

## **Multiple Barriers Presentation – Cranbrook, BC     June 28, 2012**

Over the past several years, I have had many conversations with people living and working in First Nation Communities about the barriers to employment that people face. Although my focus in assisting Treaty 7 started as a focus on job seekers with disabilities, this focus – and the focus of Treaty 7 has evolved and adapted to becoming a focus on job seekers with Multiple Barriers to Employment. This natural progression has happened for a number of reasons.

First Nations Career Centre Staff often see the symptoms of a disability but they have no verification or diagnosis of the disability and the client often (because of shame and stigma) doesn't disclose the disability - even if they are aware of it.

Many disabilities are 'invisible.' Brain injuries, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress, Diabetes and learning disabilities are just a few examples of issues which affect First Nations People; issues which affect a person's ability to find and maintain work but which can't necessarily be seen. Due to the limited resources available on-nation, these issues are often not even diagnosed. Career Centre Staff often suspect that a client is affected by a disability but they can't acquire the verification of disability without interventions, assessments and diagnoses - which are not easy to acquire.

Given the rarity of formal diagnoses for individuals living in First Nations Communities – and the many other issues and barriers faced by Aboriginal / First Nations job-seekers, focusing on Multiple Barriers to Employment makes a lot more sense than limiting our focus to disability. A Multiple Barrier focus is more inclusive, has less stigma – and it recognizes the truth – that most people with barriers to employment have several barriers – not just a disability. This approach would recognize the actual barriers of people being served and improve our representation of the actual staffing and resource needs to our funders. People who possess more than one of the following barriers are described as possessing multiple barriers to employment,

-persistent medical conditions, addictions, disability, limited education, limited work experience, mental health or emotional issues, poverty, transportation issues, homelessness etc.

Virtually everyone being served by Career Centres possesses 'multiple barriers to employment.'

Another issue which constantly arises in consultations with First Nations Employment Staff is that of 'Systemic Barriers' and that of First Nations Communities which are Economically Depressed. First Nations Communities in Southern Alberta are large rural areas with limited infrastructure and resources. They have high rates of poverty and unemployment as well as limited employment opportunities. Young people aren't growing up in economically vibrant communities where they see a wide range of work options and job opportunities. The communities are economically isolated and economically depressed. Income support is often a more visible option than job opportunities.

If we want 1000 people off income support but there are only 100 new jobs per year in the community – that's a problem. Where will 90% of the job seekers go to work? Do they have to leave their community and their people just to have a job? What are the answers? What is our path?

**Recommendations – New Directions:**

1. Invest in an **increased level of coaching, counseling and support** for Aboriginal Job-Seekers with barriers to employment in order to facilitate employment successes which are **sustainable** and meet the **personal** dreams and goals of the job-seekers. Increased resources will allow Career Centre staff to increase support and outcomes. These individual job successes will be talked about in the community and will promote employment participation as a good choice for people.
2. Encourage and support culturally sensitive economic development and self-employment initiatives on-nation in order to increase employment opportunities for people in their own communities. There must be an increase in jobs in order for there to be a decrease in poverty. Programs which nurture development of work-skills and generate competencies and interest in entrepreneurship must be developed as well. (Supported, group-based self-employment for youth teaches skills and accountability and provides a degree of accommodation that traditional employment does not).