CERB payments for 2020 ...

54. Caseworker Sandy told us they applied income averaging because Dina did not provide pay stubs or other supporting information to show the exact month(s) she received income. This means Caseworker Sandy created overpayments for every month of the year, rather than the specific month(s) in which Dina received income.
55. TESS's Treatment of Income Policy instructs staff on how to use a client's income to calculate their Ontario Works entitlement. Under this policy, TESS is supposed to work with the client to get missing information, including the time periods that they earned income. If a client provides information about the month they earned income, an overpayment is created only for the month in which they received that income. If they don't provide this information, TESS spreads the income out over the whole year. This is called income averaging and creates an overpayment for each of the 12 months of the year. The policy is clear that, because income averaging can substantially impact a client's benefits, it "should be applied only as a last resort."
56. As noted, above, no one followed up with Dina between May 5, 2022, and January 18, 2023, for information or documentation.

Deductions begin even though financial review not yet complete

57. Caseworker Sandy told us that when they sent Dina the overpayment letter on January 18, 2023, saying that TESS would begin deducting her monthly assistance, they had not completed the financial review. Caseworker Sandy also told us that the financial review was not completed until April 2023, a year after it began and almost three months after TESS started deductions from Dina's Ontario Works assistance. Nothing in SAMS shows that Caseworker Sandy completed the financial review. We found an



incomplete financial review template saved to SAMS on May 3, 2023. The implications of this incomplete template will be discussed later in this report.

58. A SAMS note shows that Caseworker Sandy began a third-party check of Dina's credit report on January 19, 2023, a day after they sent the notice letter and triggered the deductions from her benefits. Caseworker Sandy told us they sent Dina the notice letter even though they had not completed the financial review so that Dina could "see everything and respond to it." Caseworker Sandy suggested the notice letter facilitated a conversation with Dina and following that, they worked together to reduce the amount she owed.
59. TESS financial statements show that the first deduction of \$96.30 took place the following week, on January 25, 2023. At this rate, it would take over 22 years to repay this amount.

Dina frustrated at lack of advance notice

60. Dina told us no one from TESS told her these overpayments were going to be assessed against her until she received the January 18, 2023, letter. We did not see any SAMS notes about anyone from TESS speaking to Dina about this between May 2022 and January 18, 2023. After she received the letter, Dina called Caseworker Sandy on January 27, 2023, to ask about it:

[Caseworker Sandy] said, "I was given the task of going back into your file and look for overpayments."

I said, "Look for overpayments? And whatever happened to due process? And the fact that you always gave me a review every six months to 18 months you had me in [the office]. What did you not do?"

61. Dina told us she was frustrated because TESS did not communicate with her about any potential overpayments for a decade before this review:

But even if there is an overpayment, you cannot tell me that from 2012 to 2022 that you did not follow through on any of this.... And somehow you're now saying I owe you. And you go back all the way back to 2012 even though you were bringing me in every six months to 18 months of doing reviews. Review after review after review and you suddenly decide to go back into to my file to 2012.... So what were you doing for the 10 years you kept bringing me in every six months? What were you doing?... I reported everything. The only thing that I did not know was happening was the CERB in 2021 part, because I was too sick and didn't know what the heck was going on, didn't know who was getting



what. And I took responsibility for this.... But all these things – 2017, 2018 – that they knew and they say ‘overpayments.’

62. A TESS manager who reviewed the file after we began inquiries, Manager Riley, told us they would expect caseworkers to inform clients of potential overpayments before assessing them against the client:

My assumption ... just even from a client service perspective, we would want to have, especially as a part of a financial review or any review of a file, to be quite frank, is that we would want to have a discussion with the client first to share with them what we've been made aware [of] and we've made this decision and so we are now sending you a letter or we've been aware of this information and we'd like to talk more about it.

Caseworker Sandy reverses over \$10,000 in overpayments

63. Caseworker Sandy spoke to Dina by phone on January 27, 2023. According to Caseworker Sandy's SAMS note from January 31, 2023, Dina accepted responsibility for some of the overpayments but disagreed with the overpayments associated with income earned by Alex while they were enrolled in school. Caseworker Sandy's SAMS note says that Dina “was able to show” that Alex was in school full-time in 2012, 2017, 2018 and part of 2019. As a result, Caseworker Sandy reversed overpayments for Alex's income from 2012, 2017 and 2018 and reduced the overpayment from 2019. Caseworker Sandy's note does not specify what documents Dina showed to support that Alex was in school full-time.
64. In Caseworker Sandy's SAMS note from January 31, 2023, they provided reasons for reversing and reducing some of the overpayments, including:

The client stated that [Alex] was attending school full time in 2012, 2017, 2018 and 2019. She stated that [Alex] had accommodations with the school so a reduced caseload meant full time for [Alex]. The client was asked to provide documentation from the school which shows [Alex's] full time attendance for the years she is disputing, as well as a copy of the accommodations provided by the school distinguishing a reduced case load as full time attendance. The client was able to show that [Alex] was attending school full time in 2012, 2017 and 2018. The client attended school full time in 2019 but only for the benefit period 01/01/2019 - 30/04/2019. [Caseworker] agreed to remove the following overpayments, and to reduce the overpayment for 2019.

[Alex] 2012: \$2,391.00 - Full time attendance 01/01/2012 - 31/12/2012
[overpayment] to be reversed



[Alex] 2017: \$2,679.00 - Full time attendance 01/01/2017 - 31/12/2017
[overpayment] to be reversed

[Alex] 2018: \$5,025.00 - Full time attendance 01/01/2018 - 31/12/2018
[overpayment] to be reversed

[Alex] 2019 \$7,932.00 - Full time attendance 01/01/2019 - 30/04/2019
[overpayment] to be reduced

65. We asked Caseworker Sandy how another caseworker or a supervisor would know, based on these notes, what the updated overpayment amount was and what the various reversals were. Caseworker Sandy told us that the total updated amount would have been automatically updated in a different section in SAMS, called the financial tab. However, Caseworker Sandy told us that because part of the overpayment amount required a manual reversal to be approved by Supervisor Taylor (the \$2,391 from 2012), the financial tab would still include the \$2,391 and thus not the actual correct total overpayment amount.
66. Dina told us that, based on her discussion with Caseworker Sandy in late January 2023, she knew the overpayments were reduced but that is all, “[Caseworker Sandy] said it was reassessed.... So I knew it was reduced, but what it was reduced to I didn’t know.”
67. TESS did not send Dina any letters to confirm which overpayments were reversed or reduced or to advise her of the new total. Manager Riley explained to us that SAMS does not automatically generate a letter when overpayments are reversed or reduced. However, Manager Riley said caseworkers can create amended decision letters in consultation with management at their local office:

It's not necessarily ... an expectation. Because the decision still remained the same in terms of — there was an overpayment created but ... it's not uncommon for us — especially at the [internal review stage] — to either a) do an amended decision letter to say, “Hello, we've done a review of your file, your overpayment's now this” or as a part of the internal review outcome letter, clarify what the updated overpayment is.

So as a minimum ... I would have expected that there was at least a call with the client just to close the loop to say, “Listen, thank you for the information. I've got it. Just to reaffirm that it has been reconciled and this is the new reconciled amount of your overpayment.”



68. Without anything in writing about any reversals or reductions to the overpayment, Dina requested an internal review in February 2023. I discuss the April 2023 internal review decision under the internal review section of this report.

Financial review continues until April 2023

69. Caseworker Sandy told us they completed Dina's financial review in April 2023, even though Caseworker Sandy was no longer the active caseworker on file at that time. A new caseworker, Robin, was assigned Dina's file on March 31, 2023, when Caseworker Sandy moved to another unit. The financial review, which was the basis upon which TESS assessed \$25,546 in overpayments against Dina, remained incomplete. The only reference to it is a SAMS note from Caseworker Sandy on May 3, 2023 (more than a month after they were no longer the active caseworker on the file), that includes a financial review template that lacks information about income or third-party checks.
70. The SAMS expert we spoke with said Caseworker Sandy's May 3, 2023, note was not "fulsome." They said, "To me, it looks like the note was forgotten and was put in after the fact in May [2023]. Or maybe that's when the final piece of information was provided so [Caseworker Sandy] was able to finish.... That's what I would assume."
71. The SAMS expert said this was not surprising to see because there have been many changes in how financial reviews are documented over the years. They said ultimately, it's not the template that matters, but that evidence is clearly documented:

There needs to be really good documentation. If the caseworker is off for the next six weeks starting tomorrow, somebody else needs to know how to action this. So whether they've done the final template – nobody cares about [that]. What we care about is what is outstanding right now, what is the client required to follow up on.

