



**REPORT TO:** Co-Chairs and Members of Public Health and Social Services Committee

**SUBJECT:** Celebrating 10 years of Niagara Region's LEAP Program

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

That this Committee recommends to Regional Council that this report be received for information.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) is celebrating its tenth anniversary in the Niagara region.
- LEAP was introduced by the provincial government in March of 1999 and implemented in Niagara in November 1999.
- The program provides education, employment and parenting supports to young parents in receipt of Ontario Works (OW).
- Graduation ceremonies will occur on June 29, 2009 with approximately 28 graduates who have successfully achieved their high school diploma or equivalency.
- As part of the OW program, each graduate will receive a \$500 LEAP Incentive to be used for his/her education or to invest in a RESP for their child(ren).

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications directly associated with this report. The LEAP program is provided within Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities' (SAEO) 2009 approved budget and is a component of OW Employment Assistance cost shared 80%/20% with the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS).

## **PURPOSE**

To provide Committee and Council with an update on the Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) program which was introduced by the provincial government in March of 1999 and implemented in Niagara in November 1999.

## **BACKGROUND**

With the proclamation of the *Ontario Works Act* in 1998, the provincial government committed to welfare reforms based on a five point blue print. The LEAP program was launched in 1999 as a response to one of the blue print commitments. The OW blue print focused on:

- Increasing family support payments for single parents;
- Increasing eligibility review and fraud controls;
- Ensuring youth and adolescent parents finish high school;
- Addressing addictions that are a barrier to employment; and
- Improving the literacy levels of OW recipients without a high school diploma.

Previous committee reports COM 63-1999, COM 51-2001 and COM 35-2006 have outlined Niagara's experience with the LEAP program over the past 10 years. Participation in the program is mandatory for 16-17 year old parents and voluntary for 18-25 year old parents who are in receipt of OW and who have not completed high school.

LEAP is cost shared 80%/20% with MCSS as part of Employment Assistance funding earned through achieving employment outcomes. Approximately \$465,000 supports LEAP participants annually which includes LEAP employment supports, the LEAP Graduation Incentive and LEAP child care.

### **Three Elements of LEAP**

#### Learning

The learning element of LEAP requires participants to regularly attend an educational program leading to a high school diploma or equivalent or attendance at a post secondary institution as a mature student. The OW guidelines also provide parents who successfully complete high school or equivalency with a \$500 incentive to be used toward their own or their child(ren)'s post secondary education.

#### Earning

LEAP participants have access to the full range of employment supports to develop employment skills and become job-ready. Young parents are able to receive job specific training and supports.

### Parenting and Child Development

The parenting and child development element of LEAP promotes healthy child development and supports parents to become better caregivers and educators for themselves and their children.

## **REPORT**

The LEAP average monthly caseload in 2008 was 132 and the year to date for 2009 is 123.

Currently three SAEO Casemanagers are assigned to LEAP. An individualized plan of action that encompasses the three program components of LEAP is developed with each participant. SAEO staff also facilitate linkages to community resources as LEAP participants transition from school to employment or further education. Community partners that often provide assistance to LEAP participants include Adolescent and Family Support Services Niagara, the District and Catholic School Boards, Public Health and Children's Services. In 2008, each month an average of 41% of LEAP participant's children received child care supports through Children's Services, 52% did not require child care and 7% accessed informal child care supports<sup>1</sup>.

When compared to Ontario, 3.1% more of Niagara's total population has a high school diploma<sup>2</sup>. This year, 28 LEAP participants will receive their high school diploma. Each graduate will receive a \$500 LEAP incentive to be used for his/her education or to invest in a RESP for their child(ren).

The following chart summarizes the past 5 years of graduates as a percentage of the average annual LEAP caseload:

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>#OF GRADUATES</b>	<b>% LEAP CASELOAD</b>
2004	43	28%
2005	30	22%
2006	37	27%
2007	34	25%
2008	34	28%

The number and ages of LEAP graduates for 2009 in each community is as follows:

<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<b>NUMBER OF GRADUATES</b>	<b>AGE RANGE</b>
Welland /Port Colborne	8	19-23
Niagara Falls/Fort Erie	9	18-24
St.Catharines/Thorold	11	18-25

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, the average monthly number of LEAP children was 138.

<sup>2</sup> Niagara Workforce Planning Board. Niagara's Labour Market in Transition. March 2009 p9

LEAP's primary goal is to assist young parents to complete high school and receive parenting supports. The program recognizes that the completion of high school by young parents is the essential first step they take toward achieving economic self-sufficiency and securing a positive future for their children. Research shows that "average earnings for a lone parent mother with some form of post-secondary education are 103% greater than for a lone parent mother without a high school diploma<sup>3</sup>. In order to encourage LEAP graduates to pursue post-secondary education, the 2009 Niagara Region Bursary Fact Sheet will be included in graduation packages. Through approval of COM 23-2008, Regional Council supported the investment of \$50,000 of the Council Business Plan funds to re-establish the *Low-income Household Bursary Program* for youth living in low-income households to access post-secondary education. In 2008, this investment provided 107 bursaries to low income youth living in Niagara. Applications for the bursary will be accepted over the summer and results reported back to Public Health and Social Services Committee in September.

Submitted by:

Approved by:

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Brian Hutchings  
Commissioner, Community Services

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Mike Trojan  
Chief Administrative Officer

*This report was prepared by Wendy Stewart, Manager and reviewed by Sarah Pennisi, Director Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities.*

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<sup>3</sup> Ontario Association of Food Banks. The Cost of Poverty. November 2008. p 23