



Ontario Works Bulletin

A Grassroots Approach to Working with Ontario Works

Community Literacy of Ontario

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Written by Wanda Minnings, Executive Director, Simcoe/Muskoka Literacy Network

In March 2002, the nineteen LBS programs within the Simcoe/Muskoka Literacy Network were poised and ready to accept a much-anticipated onslaught of OW clients. Most of the talk around the LSP tables as well as at numerous meetings with the two Ontario Works regional offices within our network area set the groundwork for additional program preparation and expansion. And, once the planning was done, everyone waited for the fax machines to hum with direct referrals coming through from the OW Literacy Implementation Plans that were in place. Instead, the silence was deafening.

We work closely with both the Muskoka and the Simcoe OW regional offices. The Implementation Plans developed with both OW offices differed significantly. We monitored and tracked statistics relating to the numbers of OW clients and new OW referrals, but the results were the same each month: no new clients; no numbers to report.

In June 2002 the Operations Manager for Simcoe OW attended and spoke at the network's AGM. Staff, managers, and our MTCU representative spoke openly about OW clients and the programs in place for them. E-mails were exchanged, and when LSP groups resumed in September 2002, they began developing what resembled a 'marketing strategy'.

Arrangements were made to have each of our LSP groups attend an OW staff meeting in their respective communities. The meetings were conducted as roundtables in which both LBS and OW staff could comment and question openly. Suggestions were noted and implemented, and communications maintained between OW satellite offices, LBS programs and the network.

Each LSP group then planned and hosted a Stakeholders Breakfast as part of their monthly LSP meeting. OW was a very visible presence at these meetings. One result of these meetings was a request to conduct a workshop for OW and FOCUS staff in South Simcoe on "Making Referrals and Understanding Assessments". (The presentation, conducted by Melanie Remonde, MaryAnne Myers and Joanne Stuart, was so well received that it has since been given regionally to all OW employment services workers!)

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Ontario Works and Community Literacy Agencies

As part of Community Literacy of Ontario's *Working Together for Program Growth and Learner Success* project, CLO would like to highlight the accomplishments of community literacy agencies in Ontario that have occurred in response to the provincial government's mandatory literacy testing for Ontario Works participants initiative.

In May 2002, literacy agencies were informed that new Ontario Works applicants who had not completed Grade 12 or the equivalent would be required to take a mandatory literacy-screening test as part of the application process. Applicants whose literacy skills were identified as a barrier to employment and who failed the test would be referred to literacy professionals for assessment. Agencies were asked to work with their local OW offices and make the best use of resources and to ensure that effective referral processes were in place.

Recognizing that this initiative has been a hurdle for many agencies, it is important to recognize that continuous effort and determination can lead to positive changes and achievements. This bulletin showcases how some community literacy agencies across Ontario have risen to the challenge. Innovative approaches have been used by creative agencies to establish very successful partnerships in Ontario communities.

More on "A Grassroots Approach"



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The culmination of this intensive and committed investment of time and resources by our LBS staff resulted in an invitation to present weekly to all new OW clients throughout Simcoe County at the mandatory "*Empower Your Future*" sessions given by OW staff. Beginning December in Barrie and South Simcoe, and January in Orillia and Midland, we speak directly to OW clients about LBS programs. One community-based program was ecstatic when they received eight faxed referrals in one day, and another reported that they had achieved their projected contact hours for the year after nine months! Since December, we have had face-to-face contact with over 150 OW clients!

The bottom line is that our fax machines are spitting out literacy referrals from OW staff throughout Simcoe County! We have OW client statistics to report at our monthly LSP meetings! And our commitment with OW is to re-visit and review the activity formally after six months. Not bad, considering the alternative was to conclude that the Literacy Implementation Plan in Simcoe County would never result in contact hours for our programs.

For more information, please contact the Simcoe/Muskoka Literacy Network at simcoe.muskoka@literacynetwork.ca

FOCUS

By Tim Nicholls-Harrison, Executive Director Adult Learning Centres, Owen Sound and North Grey Union Public Library

Adult Learning Centres have been delivering local literacy and upgrading services in Bruce and Grey Counties since 1983. There are Adult Learning Centres in Wiarton, Brockton, Saugeen Shores, Owen Sound and Collingwood. The Centres are merged community-based programs that are overseen by the Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library. FOCUS was developed by staff at the Adult Learning Centres. Maria Bertrand, Stacey Bumba, Roger Hannon, Shirley Hollingshead, Tim Nicholls-Harrison and Stella Ostick participated in the design and delivery of the workshops with additional input, materials and advice from Ontario Works and Job Connect staff.

FOCUS was designed as win-win-win-win! Ontario Works ensures that its clients get the training they need for a better transition to employment. The community based Adult Learning Centres meet their mandated contact hours and delivery requirements. Job Connect gains referrals and clients energized for placements. Ontario Works clients gain easier access to enhanced training, individual assessment and training plan development in a respectful and supportive environment. The process moves from a "jumping through hoops" approach to a seamless, holistic approach.

