

On the Road to Employment: A Pre-Employment Program for Women

Antigonish Women's Resource Centre
Antigonish, Nova Scotia

1a. Overview of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

Mission, objectives, and principle activities

The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) is an independent, feminist, community-based organization providing information, support services and programs for women of all ages and backgrounds in an environment that is sensitive to women's needs. Using a multi-faceted approach, the Centre takes action on issues of concern to women and their families through direct service, community development, education and research.

Programs and services offered through AWRC include women-centred, client-directed crisis counseling, short- and long-term support, information, advocacy, accompaniment and referrals, facilitated therapy and support programs, information and educational programming, in-school programs, programs to assist low-income women, and support groups or informal discussion groups. The Centre also houses a library of print and resource materials and provides volunteer and workplace experience.

Women and adolescent girls come to the Centre for help with a wide range of issues including economic well-being (such as poverty, homelessness, budgeting, bankruptcy, employment, social assistance and transportation); physical and mental health (addictions, pregnancy, anger management, eating disorders, depression and stress management), violence-related issues (women abuse, sexual assault and sexual abuse), family and social relationships (parenting or family dysfunction), legal rights (divorce and separation, legal aid, custody and access and maintenance enforcement) and education and equity issues (education access, employment equity, student loans and disabilities). These issues are either addressed directly, through individual counseling, support, advocacy and/or referral or through the creation of programs and support groups.

Understanding the challenges and barriers women face, combined with experience working directly with the community, makes the Centre a respected voice in community development work. The AWRC is a critical and unique link in the network of community agencies and government service providers—it is known, locally and throughout the province, as an initiator of and positive contributor to initiatives that address issues of concerns to women. Educating the larger community and facilitating community awareness about issues of concern to women is also an essential part of their work. As well, the AWRC undertakes participatory and action research that enhances and supports this work.

Participants

Women using Centre services represent a diverse group—they may live in the Town of Antigonish or come from the adjacent rural areas. They represent a wide range of ages and education levels and include women of diverse cultural backgrounds such as First Nations, Acadian and African Nova Scotian communities. Many are challenged by barriers of poverty, abuse and of raising children on their own.

A primary focus of the AWRC is to support women living in poverty and to help eliminate poverty. Poverty keeps women and their children marginalized, stigmatized, dependent and vulnerable to violence and abuse. The AWRC works to address poverty on many levels—by working with individual women on the barriers and challenges they face daily and by helping them find ways to move forward with their goals of economic and personal independence. The Center also works with different levels of government to raise awareness of the issues which surround poverty and to affect policy change towards its elimination.

Financial status

The Nova Scotia Department of Community Services (DCS) currently provides core funding for the AWRC. Additional funding is secured on a project-by-project basis from a variety of other funders such as Human Resource Development Canada (HRDC) and Status of Women Canada, among others.

In April 2002, the Province of Nova Scotia cut \$890,000 from the budgets of transition houses, women's centers and men's intervention programs. Neither the budget cut nor the *Family Violence System Redesign Plan* (used by the Department to support its rationale for the proposed cut) had been discussed in advance with any of the eight Women's Centers in Nova Scotia. After considerable public protest, these cuts were put on hold and temporary funding was provided to allow providers to submit revised plans for service delivery. In May 2003, after an extensive series of meetings and negotiations, a coalition of representatives from Women's Centres, transition houses and men's programs presented a *Planning Report* to DCS. The report recommended core services, service improvements, cost efficiencies and opportunities for collaboration and cooperation.

Because Women's Centers provide community-based services distinct from transition houses, a coalition of Women's Center representatives worked, at the same time, to develop their own planning document for the DCS. This report summarized the unique needs and approaches of the Centres and their participants.

Negotiation with the Department for adequate and long-term core funding is ongoing.

1b. Overview of the pre-employment program—*On the Road to Employment* *Mission, objectives and activities*

On the Road to Employment is an 18-week, pre-employment program offered by the AWRC for women facing barriers to employment. The goal of the program is to provide women with the means of participating fully and successfully in the economic and social life of Nova Scotia by increasing their employability. As well, the program aims to provide women with the information and support they need to develop realistic, attainable and time-specific employment goals and career plans.

