

Training For Child and Family Services

Prepared for the
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

June, 1997

Introduction

In November 1994, following an extensive public consultation process, Alberta's Commissioner of Services for Children announced a new initiative for services for children in a document titled: "Focus on Children; a plan for effective, integrated community services for children and their families". This new plan is based on four "pillars":

- Integrated Services
- Community Based Services
- Improved Services to Aboriginal People
- Focus on Early Intervention.

Reflecting the second pillar, the details of the plan have been developed at the local and regional levels. Local Working Groups have assembled plans which are being used to prepare Preliminary Service Plans for the eighteen regions (coinciding with the seventeen health regions plus Métis Settlements) throughout Alberta. Most of these Preliminary Service Plans are now in the process of review and approval at the provincial level. The regional service plans will probably be finalized and approved in the Spring of 1998. Once these plans are approved, the government will establish Child and Family Services Authorities in each region. These authorities will then oversee the implementation of their regions' service plans.

For this report we interviewed facilitators in each of the Regions in the Clearinghouse area (regions 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18). We asked them about the most significant changes that they expected in services for children and about the employment and training implications of those changes. The development of service plans is an ongoing process. As a result, this report provides a preliminary look ahead at the likely training needs in this field. Particular training opportunities will be best determined by colleges working in conjunction with regional authorities.

Changes in Services

All of the facilitators with whom we spoke agreed that the new Child and Family Services will be very different from the current Social Services and Child Welfare systems. When asked what the greatest changes would be, respondents generally described aspects of the four "pillars" mentioned above

- Integrated Services.
Facilitators stressed that this was not simply a matter of different agencies and departments coordinating their efforts. When dealing with children and their families, professionals and others involved in justice, social services, education, health and other agencies will have to work together toward commonly recognized goals. This will require people to "step outside of their boxes"; expand their range of skills and learn to work in different environments than they are used to. Many facilitators referred to the "holistic" nature of this approach.

- **Community Based Services.**
Many people in communities throughout the province will play direct roles in the planning and delivery of local services. The current, “top down” form of policy-making will be replaced by a community-based, “bottom-up” process.
- **Emphasis on Early Intervention**
Whereas the current system seems to focus on crisis management, the new Child and Family Services will help families to avoid crises by providing support before family problems become critical.
- **Improved Services to Aboriginal People**
Aboriginal people will be involved in the planning and delivery of services to their own communities. This is expected to be a significant improvement over a system in which outside authorities have taken action in Native communities with no local input.

Overall, the new system will involve whole communities in providing wide range of services addressing children’s physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Children are to be viewed not only as individuals but also as members of families and communities.

Implications for Employment

Most of those interviewed found it difficult to be precise about the job opportunities in the new Child and Family Services. Any estimate of employment numbers would be contingent on funding, which is also in the process of being determined. Facilitators did raise several points, however:

- There will be a need for people with a broader range of skills than most in the field have now.
- There will be many job opportunities for Aboriginal people with training in social work and related fields.
- There will be a need for professionals to work within an educational setting.
- Facilitators identified likely employment for people with credentials ranging from diplomas to Master of Social Work (M.S.W.) degrees. Most of the demand would appear to be at the diploma or Bachelor of Social Work (B.S.W.) level, though additional course work will be valuable. There is also a shortage of child psychologists in the region.
- Even with the emphasis on delivery of services to Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people, many professionals and others will find themselves working in cross-cultural settings. In such situations there will be a need for skilled translators.

Implications for Training

There is a wide range of training implications arising from the plans for Child and Family Services. Many of the training opportunities identified are for short courses and after-diploma or degree programs. While facilitators in each region had their own particular views, there was some consensus on several training needs.

- *Cross-cultural training.*
Along with a significant Aboriginal population, the Clearinghouse region is home to Mennonite and Hutterite communities, as well as to members of other ethnic minorities. People working in this field will need to be trained to recognize and work with the different concepts of family held by the various cultures found in the region.
- *Cross-discipline training*
Professionals and para-professionals in a number of fields will find themselves working together under the new plans for children's services. They will have to learn to operate outside of their usual working culture. Some form of training to help them to make this adjustment would be useful
- *Training for board members.*
This will be needed throughout northern Alberta and elsewhere as new regional board members will need to understand their roles in the structure.

Other training issues may have been mentioned by only one or two facilitators but are nonetheless likely to present opportunities for northern colleges.

- Some training will also be needed for a range of professionals to make them aware of the issues and the resources involved in Child and Family Services.
- The difficulty of retaining professionals in the north creates a market for professional development courses that can be delivered locally. This would encourage professionals to stay in the region.
- There will be an increased demand for professional and para-professional training to be made available in Aboriginal communities in the North. People will need training in a full range of areas including: social work, child care, justice, health and early intervention.
- Language training will be valuable for people working in cross-cultural settings.
- People working in communities should be trained to deal specifically with children suffering from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.
- The many people involved in Services for Children and Families would benefit from some training in teamwork related specifically to this field.

- Many graduates of B.S.W. programs have not been trained to work in rural and northern settings. Post-degree courses in this area would be helpful.
- Much of the essence of the new plans for Services for Children lies in developing the strengths of communities. As a result, training in community development would be useful for many professionals. One facilitator made specific mention of the McKnight model of asset-based needs assessment.

Comments Regarding Training

Most of the facilitators with whom we spoke made general comments on the design and delivery of training for Child and Family Services. The most important point was that post-secondary institutions must work with those preparing the service plans. Just as the services provided to families are to be based on the needs of the family rather than on the structure of the system; training for this field must be designed to fit the needs of the people working in it.

Many people also stressed the importance of local delivery of courses. Personnel in many remote communities will not have the time to travel for training. This will make distance delivery and the presentation of short seminars in smaller centres highly valuable to those working in this field.

The change in the direction of services for children will also affect the content of social work programs at all levels. Early intervention and a more holistic approach to delivery will have to be integral parts of all such programs. In addition, Theoretical training will have to be balanced with practical experience.

Comments Regarding Aboriginal Communities

As with all communities, local Aboriginal input into the planning and delivery of training programs related to Child and Family Services is essential. Traditional ways of healing and traditional approaches to family life will have to be part of training for anyone working with Aboriginal communities. One specific suggestion was for leadership and public-speaking courses to be designed and delivered from an Aboriginal perspective. Native and non-Native cultures treat personal interactions differently and these differences must be recognized if such training is to be effective.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing post-secondary institutions in working with Native communities will be finding a balance between the flexibility needed to address the students' needs and the academic rigour needed in order for the training to provide graduates with widely-recognized credentials.

Summary

There are many potential training opportunities arising from the plans for Services for Children and Families. Some of the opportunities are listed here but these and others will best be realized through colleges working hand-in-hand with regional authorities and with the communities that make up the various regions.

The need for local delivery of courses and programs suggests that the Alberta North system could be put to good use serving needs in this area.

Many of the educational needs expressed in this field involve university-level programs and courses. This presents an opportunity for northern institutions to form partnerships with universities for the delivery of courses in northern communities.

Sources

Alberta Commissioner of Services for Children, “Focus on Children; a plan for effective, integrated community services for children and their families”, November, 1994.

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