

# FROM OTTAWA TO NORTH BAY BONNECHERE REACHES OUT

**W**e're hoping to get the unemployed trained with new skill sets so they can better compete in this new and ever-changing labour market," explains Maria Pelletier, employment referral and training officer for Bonnechere Algonquin Community's employment unit. Bonnechere, the newest installment to the O-GI family, will serve the Aboriginal communities of Pembroke, Petawawa, Renfrew, Eganville and Amprior. "Members and others know we're a resource for them in the community and, depending on their need, can better direct them to other agencies or services to help them in whatever situation they find themselves," she adds.



Maria Pelletier, employment referral and training officer, Bonnechere Employment Unit

Located in Petawawa near the Ottawa River, Bonnechere supplies counselling and employment services to the Non-Status Aboriginal communities in the area. "This area overall has a higher unemployment rate, and again the program will help our unemployed clients get the training and skills they couldn't afford to purchase on their own," explains Maria.

Since its opening in the third week of January, they've seen a good turnout. "The clients I have worked with have been very positive about our services...youth, the unemployed or underemployed now have resources that weren't available to them before." After assessing client's needs and objectives the unit's

staff provide the support to help them move forward in their employment and training goals. The unit also provides referrals for those wanting to start their own business.

Being the only employment unit between Ottawa and North Bay has been the greatest challenge they've faced so far. To combat such a large geographical region they've focused on getting the word out by mailing brochures, partnering with other organizations and trying to get media coverage. Maria contacts area organization and groups in

between her duties but says she likes to stay focused on her clients. "If they're not serviced, the program cannot achieve what it has been designed to do."

Unlike many employment units, Bonnechere has the unique opportunity of being situated next to the Petawawa Canadian Forces Base. Maria hopes to meet in the near future to discuss mutual points of interest. "I would like to see our relationship continue as a mutually beneficial one. I'm hoping they may be able to hire on some of our youth during the summer."

After a successful start, Bonnechere is hoping to keep up the progress and provide the best possible service to their clients. "We have all the O-GI programs available to us and we're trying to apply whatever programs we can to support our clients," says Maria.

## NEW AGREEMENT BRINGS NEW PRIORITIES

**I**t's a whole new agreement, a whole new process," says Heather Leveque, policy director for the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC). After year-long negotiations, O-GI stands on the threshold of a new four year agreement which will usher in new work priorities.

"It's a more accountable approach to programming," explains Leveque, adding that the changes will help to streamline programs. O-GI sites will now have specific priorities through which they'll focus their work. Among a host of priorities, O-GI will focus on gearing programs towards young parents, Aboriginal women, literacy efforts, and youth.

"Many of our clients are young people with children and a lot of our programs

aren't really geared towards them," she says. On top of a lack of focused programming, urban AHRDAs are not eligible for child care funds. According to Leveque, a lot of O-GI clients are young people who need to work and want to work but can't find income to support themselves while they upgrade their skills or search for employment.

Literacy among clients has also become a priority for O-GI. "Many clients have literacy issues which are not being addressed," says Leveque. "Oftentimes people who work in employment and training centres do not have the time to sit down and do a literacy assessment."

While youth have always been a main focus, Leveque says, with the new priorities O-GI will try to target key issues

affecting young people today. There are a lot of ongoing youth-specific programs, but centres are often too employment and training specific without addressing issues like illiteracy or youth being pushed out of school. "I think the changes will help clients, and I hope that the sites will embrace this new approach," states Leveque who realizes there will be challenges to reprioritizing.

Aside from changes to centres, O-GI will also be facing a major change in staffing. O-GI will now be reducing the program coordinator positions to two and creating a program analyst position. This position will look specifically at data to see where programs are working and where changes need to be made. Program coordinators have previously been covering this duty but with the new position Leveque says, there won't be anything to take their focus off of program development. "I think it will really help in the long run. It will certainly help us meet our goals."

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