

January 2015

Memo to Presidents of Municipal Social Service Workers' locals

Subject: SAMS update – news and progress

**From: Carrie Lynn Poole-Cotnam, Chair, SSWCC
Andrew Hunter, Coordinator, SSWCC**

Since the introduction of the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) in November 2014 – and the resulting chaos for workers and clients alike – the members of CUPE Ontario's SSWCC have worked non-stop to help highlight and help resolve the problems facing CUPE members in Ontario Works offices.

Our latest news is an invitation to CUPE to be part of a SAMS working group with the project team from the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

But we also wanted to share with local presidents and members all progress made to date, the actions that led up to the establishment of the working group, and the steps we'll take from here.

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Re-cap

On 16 December 2014, over 500 CUPE members from Ontario Works offices took part in a “telephone town hall” to discuss the problems created by SAMS. That night, we launched our online post-card campaign, [SAMS isn't working](#). We urged members to download the cards, personalize them with their personal SAMS experience, and send them to the Minister of Community and Social Services, Helena Jaczek.

The next day, CUPE representatives had a conference call with Minister Jaczek. We also shared with her the near-unanimous polls by CUPE members about the appalling effects of SAMS on their clients and in the workplace.

The conference call was followed by a face-to-face meeting with the minister and her staff on December 22; that meeting included CUPE Ontario president Fred Hahn, Carrie Lynn and Andrew.

We presented our demand – clearly expressed by CUPE members on December 16 – for a return to SDMT. To date, the minister and her officials refused, in person and in writing, to consider this option.

But in response to CUPE's concerns, the minister did propose the establishment of a ministry-led SAMS working group for frontline CUPE members. They would meet the SAMS project team to provide direction on how SAMS can be improved and re-designed – page by page, tab by tab, field by field.

After consulting with SSWCC members who represent municipal social service workers, we agreed to take part in the working group.

Working group: next steps

As directed by Minister Jaczek, a deputy minister from MCSS has invited up to ten CUPE frontline workers to take part in an initial three-hour meeting with SAMS project staff. We recently got word that the meeting will take place on Friday, February 6, at Queen's Park.

We plan to begin the day with a pre-meeting at 8:30 am with our participants, SSWCC coordinator Andrew Hunter and SSWCC chair Carrie Lynn Poole-Cotnam, who is standing in for Fred Hahn as the designated representative of CUPE Ontario; details to follow.

The meeting is being held to address CUPE concerns and members will be able to offer their input on functionality improvements and design, based on how they actually perform their work processes. (Note that the ministry is already working on SAMS issues with senior managers from the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association [OMSSA]).

We will do everything possible to provide feedback that will result in concrete improvements to system design and functionality.

Selecting members for the working group

Initially, SSWCC had come up with a structured way of soliciting volunteers for the group, but we have scaled things back to accommodate the limited meeting time.

However, we will do our best to ensure a broad cross-section of CUPE participants, taking into consideration factors like geographical representation and years of frontline experience.

Specifically, we are looking for members whose responsibilities include determining eligibility for OW applications and provide ongoing support to recipients (e.g. caseworker, SME, LBE).

If members are interested in participating, locals are asked to submit their names and job titles to Uliana Siniavskaia at CUPE's regional office (usiniavskaia@cupe.ca).

Members selected for the working group must have requests for union leave submitted by their locals; everyone should be in Toronto and ready to meet at 8:30 am. The day's activities will end before 3:00 pm for travel home.

CUPE Ontario will pay for hotel accommodations; per diems and travel expenses will be reimbursed according to CUPE Ontario policy.

Working group: an alternative view

It has been suggested that, by offering no more than a three-hour meeting, CUPE members can assume that there is no provision for a follow-up meeting and that the working group is a mere public relations exercise.

Such suspicion is understandable, but it is incumbent on SSWCC committee members to investigate every avenue and build on each success, no matter how small. We would be remiss in our duties as representatives of our members if we made assumptions or closed doors prematurely. All the while, we can continue to apply political pressure and use the media to help us achieve our goals.

It's important to remember that, when you play the game, even though you may not win that particular round, a loss can help you figure out the strategies for the next time.

Dragon technology

In our face-to-face meeting with the minister, we raised the necessity of taking action immediately to make SAMS accessible with Dragon, the voice-activated software used by OW workers.

The minister responded with a promise that "the SAMS software vendor, IBM, is looking at these issues along with the company that provides Dragon technology and has already made progress in resolving this issue. We will continue to ensure that any technical issues are being addressed by IBM."

Post card campaign

Well done to the locals who made the "SAMS isn't working" post-card campaign such a success. The campaign ended on January 5 and we heard first-hand that it had the desired effect: Minister Helena Jaczek mentioned in the meeting on December 22 that she had been receiving large numbers of cards at her office.

Special thanks to the members who took time to share their SAMS experiences on the post cards; they helped make an impression that brought about such breakthroughs as the working group.

Window of opportunity for political action

CUPE members have been very clear: they want SDMT restored in Ontario Works. SAMS working group notwithstanding, we have to increase political pressure on our MPPs if we are going to make this happen.

MPPs will not return to the legislature until February 17 (after Family Day), so we can use the next few weeks organize some concrete actions by locals:

1. Special meeting between your MPP, the municipal committee chair for Ontario Works in your city/region, and local frontline workers: share with your MPP and the municipal chair the challenges that frontline workers face and problems for clients because of SAMS. CUPE to provide SAMS backgrounder, members' survey, town hall polling, letters to the minister, and working group status.

Our demand: MPP and municipal committee chair to send a letter to Minister Jaczek demanding resolution of these issues.

2. Deputation to municipal committees: liaise with municipal clerks to schedule deputation to committee. Locals may present existing CUPE data and request that the committee take their concerns to council and ask that that councillors and mayor send their concerns to Minister Jaczek.
3. OW office visits: locals and municipal committees to coordinate invitations to MPPs and Minister Jaczek for visits to OW offices and discussions about the impact of SAMS on clients and frontline workers.

CUPE can provide template invitation letters from Locals and MPPs and councils and all necessary supporting documents.

SAMS survey

By the end of November, over 1,000 CUPE members working in Ontario Works offices completed a survey on SAMS and its impact on frontline workers. The results were evidence of serious levels of concern, ranging from an impact on service quality, lack of effective training and health and safety issues. One of the most significant findings was that 93% of members wanted a return to SDMT in their workplaces.

Thanks to everyone who took time to complete the survey; the results help give a solid foundation to CUPE's claims when speaking to media and when presenting our demands to the ministry. See the final survey report [here](#).