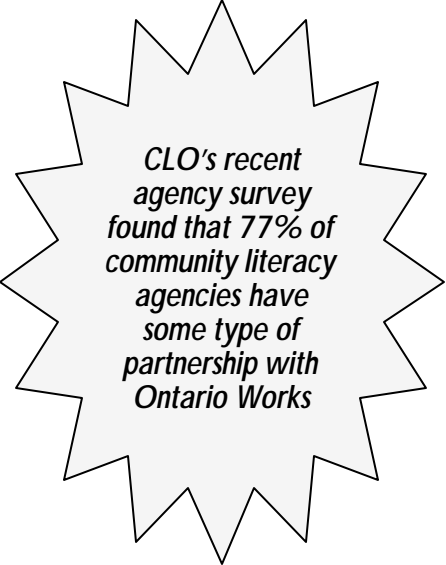
A focus group is a discussion session typically involving eight to ten people plus a group facilitator or moderator. Our FOCUS Group brings together Ontario Works clients. Drawing on their individual resources and knowledge and with additional supports from the session facilitators, the participants develop and improve many life long learning attitudes, values and skills. It is understood that the clients are encouraged to find the shortest route to sustainable employment.

FOCUS - Finding, Organizing, Challenging, and Understanding Self

- A central point of attention or activity
- The point where something starts
- The meeting spot
- To adjust to make clear

Adult Learning Centre staff met with Ontario Works staff to develop the course outline. The training priorities for hard-to-serve OW clients included:

- ⇒ Emotions, change, stress, time management and organization
- ⇒ Self-identification, self-marketing, skills awareness, self-esteem
- ⇒ Appearance, presentation, personal hygiene, nutrition
- ⇒ Money, budgeting, accessing debt counseling
- ⇒ Goals, planning and achieving, motivation
- ⇒ Knowledge of and utilization of community supports
- ⇒ Effective communication, conflict management
- ⇒ Personal and group issues that arise before, during and after the training workshops



CLO's recent agency survey found that 77% of community literacy agencies have some type of partnership with Ontario Works

The materials in the modules are presented to address levels 2 and 3 of the learning outcomes. LBS, OW and Job Connect staff meet each time to review the proposed course outline and to allocate responsibilities. Over one hundred clients have participated in the FOCUS workshops. Many have found and retained jobs for a year or more since their participation. The Adult Learning Centre has been fortunate to be involved in the development of FOCUS. It has been a dynamic learning process that has integrated many examples of best practice and best philosophy in adult education. We are grateful to all the staff within our organization and within our partner organizations at OW and Job Connect.

A workshop about FOCUS has been made available to regional literacy networks across the province. Please check with your regional network staff about information and or upcoming dates.

For more information about FOCUS, please email: tnicholls-harrison@owensound.library.on.ca.



“Trails to Literacy” and Ontario Works

By Joyce Bigelow, Executive Director, Northern Connections Adult Learning Centres

‘Trails to Literacy’ started in September 2000 under a National Literacy Secretariat grant to what is now Northern Connections Adult Learning Centres in Sharbot Lake. Since then there has been significant interest on this unique LBS delivery model, which partners a literacy marketing strategy with hands-on, outcome-based learning. Currently, five active ‘Trails’ sites in Ontario (four funded through Ontario Trillium Foundation), work on improving recreational, environmental or historical trails, **or on** helping community not-for-profits with their technical needs, running community lunches, etc.

‘Trails to Literacy’ has been such a positive influence in my life. It started me on the road to employment, after five years of welfare.” (A Trails Participant)

In today’s atmosphere of accountability, it is difficult to justify dollars spent solely on aggressive marketing campaigns. However, LBS programs need to become visible and inform the community (Ontario Works, other referring agencies, employers, family, etc.) of the value of literacy training. ‘Trails’ was developed to meet the challenge through the positive exposure provided **by** doing real-life learning activities that benefit the community. Through these activities the learners and Ontario Works Community Placement participants also gain self-esteem, critical thinking skills and the ability to work cooperatively in a group.

Linking closely with Ontario Works was a major driving factor **in** all the ‘Trails’ projects. Overall at the various ‘Trails’ locales, the increased partnership with Ontario Works has provided significant increases in regular discussion forums, Community Placement volunteers, funding/in-kind support, and learner referrals (**a 100% increase over the** previous year).

The success rate of the exiting participants has also made the ‘Trails’ projects beneficial in the eyes of both OW and MTCU. The participants who did the research, writing, production and construction not only gained new literacy/numeracy skills but, perhaps even more significantly, developed the self-direction and self-management skills that contributed to a 43% employment rate at exit. Many others moved on to further training or more advanced placements.

Significant statistics for the first year of ‘Trails’ in Sharbot Lake:

- ⇒ Seven times more OW referrals
- ⇒ Number of OW Community Placements = 37
- ⇒ Increase in OW based contact hours = 50%
- ⇒ LBS referrals due to ‘Trails’ connection = 89%

**Contact the AlphaPlus
Centre for various literacy
resources on Ontario Works.**

Information can be obtained through the web-site (www.trailstoliteracy.com) and the open AlphaCom discussion group “Trails to Literacy”. For further information or to get the “Trails to Literacy Around the Province” Report **and** Toolkit contact Joyce Bigelow, Northern Connections Adult Learning Centres, at literacy@frontenac.net.



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