72. Caseworker Robin told us they were not provided with any handover instructions for Dina's file. Both Dina and Caseworker Robin told us they did not discuss the overpayments with each other. Caseworker Robin told us that when they took over the file they had "no clue" about the overpayments. They explained, "It wasn't relevant to my job function at that point. It had already been decided. It was already with the appeals department."

New letter with new overpayment amount sent to Dina

73. On November 23, 2023, Dina transitioned from Ontario Works to the Ontario Disability Support Program, which is administered by the province. Around the time of this



transition, on November 30, 2023, TESS sent a letter to Dina stating, “As you know, you owe \$13,358.47 for your overpayment.” The letter is unsigned. It does not provide any further details or say how Dina would know she owed this amount or what specific calculations it consisted of. Supervisor Jordan told us that this letter is automatically generated by SAMS when a client leaves Ontario Works.

74. After I launched this investigation, TESS staff reviewed this letter and determined it contained the incorrect overpayment amount. In a letter dated June 4, 2025, a director wrote to Dina that her actual overpayment was \$12,805.20.
75. A manager told us there should be safeguards in place to prevent letters with confusing or incomplete information from being sent to clients:

That letter [from November 30, 2023] is an example – I mean, there should be sort of flags that prevent letters from being sent out if they’re incomplete and if they don’t have the name of a caseworker for an individual to contact.... We always have the contact name for someone, right? People need to know. If I want to speak, if I have questions, who do I call? So I think there are just some basic pieces like that, that when we don’t have them in place, especially for individuals who are so, you know, oftentimes dealing with so many complexities, it just makes it that much more challenging, right? I mean, you showing me that information that you just showed me – it’s confusing to me, right? It’s a significant impact on peoples’ lives when information isn’t clearly and timely communicated.

TESS apologizes to Dina

76. On June 4, 2025, a TESS director sent Dina a letter apologizing that her “experience with TESS was not as expected” and for “not appropriately communicating the accurate outstanding overpayment balance on your file in a timely manner.” In that same letter, the director confirms that “after a fulsome review of our records the total amount of Ontario Works assistance that you received for which you were not entitled to was \$12,805.20.” This is the first time that TESS communicated this amount to Dina, even though it was based on Caseworker Sandy’s adjustments from January 31, 2023, two and a half years earlier.
77. TESS is required to work with templates made by the province. Despite this, Supervisor Jordan told us TESS can improve how it communicates with clients within these templates:

Some of our communications are clear to us because we are experts in our field and we tend to talk that way even when we’re trying to explain something. We



forget that this might be the fourth or fifth time that we've said this to a client just today in the last hour, but it's the first time the client's hearing it. I think our letters in particular tend to reflect that because we are so very careful about [what] we say because there's a process where things can go into internal reviews and [the Social Benefits Tribunal]. That our letters are very like, specific and kind of prescribed as to what you can say because it's being approved by communications, it's being approved by legal, so don't stray outside this path. But a lot of the times life doesn't always fit in the happy path.

The overpayments: analysis

78. Many of the issues in this investigation could have been prevented with greater care, better documentation, better communication and better supervision.
79. When Caseworker Sandy was assigned Dina's file in 2022, they had a big task ahead of them. For over 10 years, TESS did not document a single financial review. Between 2010 and 2022, TESS should have completed a minimum of four financial reviews of Dina's file. If staff were concerned that Dina was not disclosing information about her or Alex's income, personal details or assets, then regular financial reviews could have addressed these concerns.
80. Caseworker Sandy had the unenviable task of reviewing more than a decade's worth of information to determine Dina's entitlement to benefits during that period. I appreciate the difficulty of this task and the position Caseworker Sandy found themselves in.
81. According to the caseworker, the file was in "shoddy" condition when they received it, which should not have been the case. All relevant information should have been properly stored and summarized. For example, previous caseworkers noted that Alex was in school, but this information was "buried" in SAMS, as Supervisor Jordan explained to us. The SAMS expert told us Alex's OSAP scans were not saved in the correct part of the system. This critical information needed to be documented and saved correctly to ensure that the calculations generated by SAMS were accurate. Proper documentation also provides a clear record of all relevant information available to any TESS staff assigned to or reviewing the file.
82. TESS did not provide any notice or communication to Dina when it started a financial review of her file in April 2022. No one spoke to Dina beforehand to explain that she was undergoing a financial review, why it was happening at that time, what information she needed to provide to TESS and the potential consequences of not providing it. A review of the SAMS notes from May 2022 shows that no one from TESS spoke to Dina



about the ongoing financial review. No one sent Dina the draft letter outlining what documentation she should provide.

83. TESS staff told us they do not generally save emails to SAMS. Unless there is a technical issue preventing staff from doing so, staff must save relevant information, including key discussions about a case in SAMS. For example, the June 24, 2022, email prepared by Caseworker Sandy is not saved in SAMS. This important email summarized the caseworker's conversations with Dina, the results of the OSAP scan, highlighted questions about Alex's school enrollment and sought direction from the supervisor. This is information that should have been captured in a note or attachment in SAMS.
84. The 2022 financial review is poorly documented in SAMS. The review began in April 2022 but was not completed until a year later. The financial review is not recorded in the format required by TESS policy. My staff could only find an incomplete template in SAMS from May 2023.
85. Templates provide a structured approach to ensure that essential information is captured consistently. This is especially critical when staff are handling complex matters. In Dina's case, the financial review template was only partially completed. The financial review, the first documented in over 10 years, provided limited value to anyone tasked with reviewing the file.
86. Information about the overpayments stemming from the financial review is also poorly documented. The overpayment calculations are scattered and confusing. For example, the January 31, 2023, SAMS note is not easy to follow and is missing key information, including:
 - that the caseworker reversed a total of \$10,348 from the overpayment
 - an updated overpayment total, after all the reductions and reversals were applied
 - the documentation Dina "was able to show" confirming Alex was in school full-time
 - that the overpayment of \$2,391 from 2012 was no longer owing. However, the reversal had to be done manually because it originated from a system that pre-dated SAMS and therefore required supervisor approval.⁸
87. Staff we spoke with had difficulty interpreting the SAMS overpayment notes. Because the SAMS notes were unclear, establishing the amount of the overpayment was difficult. Those notes were critical pieces of information that the appeals caseworker and the integrity review caseworker relied on when doing their assessments (both of

⁸ The 2012 overpayment was not reversed by TESS until June 2, 2025, after the launch of this investigation. The delay in reversing this will be explored in detail in the Risk Management Unit section below.



which are discussed later in this report). Greater care needs to be taken when summarizing such complex decisions that are potentially life-altering for clients.

