

Creating New Purpose: The Use of Guiding Circles in Social Development

The picture is bleak for some British Columbia First Nations communities – 90 per cent unemployment, a history of dependency on social assistance and an annual turnover of 40 per cent in the stressed workers that deliver the income assistance program.

It's a monster-sized social issue to tackle but it's one that the First Nations Social Development Society is taking on.

“The mindset has to change – from a ‘right to money’ to a vision of change,” says Rene Beauchamp, program manager for British Columbia’s First Nations Social Development Society (FNSDS). “We’re trying to build capacity, reduce dependency and make income assistance as smooth and efficient as it can be. We are in the business to be out of business...we’re encouraging our clients to get a job,” he adds.

The FNSDS is a not-for-profit society that represents the Band Social Development Workers of British Columbia (BSDW).

The FNSDS is also involved in consultation with a number of federal and provincial government agencies as well as Aboriginal organizations to promote accountability and sustainability for BC First Nations. The organization administers income assistance on-reserve for British Columbia First Nations communities and provides social development worker training.

“We have two levels of training for our social development workers – basic and a second level that gives the workers the ability to identify client needs and make referrals to other services,” says Beauchamp. “We don’t try to replace already-existing employment workers...our goal is to assess, inspire, refer,” Beauchamp adds.

As part of the social development worker’s toolkit, the *Guiding Circles* career discovery program has been added to help “create a conversation” with clients in the hopes of identifying personal strengths and talents.

“It’s like grabbing a thread that can guide a person to self-awareness,” says Beauchamp. Although First Nations people are driven by values, they may not be aware of it. *Guiding Circles* helps to put values in priority and creates an awareness of how they impact your well-being and self-expression,” he says.

By combining traditional Aboriginal teachings with contemporary career exercises, the *Guiding Circles* program awakens a participant’s sense of self-esteem. Through specific activities, participants are able to relate their individual life experiences to career planning – allowing them to make choices based on natural talents and interests. The story-telling activities also help to establish personal vision and to help set goals.

“Sometimes, we have a resistance to look at ourselves,” says Beauchamp. The program guides you to look at social, personal and family values...because these beliefs guide everything that you do.”

The society has been using the *Guiding Circles* program on a limited basis but hopes to include its techniques in more of its initiatives in the future.

“We see a stronger role for it...*Guiding Circles* is a tool that gives the workers a way of interacting with clients in a more meaningful way,” says Beauchamp. “Out of that experience comes the ability to visualize a new future. There is great value in having values objectified,” he adds.

Currently, *Guiding Circles* training is provided to social development workers with “no expectations” for its use but, as Beauchamp notes, people are using it and finding it very helpful.

“We want to employ it more through our active measures program – to create services, on the reserves, where none existed before,” he says.

To date, approximately 180 workers have been trained to use the *Guiding Circles* career discovery program. Those workers are assigned to First Nations reserves across the province of British Columbia.

To learn more about how you or your organization can get involved with *Guiding Circles* visit aboriginalhr.ca or call 1.866.711.5091.