

# **Fred Wien - Some Ideas About Best Practices Delivering Social Assistance to First Nations Persons Living on Reserve.**

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While our social assistance research project has conducted some interviews among First Nations in different parts of Canada, our most in-depth work has been with the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) First Nations of the Maritime provinces. In the course of the research, we have come across some “best practices” that they have adopted or that they have learned about from provincial authorities. I will summarize some key insights in this presentation. This is not intended to be a laundry list but rather a stimulus for discussion later this afternoon.

## **1. The Importance of recognizing the diversity of social the assistance population.**

Stereotypes and misconceptions about the social assistance population abound among the general public and even among those charged with developing policy and programs. A common misconception, for example, is that most people on “social” are unemployed but able to work, leading then to policies designed to encourage/force labour market participation – policies that are then applied across the board. Yet many people on social assistance fall into other categories and employment may not be an option for them, even if jobs were available. They may have serious health issues, for example, including activity limitations. They may be retired, waiting for a seasonal job to restart, going to school or looking after young children at home.

Even those on assistance who are deemed to be employable are not, in many cases, outside the labour market. As Table 1 below, shows, for example, almost half the adults receiving social assistance on reserve in the 2008-10 period in Nova Scotia were looking for work. More than half had some employment or self-employment income during the course of the year, and almost two-thirds pieced together an annual income from more than one source.

## Who is on assistance?

Indicator	Receiving assistance	Not receiving
Working for pay	26.4	67.2
Looking for work	47.9	35.4
Employment or self-employment income	52.0	78.0
More than one income source	62.2	48.9

Source: First Nation Regional Health Survey for Nova Scotia, 2008-10. Union of Nova Scotia Indians.

Some may be young, single individuals without dependents, others are single parents or have partners with children. Some are on assistance a short period of time, others for longer and some are part of an inter-generational pattern of assistance. The point is that there is considerable diversity and First Nations require the flexibility and resources to tailor programs and support services to their particular clientele. Social Development Administrators (SDA's) working on reserve haven't had either the staffing or program resources to meet these different needs. If up to 50 per cent of the adults on reserve are relying on SA for some or all of their income, issuing cheques to people takes up all of their time.

### **2. Improved record keeping**

Current record-keeping on social assistance clients is understandably designed from an administrative standpoint, designed to provide information about the number of clients, whether they have dependents, what benefits are provided, and similar requirements. Yet, records that are filled in routinely by SDA's could be so much more interesting and helpful. How long has someone been on assistance and what is their pattern? Is it intergenerational? Under what circumstances did they get in a situation where assistance became necessary? Under what circumstances were they able to leave their dependence behind? What supports helped them to make this transition? Answers to questions such as these, documented in records, would allow SDA's and their First Nations to have a much better understanding of the cause and remedies for social assistance dependence.

### **3. Implementing culturally appropriate programming**

In our on-reserve interviews in the Maritimes, including conversations with the SDA's, we heard of many instances of culturally relevant practices being introduced, or at least people were expressing aspirations to do so. Examples included the following:

- Building on Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik rights to hunt, trap, fish and gather on a community level, communities are finding ways to make the bounty available to individual families, for example through the establishment of community freezers. This is an example of community-level measures that might also include other activities, such as the establishment of community gardens or kitchens. Distributing fish within the community caught for food, social and ceremonial purposes is another example of this pattern.
- Giving special attention for cultural reasons to the developmental needs of children, for example by including a child benefit on welfare cheques additional to what is available from the national Child Tax Benefit
- Supporting elders in the community by paying for their heat and lights, for example, or clearing their sidewalks in the wintertime. Since elders are not technically eligible for such support because they receive federal pensions, communities often rely on "own source revenues" for this purpose.
- Recognizing that Mi'kmaq and Wloastoqiyik people are traditionally quite mobile, moving or visiting from one reserve to another, or to off-reserve locations. Finding ways to support recipients even if they are not in one location need to be developed.
- One of the best adaptations of "social" for cultural and lifestyle reasons is the Cree Hunters and Trappers Income Security Program. Created in 1970s as part of James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement, hunters and trappers who are significantly engaged in that activity during the year are allowed to earn revenue from the product and also receive a payment that allows them to have a year-round income and continue this traditional practice.