88. TESS did not follow the steps required by the policy before applying income averaging. Specifically, there is no documentation to show that staff worked with Dina or with Alex to find missing information. This matters because if TESS had obtained Dina's pay stubs, the income Dina received would only have created an overpayment for the month in which she received it, rather than spread out over the whole year.
89. We confirmed that TESS never sent the April 2022 document request letter to Dina. Even if staff had mailed that request, there is nothing in the file to show that anyone followed up with Dina about it between May 5, 2022, when staff noted in SAMS that they spoke with Dina, and January 18, 2023, when they sent her the letter detailing \$25,546 in overpayments. There was no contact with Dina about a hugely significant issue for more than eight months. Further, because of this, Dina was not given the chance to respond to these overpayments until after they were applied and monthly deductions from her assistance had begun.
90. Overpayment decisions have a significant impact on clients, as they can result in large amounts owing and reductions in a client's monthly income. They should not be used as a tool to gather evidence after the fact. TESS was still in the process of figuring out what the overpayments should be. Best efforts had not been made to obtain the information from Dina. For at least eight months, there was no communication to Dina letting her know that TESS was waiting on documentation and that failing to provide it could result in overpayments. TESS was still completing Dina's financial review and did a third-party credit report check after it had already made and communicated the overpayment decision to Dina.
91. There is also evidence that TESS had already received some of the information it was seeking but had failed to properly document it on Dina's SAMS file. TESS records show that several caseworkers had information about Alex's enrollment in school but had not properly applied this information to the file. Staff had questions about Alex's full-time enrollment in school for 2017, 2018 and 2019, but did not provide an explanation or any evidence clarifying their concerns. In any case, staff should have addressed these concerns directly with Dina and Alex before finalizing the overpayments.
92. Had staff been communicating adequately with Dina in the first place, at least \$12,739 in overpayments could have been avoided. Instead, these overpayments were imposed on Dina, only to be changed less than 10 days later. Once again, TESS received information that Alex was in school but did not properly add it to the file. In addition, Dina received no written confirmation of these critical changes on her file. She was given no clarity about what overpayments were reversed or reduced or why. It was



only on June 4, 2025, and after I launched this investigation, that a TESS director wrote to Dina confirming the amount of the overpayment still owing after the appropriate reversals were applied.

The internal review

Internal review processes

93. Clients who disagree with TESS decisions about overpayments can request an internal review. TESS explains its approach to internal reviews in an internal guide called the Decision Review Model (the Model). The Model says internal reviews include “a review of the decision, legislation and policies to ensure a correct decision has been made.” TESS appeals caseworkers are responsible for completing internal reviews.
94. The Model sets out best practices for appeals caseworkers, including:
 - Review the request for an internal review to determine urgency.
 - Review the date of the Notice of Decision to assess whether the reason for the decision was clearly explained and the correct legislation referenced.
 - Review notes and documentation on file.
 - Assess the decision based on legislation/policy and the information on file.
 - Determine if additional information is required to resolve the appeal.
95. The Model also sets out an Early Resolution Process to help TESS staff resolve issues that might come up during internal reviews in “an efficient, effective and fair manner.” The Model says the Early Resolution Process can happen “anytime throughout the cycle of the appeal process” and includes:
 - discussing the issue under appeal with the local caseworker to determine if additional information is available
 - communicating directly with the appellant to identify issues
 - obtaining and considering any additional information presented by the appellant
 - problem-solving
 - making referrals as necessary
 - sharing information related to legislation, policy and procedures with the appellant and giving them the chance to discuss them and get clarification if needed
 - rendering a decision
 - providing the appellant with an Outcome of Internal Review Letter and including instructions on how they can appeal the decision



96. In addition, TESS's Process for Internal Reviews and Appeals requires decisions to be communicated to clients both verbally and in writing.

Dina's internal review

97. Caseworker Sandy's January 18, 2023, overpayment letter stated that Dina could request an internal review of the decision, which Dina did in a letter to TESS dated February 26, 2023. In her letter, Dina gave detailed reasons for why she disagreed with the overpayments TESS assessed against her. Dina explained her child's enrollment in post-secondary studies, including that Alex's reduced case load was considered full-time both by their institution and OSAP under an Individual Educational Plan. Dina also explained that she reported income and provided supporting documents to previous caseworkers, which were not saved on her file. In the letter, Dina accepted responsibility for some of the overpayments, despite expressing concerns that one caseworker provided Dina and Alex incorrect information about Alex's eligibility for COVID-19 federal emergency benefits.
98. By the time Dina submitted her request for an internal review, Caseworker Sandy had already reversed \$10,348 from Dina's file. This reversal happened in SAMS on January 31, 2023, the same date Caseworker Sandy created a SAMS note explaining that Dina provided information that reversed or reduced some of the overpayments. Another \$2,391 was still pending reversal. As explained in the overpayments section of this report, Dina did not know which overpayments Caseworker Sandy had reversed or the new amount TESS was claiming against her because no one ever communicated this to her in writing. Caseworker Sandy's notes, however, were available to TESS staff with access to Dina's file, including the appeals caseworker assigned to Dina's internal review.
99. As noted in the financial review section above, staff found the SAMS notes about the overpayments and the reversals hard to follow.
100. When we spoke to Appeals Caseworker Avery who was assigned to Dina's internal review, they said typically they speak to the client and review the original caseworker's calculations to "make sure it's correct and that the amount is valid." Appeals Caseworker Avery explained to us the importance of speaking to the client directly:

It was a requirement to make sure that you make contact with the clients to hear their side of the story.... I don't want to just take what you wrote on your appeal letter at face value, I'd love to hear your story.... I always found it was important to have a conversation with clients regarding their overpayment and how it happened.



101. In this case, Appeals Caseworker Avery told us they did not speak to Dina, Caseworker Sandy or anyone else as part of their review. They did not request additional information or documents from Dina. Appeals Caseworker Avery did not review each overpayment that made up the total amount. Rather, they told us they relied on Caseworker Sandy's SAMS notes when conducting the internal review. They told us, "With respect to an overpayment, we want to make sure or put trust that the [original] caseworker is doing their work correctly." Appeals Caseworker Avery did not consult a supervisor or ask anyone to review the internal review decision letter before mailing it to Dina on April 18, 2023.
102. Appeals Caseworker Avery did not call Dina to notify her of the decision. The only contact Dina received from Appeals Caseworker Avery was the internal review decision letter dated April 18, 2023.
103. The decision letter does not include detailed reasons explaining the decision and does not respond to the statements set out in Dina's internal review request. The decision from Appeals Caseworker Avery says:
- We let you know that you have an overpayment of \$25,546 because of undeclared income. The overpayment is from January 2012.... This means the overpayment amount will not change because we have determined that the original decision was correct.
104. The decision letter does not include a breakdown of the overpayments.
105. When we showed the decision letter to Appeals Caseworker Avery, they told us that the listed overpayment amount was "clearly" incorrect because the local caseworker had already lowered the total before the date of the decision letter. By the time Appeals Caseworker Avery was assigned the Internal Review, TESS was no longer claiming \$25,546 in overpayments because Caseworker Sandy had already reversed \$10,348 of overpayments from Dina's file months earlier, and this had been adjusted in SAMS. Caseworker Sandy identified another \$2,391 that needed to be reversed, but it had not yet happened.
106. The internal review decision included information on Dina's right to appeal the decision to the Social Benefits Tribunal,⁹ but Dina did not appeal to the tribunal.
107. Manager Riley told us that the April 18, 2023, internal review decision letter was not well-written:

⁹ A client can appeal an internal review decision to the Social Benefits Tribunal. This tribunal is independent and operates at an arms' length from the provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services. The tribunal will review the decision, evidence and any submissions from the client and TESS. The tribunal will make a decision within 60 days of hearing the appeal.



This letter was confusing, and so the information about the overpayment amount was — even if the initial amount was there, no clarification was there for the current amount to say, “Upon review, your file was reconciled and therefore your overpayment's been reduced to this amount.” And then the information related to the overpayment. So [it] appears as if the overpayment amount is only for one month and not a collection of periods.

108. Dina explained her reaction when she received the internal review decision and its impact on her:

I do not know what I did after I received it because it didn't really address my concerns.... How could you say I have undeclared income when your staff didn't write anything down? I took things into them, I spoke to them on the phone, they walked me through the procedure for reporting. And then they did nothing. I'm supposed to know that they're doing nothing? I'm supposed to know when I receive a cheque that it doesn't look right.... No one tells you anything and then now you're telling me that you're going to go after me for this huge amount of money.... And yeah after I got this ... I don't know how to explain it, but I just didn't give a shit. I just stopped functioning at that point. So from about April ... to September I literally stopped functioning ... they were trying to say that I may be clinically depressed because this stuff was just sending me over the edge.

109. During our interview, Appeals Caseworker Avery acknowledged that their review could have been more thorough:

It looks like I did not speak to her [Dina] directly but it looked like there were enough notes in the file to substantiate the information ... also her letter is very thorough ... in that it's a page and a half, two pages of her explanation ... how the overpayment came to be and her taking some responsibility for not declaring the income, etcetera. So I probably felt I didn't need to contact her.