For many women, gaining access to further education or sustainable employment is a daunting task—especially when their lives are complicated by poverty, single parenting, family responsibilities, recovery from addictions, relationship changes, abuse or lack of education and current job skills. *On the Road to Employment* is a highly successful, holistic program from which more than 75 percent of participants find employment, continue their education or enter re-training programs.

I would tell a potential participant that this eighteen-week program might help change her life because there is so much offered. If she has barriers to employment, this program will help her break down those barriers so that she can make her life more manageable and begin to live the life she really deserves. The environment is supportive and safe. The facilitation, knowledge and skills are excellent. Everything she gets out of this program will be useful at home, school or work.

- Program participant

The program is broadly divided into two halves. The first half is devoted to developing life skills such as self-esteem, communication skills, anger and stress management, parenting support, assertiveness and healthy living. The second half builds upon the first by providing practical skill development aimed at increasing employability. The job readiness component provides training and certificates in First Aid and CPR, WHIMS, Occupational Health and Safety, SuperHost, Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR) and Non-Violent Crisis Intervention. Skills are also developed in career goal identification, basic computer skills, resume writing and cover letters, interview techniques and job search skills. There is also a Course Shadowing component wherein women attend a nearby campus of the Nova Scotia Community College to become more familiar with the courses offered, the site and course expectations.

On the Road to Employment is held on-site at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre on the main street of the Town of Antigonish. Locating the program in the Centre allows participants to access to the supports and services provided there and establishes better communication links between program and Centre staff. It also allows many women to become more familiar with the heart of primary employment in the area—the Town of Antigonish. Support from Centre staff is kept separate from the curriculum, although Centre core staff deliver components of the program. This integrated approach helps participants to feel more comfortable in accessing the spectrum of Centre services.

Participants

The program involves 10 to 12 participants over the course of its 18-week duration. It is offered twice each year—from September to January and again from January to June. Held from Monday to Friday between the hours of 9 am to 2:30 pm, the program minimizes childcare costs as many children are in school during these periods. The program facilitator works a total of 24-weeks to prepare, deliver and evaluate their work together. This work is enhanced when there is a mixed group of participants—women from a variety of backgrounds, income and education levels, ages and home communities. There is one unifying factor, over 90 percent of the participants are challenged by poverty.

Funding

On the Road to Employment was first developed in 1999 as a re-entry readiness program with funding through a memorandum of understanding between the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services and HRDC. Although the program is highly successful, core funding is not available. Program funding must be sourced each year. Funding has been obtained from HRDC through a variety of programs—the Employment Assistance program, the Labour Market Development Agreement (LMDA) Early Years, and LMDA Literacy. The program focus or participant mix must change to accommodate funding and eligibility requirements. Funding is used to hire a program coordinator and life skills facilitator, to pay such administrative and overhead costs as rent, materials and supplies and to provide childcare and transportation subsidies. Each program costs approximately \$90,000.

Partnerships

Partnerships and collaborations are essential to the success of the program. These take a variety of forms—from participants on the program Advisory Committee, to workshop facilitators for life skills and employability components of the program. The Advisory Committee was formed to provide support and to offer guidance about program implementation and evaluation, to hear progress reports and to resolve problems. Members of the Advisory Committee include representatives from AWRC, St. Francis Xavier University, DCS, the Antigonish-Guysborough Black Development Association and a former participant. The program has informal partnerships and draws from a variety of community-based skills and services—such as the Nova Scotia Community College, Public Health Services, DCS, Antigonish County Adult Learning Association (ACALA), the Pictou Antigonish Regional Library, Addictions Services, Antigonish Career Resource Centre and Mental Health Services.

4. Lessons Learned

Keys to success

On the Road to Employment is a successful program in a number of ways and for a variety of reasons. The program takes place within the supportive atmosphere of a Women's Centre, allowing participants to access Centre services and supports and providing enhanced communication between staff members and participants. As well, it introduces the women to the primary place of employment—the Town of Antigonish—and the supports and services available there. Because the program is based in an existing Centre, with administrative and program supports and services, it allows for greater focus on the women and the curriculum, making it more effective.