#### **4. Clients need a rich array of programs to help them succeed**

Research is demonstrating that persons are much more likely to leave social assistance behind if they have an array of coordinated programming to support their efforts. Our research in the Maritimes demonstrates that clients living on reserve do not have access to the range and richness of programs that provinces make available to their recipients. Yet, when the Harper government was demanding after 2011 that First Nation communities have the same level of benefits and eligibility requirements as provincial, it showed little interest in insuring there was also comparability in ancillary programs.

We undertook a detailed analysis of this question in New Brunswick, for example, and came to the following conclusions:

Our research identified 113 programs offered by New Brunswick government that were relevant and available to its social assistance clients. Of that number.

- Only 14-17% of provincial programs were available to persons living on reserve
- In 25% of the cases, there was no similar program available on reserve
- About 22% of the programs were marginally comparable, or it was hard to tell
- Between 39 and 46% of the programs were reasonably comparable

There is another difference as well. Some social departments, as in New Brunswick, are able to offer their own array of programs to clients through the department itself. This has some significant advantages in that programs and services can be tailored to the social assistance population rather than the latter having to fit in to programs offered by other departments to a broader range of clients. In contrast, on reserve, the social department is basically geared up to issue cheques and address special needs. It needs to negotiate with other, separate departments if it wants to do anything else.

#### **5. Delivering programs in an integrated manner: case management**

Directors of programs on reserve and their clients often complain about the lack of coordination in program delivery, with each service provider just concerned with their own area of responsibility and clients having to go to multiple locations to have their needs met. Yet available research shows that providing services in an integrated, coordinated manner does yield better results. One expression of this approach is case management, which starts with the client expressing his/her goals and needs, a careful assessment of strengths and barriers being conducted, and service providers indicating how they can contribute to the overall package. Coordination may be achieved by having the client meet with relevant service providers in the same room, or by a coordinator assembling the desired constellation.

The New Brunswick Social Development Department has made a major investment in this approach starting in the mid-1990s and claims to have achieved a major reduction in their social assistance caseload—some 43 per cent in the first decade. It is encouraging to see that Indigenous Services Canada is starting to support case management for the on-reserve social assistance program, as well as the provision of pre-employment services. However, this initiative is still being ramped up and its longer-term funding is not secure.

#### **6. Recognizing there are real disincentives to undertake training and employment.**

For at least some clients, there are real disincentives for leaving “social” and entering training and employment programs. This is not the case for everyone. For a young person on assistance, a minimum wage, entry-level job that provides an introduction to the labour force can seem to be an attractive proposition, especially if they do not have dependents are not paying much in

the way of housing and utility costs. Even here, though, supportive programming is helpful. One of the Wolastopiyik First Nations included in our project, for example, makes it a requirement for young people living on reserve to engage in career planning, and also to work for a time in the community's service sector establishments in order to obtain work experience.

On the other hand, someone on assistance who is in charge of a household and supporting dependents as well as receiving other necessary benefits won't see it the same way. One should not be surprised if they do not show much interest in training for or starting a low-wage, low future job because they would lose hundreds of dollars in housing, utility and child benefits within a short time of leaving assistance.

There are some ways around this dilemma, in addition to adopting policies that phase out benefits gradually. In one Mi'kmaq community, the First Nation has negotiated with a fish plant located some distance away to provide jobs for reserve residents. The First Nation has a bus that transports workers back and forth, and their wages are paid through the First Nation, thereby avoiding income tax deductions. Another approach would be to aim higher, that is to provide longer-term education and training while being on assistance so that at least some clients are qualified to take up higher paying jobs with better benefits.

## **7. Tackling real barriers to people being successful**

In addition to the disincentive effect, social assistance recipients living on reserve face a number of other serious barriers to undertaking training and employment. Programs need to be developed to tackle these.

The lack of transportation is one case in point. We are working with one Mi'kmaq community, for example, to address the transportation issue. While the community is located only about 60 km. from an urban area, high levels of poverty mean that many cannot afford the costs associated with driving. These include driver education and licensing fees, the cost of buying and insuring a car, dealing with fines that may have accumulated, and so on. When we developed a project to address some of these issues, we were amazed at the level of interest in participating in the project.

## **8. Conclusion**

These are some of the "best practice" ideas that emerged from our research in the Maritimes, and I hope that they stimulate further discussion this afternoon. Longer-term, they may be of interest as First Nations in the Maritimes and beyond set about having a greater say in social policy on reserve, perhaps even in regaining control over this important area.