110. As noted above, Appeals Caseworker Avery acknowledged that the total amount cited in their decision was incorrect. They added, however, that if overpayments were changed or reversed, the caseworker who made those changes should have sent a letter to Dina explaining those changes. We learned from TESS that while it is considered good practice, caseworkers are only required to send clients letters when overpayments are increased but not when they are reduced.
111. In addition to the letter dated June 4, 2025, TESS sent Dina another letter dated June 6, 2025. In the June 6, 2025, letter, Supervisor Jordan confirmed to Dina that the internal review outcome letter “reflected the incorrect overpayment balance.” In the letter, Supervisor Jordan also clarified that, after Dina provided additional information in January 2023, the overpayment balance was reduced to \$12,805.20. TESS sent this



letter more than two years after Appeals Caseworker Avery made the internal review decision in April 2023.

The internal review: analysis

112. Internal reviews are an important safeguard to ensure TESS decisions are accurate and fair. But the process is ineffective when staff do not meet the basic principles of administrative fairness.
113. I found that staff did not follow TESS's processes for internal reviews in this case. Despite telling us it is a requirement to speak to the client, the appeals caseworker told us they did not speak to Dina. Dina did not have the opportunity to be heard, an important part of any fair process. Staff never asked Dina for documents, despite Dina indicating in her internal review request letter to TESS that she had documentation to support her position.
114. TESS staff also missed a significant part of the story: that the overpayment had been reduced by \$10,348 months earlier.
115. The decision letter also said the entire overpayment was from January 2012. This was incorrect. Only one overpayment was from 2012. The rest were from 2017 to 2022.
116. I acknowledge that the SAMS notes were difficult to follow. However, if staff had difficulty interpreting them, they should have reached out to the local caseworker or a supervisor to discuss them.
117. Appeals staff did not independently confirm the overpayment amounts. The purpose of a review is to verify whether overpayments are accurate and supported by evidence, not simply to restate what a previous caseworker found.
118. Administrative fairness requires individuals to be provided meaningful information that allows them to understand the decision being made. The threshold for what is adequate can differ on a case-by-case basis, but it will be higher in situations where the impact on an individual is greater. In addition to containing incorrect information, the internal review decision letter did not provide detailed enough reasons for the division's conclusions and did not address Dina's concerns. This is particularly concerning for a decision that involved large overpayments spanning 10 years. In this case, the potential impact of this internal review on Dina was immense: \$25,546 is a significant amount for most Torontonians, but even more so for Ontario Works clients like Dina who make do on a small, fixed income.



119. These gaps and errors in the internal review compounded existing issues on Dina's file. The internal review followed a pattern of staff not speaking to Dina before making critical decisions that had significant impacts on her life.
120. With an organization the size and complexity of TESS, mistakes happen. But once an error has been identified, given the vulnerability of its clients, TESS should move to rectify the mistake as quickly as possible. Ontario Works clients should not have to pursue lengthy proceedings at the Social Benefits Tribunal to receive basic procedural fairness or have obvious errors reversed.

The Risk Management Unit review

The Risk Management Unit's processes

121. TESS's Risk Management Unit (RMU) ensures the division complies with relevant policies and legislation and that it follows good management principles and practices. The Integrity Review Unit, housed within the RMU, reviews allegations of fraud, called an integrity review. The Integrity Review Unit also supports fraud detection, prevention and deterrence measures.

The integrity review process

122. Managers and caseworkers we interviewed told us that TESS caseworkers must notify the RMU when an overpayment is more than \$10,000 and/or when they suspect the client has received assistance for which they are not entitled. An integrity review caseworker will investigate to determine whether there was potential fraud. According to the division's Integrity Review Model Guide (the Guide), this investigation includes:
 - reviewing the allegations against the client
 - speaking with the local caseworker to clarify information
 - interviewing the client
 - reviewing documents to determine eligibility for Ontario Works assistance
 - calculating overpayments if needed and documenting it in the case file
 - consulting with their supervisor for advice if needed
 - preparing case summaries, including referring to police under certain circumstances
 - reducing, suspending or closing the case
 - ensuring a supervisor also reviews all overpayments of \$10,000 or more



123. For an integrity review, an RMU caseworker will first do a preliminary review that lasts up to 30 days. If the caseworker needs more information to determine whether potential fraud has occurred, they do a secondary review. The secondary review is a comprehensive investigation where the caseworker reviews information by obtaining original or certified copies of relevant documents to assist them in making a decision regarding eligibility. Integrity review caseworkers have six months to complete secondary reviews.
124. RMU management told us that integrity reviews act as a “check and balance” for large overpayments to ensure everything was done correctly. Where necessary, integrity review caseworkers can request additional evidence. For example, if a client does not provide pay stubs to show when they earned income, unit staff can ask the client’s employer for more information before applying income averaging. RMU management told us that income averaging is “not our preferred method” and should only be done when the division cannot obtain information by other means.

TESS’s integrity review of Dina’s overpayments

125. Because Dina’s overpayment totaled over \$10,000, Caseworker Sandy referred Dina’s file to the RMU on January 19, 2023, a day after sending Dina the overpayment letter. An integrity review caseworker from the RMU, Morgan, began their review of Dina’s file around March 30, 2023.¹⁰ During their review, Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan spoke to Caseworker Sandy. They did not speak to Caseworker Robin, who was Dina’s new caseworker by this time. They told us they wanted to speak to Caseworker Sandy because the overpayment notes “had a lot going on” and Caseworker Sandy “created a very significant overpayment” of more than \$25,000.
126. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us they relied on the notes in SAMS and did not verify the overpayments, as “SAMS is pretty accurate when it comes to doing the calculation.” They told us they accepted Caseworker Sandy’s use of income averaging and did not conduct third-party checks or ask Dina for any documentation. They told us this was because, “The client had stated to the caseworker that they did not have any of their pay stubs ... So, because of that, the legwork the caseworker had done ... that was all the information we were going to have access to.” Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us that they learned that Caseworker Sandy had reduced the overpayment, but were waiting for Supervisor Taylor’s approval to reduce it even more

¹⁰ The integrity review caseworker could not explain for certain why their review did not begin earlier but said it may be because of complications with the way SAMS transfers files. They said these complications have been flagged with the province. The province oversees SAMS as a whole and all changes to SAMS must be made by the province.



(the overpayment from 2012 in the amount of \$2,391). Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us:

I recall having the conversation with [Caseworker Sandy] just being like, “so you’ve already done all this. Are we just waiting for the supervisor to approve this reversal?” and they had said “Yes.”... The majority of my email communications was with the caseworkers and the supervisors trying to advocate whether they approved the reversal or not. I just kind of needed someone to say “yes” or “no.” I needed the decision to be made. That is above my pay grade.

Integrity review caseworker does not contact Dina during integrity review

127. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us that, usually, as outlined in the Guide, they speak to clients during an integrity review. However, they did not in this case. They explained why:

Because there were no third parties and those discrepancies had already been discussed and, as far as the notes indicated, addressed with the client by [Caseworker Sandy], that was it. And then the rest of my communications were in relation to just following-up on whether the reversal was gonna happen or not.

Supervisor Taylor does not reverse the 2012 overpayment

128. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan explained to us that the RMU could not reverse the 2012 overpayment themselves. Rather, a supervisor from the local office had to do this because that is where the overpayment was first created.
129. Between April and June 2023, Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan and Caseworker Sandy followed up with various staff at least five times about the reversal of the 2012 \$2,391 overpayment, including Supervisor Taylor and Morgan’s own supervisor, Supervisor Casey. Despite advising Supervisor Taylor that they had verified documentation for the reversal, and Supervisor Taylor saying they would review the reversal, it was never reversed.
130. On June 15, 2023, Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan emailed their supervisor, Supervisor Casey, separately. They said they “don’t want to step on any toes” but the request to reverse the \$2,391 from 2012 “appears correct/appropriate” and “verification has been received that the dependent was in full time school, therefore the



earnings are exempt.” Supervisor Casey responded the same day, saying they would get back to the integrity review caseworker.

131. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan shared they reached out to Supervisor Casey because they were not “getting anywhere” with Supervisor Taylor in reversing the \$2,391 overpayment from 2012. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us they were in a “holding pattern” while they waited for a decision from Supervisor Taylor:

[Caseworker Sandy] would have created the overpayment I’m assuming sometime in January or December, and then that’s why it came to us here at RMU, and then the fact that you know, I’m still sending follow-up emails in June for a supervisor to give an answer whether it was “yes” or “no” – a lot of the feedback from those emails that you also saw was, “Wait. I’m looking into it,” or “We’ll follow up.” And I was sort of in a holding pattern and I hope that didn’t irreversibly negatively impact [Dina] obviously, but it was – I think the delays and the, I guess, lack of decision really was the biggest detriment to this file overall.

132. In our interview with Supervisor Casey, they could not recall whether they spoke to Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan or whether they took any steps after the June 15, 2023, email exchange. They told us that they recalled speaking with Supervisor Taylor but could not remember the details. Supervisor Casey told us they did not document those conversations on SAMS.
133. We also spoke to Supervisor Taylor. They told us that they wanted to ensure that Caseworker Sandy’s work was done correctly before reversing the \$2,391 overpayment from 2012. Other than consulting with the RMU, Supervisor Taylor did not recall what steps they took to ensure Caseworker Sandy’s work was done correctly. There are no SAMS notes from Supervisor Taylor about reviewing Caseworker Sandy’s assessment.

RMU closes file while reversal is still outstanding

134. On August 24, 2023, Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan sent Supervisor Casey an integrity review report for Dina via email. This is the report that integrity review caseworkers fill out when they complete an integrity review. In the report, Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan said they advocated for the supervisor to reverse a portion of Alex’s overpayment based on Alex being in school, but the report does not explicitly mention the amount (\$2,391) or that the reversal was still outstanding.
135. The report lists the total overpayment for Dina as \$15,198, which still includes the \$2,391.



Months later, Supervisor Taylor briefly picks the file back up

136. On October 16, 2023, Supervisor Taylor emailed Supervisor Casey about Dina's file. Supervisor Taylor asked Supervisor Casey to review whether the information Dina provided was enough to support the overpayment reversals for not only 2012, but for 2017, 2018 and 2019 as well. They said that, if not, they will have to get further information about Alex's school loans from Dina. Supervisor Taylor also asked Supervisor Casey to confirm if Caseworker Sandy used income averaging for any overpayments.
137. There is no documented response from Supervisor Casey to Supervisor Taylor's email from October 16, 2023. There are no documented attempts by Supervisor Taylor to follow-up with Supervisor Casey after this.
138. We asked Supervisor Taylor why they were asking about overpayment reversals for 2017, 2018 and 2019 months after they had already happened. They told us that as they looked at the file more, they started to wonder whether the reversals for those years were appropriate. From our review of the SAMS file and other information TESS provided, Supervisor Taylor did not document any concerns about these overpayments.

Supervisor Casey responds to integrity review report four months later

139. On December 19, 2023, nearly four months after receiving it, Supervisor Casey responded to Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan's August 24, 2023, email containing the integrity review report. Supervisor Casey from the RMU could not explain to us why they did not respond sooner. In their email response, Supervisor Casey tells Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan that they are unclear about the report. Specifically, they note that they do not see any document in SAMS proving Alex's enrollment in school.
140. There are no emails between Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan and Supervisor Casey following this exchange and there are no case notes about what, if anything, happened afterwards. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us they recall that their involvement on the file ended after submitting the report in August 2023:

I probably at some point would have just closed the case out because there really wasn't anything else for me to do. My hands were kind of tied because it was at the local office level and that was pretty much that. I don't recall having any further conversations with [Supervisor Casey] about it unless [they] reached out to me, which I don't recall.



141. Supervisor Casey told us that their investigation should not have been closed, but did not recall speaking directly to Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan about this. They also did not recall following up on their December 19, 2023, email and said: “That shouldn’t have happened in terms of the investigation being closed ... if the amount is not correct it should not have been closed at all.”
142. RMU management told us that, ultimately, the responsibility lay with Supervisor Taylor and not the RMU:

[Supervisor Taylor] dropped the ball ... My position is my staff made the correct assessment. [Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan] validated the overpayment that should be there. [They] made the recommendations for the reversal. [They] made efforts to ensure that it was done but [they] had to close the file because we have our compliance requirements that we have to resolve and make decisions within a reasonable timeframe and at that time it was not fixed.

Supervisor Taylor leaves the City before reversing the 2012 overpayment

143. In January 2025, Supervisor Taylor left the City. Supervisor Taylor told us that they did not speak to anyone at TESS about taking over responsibility for reversing the 2012 overpayment. The \$2,391 overpayment from 2012 was still on Dina’s file when they left.
144. In our interview, Caseworker Sandy expressed surprise that Supervisor Taylor never reversed the 2012 overpayment:

[Supervisor Taylor] didn't reverse that overpayment? [Supervisor Taylor] should have because there was documentation that [Alex] was in school full-time. So there's absolutely no reason not to. There's zero reason to have that overpayment on there. That's ridiculous. I don't understand. Like, how could [Supervisor Taylor], how could [they] validate keeping that on there or justify keeping an overpayment that's not valid on there? It's so frustrating.

Two years later, TESS reverses the 2012 overpayment

145. A manager from the RMU told us that TESS did not reverse the \$2,391 overpayment until June 2, 2025. This is more than two years after at least two caseworkers repeatedly requested its reversal and more than a month after I launched this investigation.



146. Supervisor Jordan told us it took multiple reviews to catch this error. This is because, by the time the division looked into the file in 2025 and since the system automatically starts with the oldest overpayment first, Dina had already repaid the 2012 overpayment of \$2,391 through deductions. Once the 2012 overpayment was paid off, the system would have moved on to the next overpayment.
147. Supervisor Taylor was apologetic when we asked why they did not reverse the 2012 overpayment of \$2,391. But they told us they did not feel that this had a significant impact on Dina:

It kinda bugs me that I didn't follow up with the overpayment for \$2,300.... Ok, there's a gap there. Yeah. Without a doubt. So my apologies to everyone. But at the same time in my logical mind, you know, it didn't really affect the overpayment recovery amount ... there was all these complications on the file, I didn't want to step into it and just say "yes" and then later we end up with the repercussions.

The Risk Management Unit review: analysis

148. The RMU's integrity review repeated some of the problems I identified with the internal review. Specifically:
- Staff did not follow the steps outlined in the Guide, including independently reviewing documents and calculations completed by the original caseworker. Instead, staff relied on the local caseworker's SAMS notes and explanations for income averaging. They did not ask Dina for additional information or conduct their own third-party searches.
 - Interviewing clients is part of the integrity review process. In this case, however, the RMU did not speak to Dina during the review.
149. Integrity Review Caseworker Morgan told us they were focused on advocating for the 2012 overpayment of \$2,391 to be reversed, which is evident from their multiple attempts to raise the issue with two supervisors. Unfortunately, neither supervisor took proactive steps to reverse the overpayment or verify whether it was correct.
150. Part of a supervisor's role is to provide support and accountability for the division's work. I find that the supervisors overseeing Dina's file did not fulfill this obligation in this case. They failed to consistently document their communication about this issue. Emails went unanswered for months, if they were answered at all.
151. When a supervisor emailed the integrity review caseworker in December 2023, the file had been closed for nearly four months, with the incorrect overpayment of \$2,391 still



outstanding. It was only after launching this investigation that the division revisited the file and discovered the oversight.

152. The matter languished, and no supervisor addressed it. This was unfair to Dina. I also find that the integrity review fell short of its intended purpose to serve as a “check” on large overpayments.

Dina’s complaints to TESS

TESS’s customer service processes

153. The division’s Customer Service Standards set out what clients can expect from TESS. A client can contact TESS in a variety of ways, including phone, mail, online and in person. TESS’s service standards say that a client will be able to speak with a manager within 30 minutes of visiting in person.
154. The Client Services and Information Unit is the division-wide unit responsible for handling complaints about TESS. This includes complaints about local offices that handle day-to-day case management for Ontario Works clients.