Centre supports and services are kept separate from the curriculum of the pre-employment program. Core Centre staff deliver workshops for the program and so participants get to know then and feel comfortable with them, and individual problem solving can take place at the Centre. However, the curriculum is set and delivered in the classroom by the program facilitator. Integrating the program with core Centre services in this way allows for enhanced success.

The program is founded on the principles of adult education—learning must be practical, self-directed, seen as a shared responsibility and values the experiences and perspectives of the women taking part. It combines periods of skills work with life skills components. A variety of methods are used to engage participants—such as a weekly news reviews, guest speakers or videos, presentations, group and individual work, weekly themes and Friday fun activities. The day begins with an inspirational reading and often ends with a meditation period.

The groups are kept small—allowing the women to break down barriers, form personal friendships and eliminating the formation of sub-groups that can be detrimental to group dynamics.

On the Road to Employment is challenging—staff have high expectations for each woman to work to the best of her ability. The facilitators provide absolute support. This combination of support and expectations motivates women to achieve things they never thought possible. The women carry with them a sense of accomplishment that gives them the courage and confidence to go forward in their lives. The high quality of staffing for the program, enhanced by the ability to retain staff through several sessions, also contributes greatly to success.

Recognizing the complicated realities of women's lives by providing transportation and childcare subsidies, as well as holding the sessions during school hours, is clearly essential to success.

Program evaluations monitor participants' progress and demonstrates the effective elements of the program. Seventy-five to eighty percent of their past participants go on to further education, training or employment. Through these evaluations, participants were asked to compare their level of knowledge or skill at the start of the program with their skill at the end of the program in six key

areas—self-awareness/self-esteem, communication skills, computer skills, goal setting, job seeking skills and knowledge of community resources. All participants noted significant improvement in these areas.

Participants identified many program strengths and, most notably, stressed the importance of an all-women group to maximize their learning. Although participants thought that all of the program components were crucial, they underscored the importance of the life skills component in the first half of the program. Incorporating life skills into the program increased self-confidence and motivation for learning. This enabled them to proceed, with confidence, to the more practical employment-related skills.

Without the life skills part of the program, I would not have completed the program. You have to get that strong sense of self-esteem before you can do the rest.

- Program participant

Obstacles to success

Successful completion of the program does not eliminate the complicated realities, challenges and struggles facing women as they try to go back to school or to gain employment. For example, a young single mother on Social Assistance, who took part in the program, was determined to attend university. However, in doing so, she was denied Assistance and struggled through her classes without food or income. The Centre and staff were there to help her and to provide on-going support as best they could, but the systemic supports she needed to provide for herself and her family did not exist. Unfortunately, the undervaluing and lack of respect for women's work, as well as systemic barriers facing women trying to get out of poverty or living with abuse, do not go away for women completing the pre-employment program. ←

Sourcing core funding for the Women's Centre and on-going funding for the pre-employment program is a major obstacle. Each year, Centre staff struggle to find the money to run the program. As discussed earlier, operational funding for Women's Centres by DCS was cut significantly, a cut which was later 'put on hold.' A plan was presented to the Department by Women's Centres in Nova Scotia, but there has, of yet, been no official response. More women are coming to Women's Centres for direct services, and there has been a great increase in the demand for re-entry programs such as *On the Road to Employment*. Current core funding levels of \$100,000 for Women's Centres does not cover the crisis support services needed, and, given the increasing demand for services, Women's Centres like the AWRC are chronically under-funded.

This climate of uncertainty and financial insecurity makes it hard to operate at both the program and organizational level. Although funds for the pre-employment program have all come through HRDC in the past, they must be channeled through changing 'priorities.' HRDC funding does not allow for continuous operation of such a program. This means changing the requirements for the program to meet funding requisites. It also means considerable

administrative time is spent in writing and negotiating short-term program contracts and summary reports.