Dina’s struggles to reach TESS staff

155. Dina told us she had concerns not just about the overpayments, but also about various employment and health-related benefits she felt she was entitled to. Dina said she went in person to see Supervisor Taylor several times to discuss these issues, but Supervisor Taylor did not meet with Dina:

[Supervisor Taylor] would make me sit there, two to three hours later and [they] would not come down. At that point, [Caseworker Sandy] was working in the lower part where you come in, so they would send a message up to [Supervisor Taylor]. I went to the front desk and I’d check in and they would keep letting [Supervisor Taylor] know I’m there and [Supervisor Taylor] would keep saying, “I’m coming down in 20 minutes. I’ll be down in half an hour.” [Supervisor Taylor] would deliberately let me sit there and [they] would never come down and then I would just get tired and I’d get up and leave.

156. Caseworker Sandy told us the same thing: that Dina would come to the office to meet Supervisor Taylor, only to be left waiting for hours, even though Caseworker Sandy repeatedly reminded Supervisor Taylor that Dina was waiting.



157. Dina said she continued to contact Caseworker Sandy for help, even after Caseworker Sandy was no longer assigned to her file: “I felt comfortable going to [Caseworker Sandy] if [they were] downstairs because one, [they were] the one that was there for you to go to and two, [they were] my past worker so why wouldn’t I? And [Caseworker Sandy was] one of the few people who treated me nicely.”
158. Caseworker Sandy told us that Dina continued to contact them because she was having a difficult time reaching her new caseworker, Caseworker Robin, and Supervisor Taylor. Caseworker Sandy (who was no longer Dina’s caseworker) emailed Caseworker Robin and Supervisor Taylor on May 15, 2023, saying they emailed them both about Dina two weeks earlier and received no response. Caseworker Sandy wrote that Dina told them she tried to reach Caseworker Robin five times in the past three weeks and also tried to contact Supervisor Taylor but was not successful. In the email, Caseworker Sandy says that Dina said she also went to their offices in person to try to reach Caseworker Robin and Supervisor Taylor, without success. Caseworker Sandy received a reply from Supervisor Taylor the next day asking to speak about Dina.
159. Supervisor Taylor told us that they recall speaking to Caseworker Sandy about this email. There are no notes on SAMS about this conversation. Supervisor Taylor told us they instructed Caseworker Sandy to redirect Dina to Caseworker Robin when she came in person. There are no corresponding SAMS notes documenting Dina’s attempts to reach Caseworker Robin and Supervisor Taylor or her visits to the local office.
160. We asked Supervisor Taylor about Dina’s attempts to meet with them in person and if she had to wait hours to see them. Supervisor Taylor told us they did not recall if Dina came to see them: “I don’t want to say that she was not correct, but at same time it is possible that she came in and for whatever reason I wasn’t available and she wasn’t wanting to talk to anyone else. She wanted to talk to me directly. It is possible for that.”
161. Supervisor Taylor told us that when a client shows up without an appointment and the staff member they want to see is unavailable, a backup staff member will see them instead. Supervisor Taylor told us that in an “ideal world,” the details of a client’s meeting with a backup staff member would be recorded in SAMS. But they said this is not always done because the office can be busy and “intense” and “people are just trying to get stuff done as opposed to, you know, tying up all the loose ends – I shouldn’t say loose ends – but, you know, instead of doing the documentation.” There are no notes in SAMS recording a meeting with Dina and anyone from TESS during the time period relevant to this investigation.
162. We asked Caseworker Robin about their interactions with Dina. Caseworker Robin told us that when Dina’s file was assigned to them on March 31, 2023, Supervisor Taylor told them that Supervisor Taylor would be the one to manage Dina’s file. Caseworker



Robin told us that as a result, they forwarded all case management tasks to Supervisor Taylor.

I forwarded it to my supervisor because [Supervisor Taylor] was dealing with the case. It was all above my head, right? It was my name on the file as the case owner, but it was being handled at a level above me. Like, every person has to have a case owner attached to them, right? So, in this instance unfortunately that was me, but it was being handled above me. So, anything that had to do with this case went to my supervisor and any actions on the case were from my supervisor. This was not a case where I was working independently.

163. This assignment of duties, described by Caseworker Robin, was not documented in SAMS and was never communicated to Dina. Supervisor Taylor told us that Dina refused to speak with Caseworker Robin. This is also not documented on Dina's file in SAMS.
164. Dina told us that when she could not reach Supervisor Taylor and Caseworker Robin, she tried to call Supervisor Taylor's manager, Manager Quinn. Dina said Manager Quinn did not return her calls.
165. We asked Manager Quinn whether they had ever received any calls from Dina. Manager Quinn said they were not aware that Dina had tried to call them. They also told us they were not sure if Supervisor Taylor was handling Dina's case instead of Caseworker Robin. Manager Quinn told us they were not aware of any communication issues between Dina and Caseworker Robin. We asked several staff whether it was usual practice for a supervisor to be handling the day-to-day management of a case instead of the caseworker assigned to the file. Most said this was unusual but not unheard of.

Dina escalates concerns to complaints unit

166. Emails we reviewed show that a client services manager, Manager Jesse, brought concerns from Dina to Manager Quinn's attention at least twice.
167. On July 24, 2023, Manager Jesse sent an email to Manager Quinn. Manager Jesse said Dina expressed in a call that she was "concerned that she's being asked to provide information that she's already provided." Manager Jesse also pointed out the financial review notes from May 3, 2023 "appear to be a template that was not filled in." Manager Jesse asked that Manager Quinn prepare a letter to Dina "to indicate exactly what [information] is required." Manager Quinn responded to Manager Jesse via email on the same day, cc'ing Supervisor Taylor. They asked Supervisor Taylor to "ensure the caseworker follows up to provide a letter with the necessary specifics regarding



any outstanding items.” There is no record on file of TESS sending any such letter to Dina.

168. On August 9, 2023, Supervisor Taylor wrote to Manager Quinn and Manager Jesse that they were in the process of reviewing Dina’s overpayment, saying “at which point further info will likely be requested of the client.”

169. When we spoke with Supervisor Taylor, Manager Quinn and Manager Jesse, none of them could confirm what steps, if any, they took following this email. Manager Jesse told us they recalled speaking to Dina a few times. Manager Jesse told us that, as a client services manager, they did not follow-up to ensure someone sent Dina the letter because it is for the local office and its manager, in this case Manager Quinn, to handle. Manager Jesse told us:

I would have left that in the [local] office’s hands to complete. Once I know that’s in progress, that becomes part of case management.... Usually once it’s in the hands of a [local] manager, I will leave it in the hands of the manager.

170. On October 18, 2023, Manager Jesse again emailed Manager Quinn and told them that Dina called and was upset with her caseworker, Caseworker Robin, and that she had requested a new caseworker. Manager Quinn told us they did not recall what their response was to Manager Jesse or whether they took any steps to address Dina’s concerns about Caseworker Robin: “My recollection is that [Dina] actually had an ok working relationship with [Caseworker Robin]. I don’t remember there being challenges there.”

171. None of these conversations, emails or details of Dina’s concerns or complaint to the Client Services and Information Unit were documented in SAMS.

Dina’s complaints to TESS: analysis

172. Based on the evidence we reviewed, Dina had difficulty reaching someone at TESS to address her concerns about her file. While one caseworker was responsive to Dina and relayed her concerns to management, there is no documentation that anyone acted on those concerns.

173. When a client services manager also attempted to have staff address Dina’s concerns, no one took any action. The Client Services and Information Unit did not follow-up with management at the local office to ensure they responded to Dina. They should have.

174. If another staff member, supervisor or otherwise, takes over a file, as we were told happened in this case, it needs to be documented. The client should also be informed of the change, so they know whom to contact if they have questions or concerns. Yet,



we found no evidence that this happened. If the local office supervisor was unofficially managing the file, Dina wasted her time trying to contact the caseworker.

175. Dina was frustrated because she had questions about her file, but was unable to get them answered. A caseworker tried to intervene but was unable to get anyone to respond to Dina's questions and concerns. Dina's attempts to escalate her concerns were also unsuccessful.
176. Staff did not meet the standard required for in-person client visits: management is supposed to meet with a client within 30 minutes of their visit to a TESS office. We found Dina was left waiting to speak with management for hours. This is unacceptable and yet another example of how TESS's service to Dina fell short of its service standards.
177. Taken individually, most of these case management and communication issues may seem relatively minor. However, together, they paint a picture of poor communication and customer service when it came to Dina's file. Dina's questions and concerns were not trivial: they had to do with thousands of dollars that TESS suddenly said she owed. The division's communication was unclear and inconsistent, falling short of the level of customer service the public should reasonably expect from their public servants.

Conclusion

The investigation was necessary to untangle layers of contradictory information, incorrect assumptions and confusion among multiple staff involved. In my opinion, TESS overlooked the person at the centre of this case, and as a result, Dina was treated unfairly.



Conclusion

178. Social assistance from programs like Ontario Works is often a lifeline for Torontonians facing difficult life circumstances. When errors occur in how those benefits are managed, the consequences can be life-altering. Dina suddenly found herself owing thousands of dollars to the government without understanding how. I launched this investigation because my staff also struggled to get clear information about what happened in her case. The investigation was necessary to untangle layers of contradictory information, incorrect assumptions and confusion among multiple staff involved. In my opinion, TESS overlooked the person at the centre of this case, and as a result, Dina was treated unfairly.

The human impact of municipal decisions

179. Ontario Works clients rely on the City's administration of social assistance benefits for support, and TESS staff have a difficult job. They manage large caseloads of complex files and navigate a case management system which requires internal experts to explain its intricacies. The staff we interviewed care about their work and the people they serve. They acknowledged where they could have done better.
180. Dina's overpayment was more than \$25,000 — a significant amount of money for most people. At the time, she was receiving \$963 every month from Ontario Works. Once the deductions began, she was repaying 10 per cent of that: \$96.30 each month, until it was paid off. Based on the repayment schedule, Dina would have needed more than 20 years to repay an amount that TESS later confirmed was incorrect. Greater care should have been taken to ensure TESS's calculations were correct because of the serious impact this overpayment could and would have on her.

Communication failures

181. Clear communication is a key component of administrative fairness. It includes giving people timely notice of a decision that may affect them, the opportunity to be heard and sufficiently detailed reasons to understand why decisions were made.
182. It was unfair that TESS did not tell Dina that she was undergoing a financial review, nor give her the chance to provide documentation to support her case, before the overpayments were assessed. Over a period of more than 10 years, TESS did not conduct a financial review. A financial review is required every 24 months. If they had been completed as mandated and if TESS had obtained the necessary information



from Dina, TESS may have discovered overpayments earlier, lessening the impact on her.

183. Dina received confusing letters from TESS with incorrect information or missing contact information. Even some TESS staff we interviewed had a difficult time understanding some of the letters. Receiving unclear and factually incorrect information had a significant impact on Dina's life and was unfair. Dina told us that she was left feeling shut down and depressed.
184. While staff turnover in a large organization like TESS is understandable, it is important to let clients know when their file changes hands so they know whom to contact with their questions or concerns. Knowing that her file had transferred to a supervisor would have saved Dina time and given her a clear contact person.
185. Fairness also requires timely responses and an accessible complaints process. Dina struggled to reach her second caseworker and a supervisor; she sometimes waited hours in person, only to leave without assistance. Efforts to escalate her concerns to two managers failed. Not only did this fail to meet TESS's service standards, but it also reflected a lack of respect and consideration for Dina.

Missing, inadequate and incomplete documentation

186. Good record keeping is another important component of administrative fairness. Dina's story highlights the importance of maintaining a proper record. Overpayment amounts, reversals, financial documentation, TESS decisions, discussions with Dina and her attempts to meet with TESS were not clearly documented in SAMS, if at all. Without clear documentation on the case management system, there is no reliable record.
187. TESS's failure to properly save information that Alex was a full-time student led to further problems. The process of applying and then reversing overpayments was confusing and unclear. Subsequent caseworkers tasked with verifying the overpayments either misinterpreted the information contained in the SAMS notes or struggled to find the information they needed, which, as one TESS staff member described, was "buried" deep in SAMS.
188. I recognize SAMS is a challenging system to work with and appreciate the complexities staff navigate just to do their day-to-day work. However, I cannot stress enough the importance of clear, thorough, contemporaneous notes and documentation in a case management system. These notes and documents allow any other staff member to pick up a file and determine what has been done and what next steps are needed.



Without them, work is repeated or information is misinterpreted, potentially leading to serious consequences for Torontonians like Dina.

Safeguards and supervision broke down

189. TESS has a series of safeguards that should, if used correctly, ensure errors or omissions are caught and fixed. Internal reviews by appeals caseworkers, integrity reviews by the Risk Management Unit and a complaints process all exist for this very purpose. They are in place to ensure fairness for Ontario Works clients who can face serious consequences when they are not followed. TESS did not follow these processes and the safeguards failed.
190. TESS did not request information from Dina when it conducted its initial financial review in 2022. Deductions began almost immediately, without verifying any of this information with Dina. Only days later, however, TESS reversed almost half of the overpayment. If TESS had followed the financial review process and obtained the relevant information from Dina, the assessed overpayment would have been calculated correctly in the first instance.
191. TESS's Model for internal reviews includes assessing the client's review request and notes on the file and speaking with the client to get their side of the story. This did not happen in this case. Instead, TESS erroneously upheld the original overpayment amount of \$25,546, months after Dina's caseworker had reversed over \$10,000, with another \$2,391 awaiting approval to reduce the overpayment further. This was information that was recorded in SAMS. TESS staff failed to consider this information when they made the decision to confirm the \$25,546 overpayment. The checks in place failed to work as intended because staff did not follow the established process.
192. Similarly, TESS's integrity review also fell short. It did not independently verify the overpayment amounts, run third-party checks where needed and, most importantly, interview the client. TESS relied on the original caseworker's notes instead of following its own review procedures.
193. Two staff members repeatedly noted that the 2012 overpayment needed supervisory approval to reverse it in the system. However, this change was not completed. When the supervisor left the City, the task was not reassigned. No one followed up to ensure that the reversal of the overpayment was completed. No one at the management level took responsibility for reversing the overpayment, even after other staff flagged it on multiple occasions.
194. The final failure to address Dina's concerns happened when she tried to complain to TESS's Client Services and Information Unit. While this Unit tried to have staff address



Dina's concerns, no one took action or ownership. The Unit did not follow up to ensure TESS responded to Dina. Her concerns about the incorrect and confusing overpayment remained unanswered.

195. The reversal of the 2012 overpayment of \$2,391 occurred in June 2025, after I launched this investigation and more than two years after staff first requested supervisory approval for the reversal of the overpayment. Without Dina's complaint to my office, the amount likely would not have been reversed. An amount, we now know, she did not owe.

Moving forward with accountability and a commitment to fairness

196. Although TESS has effective systems and processes designed to ensure that decisions affecting Ontario Works clients follow established policies and procedures, this did not happen here. There is no doubt that this case was complex. However, the rules in place to guide staff's decision-making were not followed.
197. While this investigation focuses on one case, our overarching goal is to ensure that the City treats people fairly — particularly some of its most vulnerable. Safeguards that should have prevented issues instead failed, turning an already difficult situation into a distressing one for Dina. When implemented, the recommendations in this report are designed to help prevent other Ontario Works clients from encountering the difficulties Dina experienced.

Recommendations



Recommendations

In consideration of the information gathered through this investigation and our findings, I make the following recommendations to the General Manager, Toronto Employment and Social Services:

Recommendation 1: TESS should ensure clients are informed when a financial review is taking place. This notice should explain the reason for the review, specify the information the client is required to provide and outline the potential consequences of not providing information by the deadline specified in the notice.

Recommendation 2: TESS should ensure caseworkers and other involved staff consistently follow the division's processes for conducting financial reviews, including using and completing the financial review template.

Recommendation 3: TESS should clearly document financial evidence on client files and ensure that the evidence is saved in the appropriate sections of the case management system.

Recommendation 4: TESS should give clients a reasonable opportunity to provide information before finalizing an overpayment.

Recommendation 5: TESS should ensure supervisors or managers review all overpayments over \$10,000 before they are applied to the client's case, with clear timeframes to ensure timely review.