3. Women and CED

The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre is a community-based, feminist organization that is committed to creating a community in which women participate fully and see their values, beliefs and ways of working reflected in the philosophies, policies and structures that organize and inform the social, political and spiritual realms in which we live,

It is a non-profit organization run by an all-women board of directors and an all-women staff. Together, they offer services and supports to women and adolescent girls. For the past twenty years, the Centre has been working to address issues that women face every day—issues relating to poverty, violence, employment, education and re-training, housing, parenting and health. 

The *On the Road to Employment* program recognizes that learning employment-related skills alone does not necessarily help women find employment. Many women have lived in poverty or near-poverty, for most of their lives. This means that many women enter the program with a great deal of stress about their past and their hopes for the future. Many also carry emotional burdens of poverty-related barriers such as depression, addiction, childhood and/or spousal abuse, poor communication and interpersonal skills and low self-esteem. The program provides workshops on many of these sensitive issues as well as skills, tools and supports to deal with them.

On the Road to Employment is a program that works. It works because in a women-only setting, with good programming, facilitation and outside support, women can safely examine their pasts, share common concerns and begin to see the value of their work. Through this process, in partnership with the other women in the group, they begin to value themselves as women. This validation, reinforced throughout the program, provides the inner strength for women to successfully complete the program. It is this strength and self-esteem that they carry with them to the future.

Core Centre services help overcome the challenges that women face. Knowing and valuing the reality of women's daily lives also means that Centre programs provide for childcare and transportation—through subsidies, scheduling and other accommodations. Without these subsidies and allowances, women could not complete the program.

Most important is the realization of how closely economic development is tied to social development. Many existing economic development agencies and programs fail to recognize barriers specific to women and do not really value the work (paid and unpaid) and experiences of all women—regardless of their social status and economic background. Women cannot be involved with economic development unless they have food to eat, adequate and affordable housing, and unless they know that their children are well looked after in a safe and educational environment. Agencies and programs must recognize and support women's work, and consider the economic and social realities and challenges facing women, for women's CED to take place.

Women's Centres are uniquely positioned to offer programs and services that work directly with women on economic and social issues. They provide a bridge between local services, government departments and the women and families they are meant to assist. As well, Centre representatives serve as respected and knowledgeable advocates working to change social and economic policies so that women are included. In partnership with women, they are working to create a more just and equitable society.

*"Each day at the Women's Centre, we have the privilege of hearing the stories of women's lives, learning from their experiences, benefitting from their wisdom and gaining inspiration from the strength they demonstrate in the face of adversity. Women confide their hopes, their pain, their tears, their anger, their frustration and their determination to create a better life for themselves, their children and their community. We share that determination."*¹

- Women's Centre Staff Member

5, 6. Plans for the future and potential for replication

On the Road to Employment is a well-established and successful program. Funders, former participants, community members, local employers and organizations all recognize the benefits of the program. There is currently a waiting list of women ready to take part in future programs, and demand is growing. The challenge, however, is to secure stable, yearly, adequate funding so women have ongoing access to pre-employment programs.

Three Women's Centres in Nova Scotia currently offer similar re-training programs. The curriculum for the program has been standardized and created in binder format, including detailed information about scheduling, activities, exercises and skills training. This makes it easy to replicate the successful curriculum components of the program. Women's Centres are working toward delivering re-entry training to women across the province and are currently developing standards for program delivery.

What is more complicated to replicate are the range of support services offered in addition to the facilitated sessions of the pre-employment program. Given that the issues and challenges facing women do not go away upon completion, the Centre is also able to provide the, much needed, on-going support and advocacy for women trying to find employment and/or taking part in education and training programs.

¹ Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. *Annual Report*, 2002-2003, page 86.

Note

Unless otherwise indicated, the information contained in this case study is derived from a variety of sources, including an interview with Lucille Harper, Executive Director, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, as well as directly from the following documents:

On the Road to Employment: A Pre-Employment Program for Women facing Barriers to Employment. Final Program Report, July 2003. Prepared by Heather Carson.

2002-2003 Annual Report. Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, June 2003. Submitted by Lucille Harper

Mission Statement. Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. Approved September, 2002.

On the Road to Employment Program Manual, pages 4-8.

Information Sheet-Background Information. Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, September 2001.