Recommendation 6: TESS should inform clients in writing when they reassess overpayments, regardless of whether the overpayment amount increases or decreases. This notice should include information about why TESS reassessed the overpayment, any changes to the amount the client was overpaid and a breakdown of the total amount the client owes. It should also include any appeal or internal review options available to the client.

Recommendation 7: TESS should ensure staff consistently follow the division's processes for internal reviews and appeals, including speaking to clients during the review and communicating internal review decisions to clients both verbally and in writing. TESS should also ensure internal review staff take all reasonable steps to independently verify overpayments, including reviewing evidence, calculations and other relevant information, and ensuring it is accurately documented in the case management system.

Recommendation 8: TESS should provide clients with adequate reasons for internal review decisions about overpayments.



Recommendation 9: TESS should ensure that supervisors or managers review all internal review decisions for overpayments over \$10,000 and approve decision letters before sending them to the client.

Recommendation 10: TESS should provide regular and ongoing training and guidance to staff on case management, documentation, overpayments, financial reviews and internal reviews, to ensure its policies and processes are followed consistently.

Recommendation 11: TESS Risk Management staff should follow the processes set out in the Integrity Review Model Guide, including independently verifying overpayment amounts and interviewing the client, when conducting integrity reviews. They should also ensure all the appropriate steps have been taken to confirm, reverse, or correct an overpayment before closing the integrity review.

Recommendation 12: TESS staff should review every letter related to overpayments for clarity, accuracy and contact information before sending it to a client. This includes reviewing letters that are automatically generated by the case management system.

Recommendation 13: TESS should inform its clients if a different staff member takes over the management of the client's file, regardless of that staff's title or position, and provide the client with that staff member's contact information. This change must also be documented on the client's file in the case management system.

Recommendation 14: TESS should ensure it has an effective and consistent system for documenting its interactions with clients. This includes in-person visits, calls and written communication. For in-person visits or calls where staff is unavailable, TESS should document the client's attendance and ensure the client's caseworker is notified. TESS management should develop guidance for staff on what constitutes a relevant addition to a client's file.

Recommendation 15: TESS should ensure it meets its in-person client visit standards. When this is not possible, TESS should ensure they clearly communicate with the client and make alternative arrangements to meet with them.

Recommendation 16: TESS should ensure that the Client Services and Information Unit follows up with relevant staff to verify that a complaint is resolved before closing the complaint file.

Recommendation 17: TESS should ensure staff document case consultations and file direction in the case management system. This includes information contained in emails that is relevant to the client's file and benefit entitlement.

Recommendation 18: TESS should create a plan to implement all recommendations and report back to Ombudsman Toronto on a quarterly basis on its progress, until the Ombudsman is satisfied that the division has taken adequate steps to address them.

TESS's response to our report

“We appreciate the opportunity to reflect on how we can continue to strengthen our processes, improve communication and enhance service quality. Importantly, much of this work is already underway, reflecting TESS’s sustained focus on continuous improvement and our dedication to refining our practices.”

Tom Azouz, General Manager, Toronto Employment and Social Services



Employment & Social Services
Tom Azouz, General Manager

Metro Hall (C/O Union Station, 3rd Floor East Wing)
55 John Street
Toronto, Ontario M5V 3C6

Tel: 416-392-8623
Fax: 416-392-4214

November 26, 2025

Kwame Addo
Ombudsman Toronto
375 University Ave, Suite 203
Toronto, ON M5G 2J5

Dear Mr. Addo,

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide feedback to your report, "An investigation into the City's handling of a resident's social assistance overpayments".

Toronto Employment & Social Services (TESS) provides vital supports to more than 100,000 individuals and families each year, helping these residents access income support, employment services, and other resources that contribute to stability and well-being. Our work is grounded in fairness, accountability, and a deep commitment to serving the most vulnerable Torontonians with respect and integrity. We have professional and caring staff, who are focused on providing the best possible service to our clients.

TESS accepts the findings and recommendations outlined in the Ombudsman Toronto (OT) report. We appreciate the opportunity to reflect on how we can continue to strengthen our processes, improve communication, and enhance service quality. Importantly, much of this work is already underway, reflecting TESS's sustained focus on continuous improvement and our dedication to refining our practices.

We also want to acknowledge the client whose experience led to this investigation. We recognize the frustrations that resulted from the errors identified in the handling of their overpayment. We have since corrected the administrative errors, issued an apology, and met directly with the client to review their file and ensure all concerns were addressed.

While we acknowledge these errors, it is important to note that the areas of income reporting, financial reviews, and overpayments are inherently complex for both clients and staff. The administration of overpayments requires a detailed understanding of program rules and, at times, manual intervention to ensure accuracy within the provincially managed Social Assistance Management System (SAMS).

While SAMS supports consistent service delivery across Ontario, it also has operational limitations that can contribute to administrative complexity and potential for error. As the case management system provided by the province, SAMS is used to manage benefits for Ontario Works, the Ontario Disability Support Program, and Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities. Navigation within SAMS is inherently complex, as SAMS performs a wide range of functions, including capturing client information and transactions, recording personal and employment support needs, interfacing with other Provincial and Federal government systems, calculating eligibility, issuing payments, storing documentation, and facilitating electronic communication with recipients. To help staff manage these requirements, TESS maintains a dedicated SAMS Operational Support Team and onsite Subject Matter Experts who provide guidance on the more intricate aspects of the system and related business processes.

In recognition of these complexities, additional steps have been taken to enhance training, as well as enhancing staff tools and business processes to provide greater clarity and ensure appropriate management oversight throughout each step of these important reviews. Many of these improvements were underway before the Ombudsman's investigation began, and together, they form a strong foundation for addressing the recommendations in this report.

Progress and Ongoing Improvements

Client Service and Communication

In December 2024, TESS reaffirmed its commitment to the City's Service Promise by reminding all staff of customer service standards and expectations for timely follow-up. The Client Services and Information Unit is implementing a new tracking process to ensure every client concern is addressed and closed with confirmation that action has been taken.

We continue to enhance training and tools to support clear, consistent communication with clients—ensuring that decisions are explained in plain language and that clients understand their rights and responsibilities at each step.

Internal Reviews

We have strengthened our internal review processes to ensure fairness, consistency, and accuracy in decision-making. This includes the introduction of a Supervision Plan in 2024 that clarifies file review expectations for management staff.

New note templates and additional training are being developed to guide staff in documenting decisions, verifying details, and ensuring that clients receive clear and accurate written outcomes. These measures aim to reinforce accountability and improve client experience.

Overpayments and Financial Reviews

TESS has completed a comprehensive review of our Overpayment Policy and associated business processes. We will be finalizing and rolling out the updated policy in alignment with the Ombudsman's recommendations in Q2 2026. We are then planning to provide division-wide training to support the implementation of the new overpayment updates in Q2/3 2026 and financial reviews policy updates in December 2025 to ensure consistent understanding and application among staff.

We are developing enhanced protocols to ensure clients are promptly notified of any changes to their overpayment, with clear and accessible explanations. Enhanced reporting tools will provide stronger oversight, ensuring that large or complex overpayments are reviewed and validated by management when an overpayment is established in SAMS based on changes to a client's circumstances and/or income.

As recommended in the Ombudsman's report, all overpayments of \$10,000 or more will be subject to a mandatory supervisory review.

A revised Financial Review Policy was implemented in October 2025, supported by a new Financial Review Tool launched earlier this year. These updates help staff more effectively identify and assess income discrepancies while ensuring proper communication with clients throughout the process.

We are also reintroducing quality assurance file reviews by Q2 2026, to further strengthen oversight and identify issues before they affect clients. These reviews will serve as an important feedback loop for continuous improvement.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

TESS remains committed to strengthening service delivery and ensuring fair, transparent, and compassionate support for all residents. We have already made significant progress and are well positioned to address the concerns identified in this report.

In addition to the actions noted above, TESS will provide quarterly updates to Ombudsman Toronto outlining our progress on implementing recommendations and demonstrating our ongoing improvements.

Through this ongoing collaboration, we will continue to uphold public trust, support our dedicated staff, and ensure that our services meet the highest standards of accountability and fairness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Azouz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Tom Azouz
General Manager
Toronto Employment & Social Services