

Integrated Service Delivery to Humanize the Welfare to Work System

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Abstract

An integrated model of service delivery, combined with community partnerships for provision of childcare, focused training related to specific employer needs, and other resources related to return to employment, provide a system that is effective and humanizing in assisting individuals to find meaningful employment.

A number of factors have contributed to the dehumanizing of Welfare clients. Recent deep cuts to welfare amounts have left individuals without adequate funds for food and housing. Services divided between many agencies, requires clients to navigate a maze of places, people and paperwork. Agencies limited to one or two services must turn over a large numbers of clients to provide revenue lessening their ability to build relationships with clients.

An integrated model, such as the one that Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre is using, provides full service from assessment to employment. Clients begin with an assessment and job search skills training.

Community Placement offers short-term experience to develop skills and confidence. Employment Placement liaises with employers and clients and creates a fit between the two. Job mentors coach clients for long-term job maintenance.

This model provides an interactive, holistic and client centred approach to the Welfare to Work system. It maintains client dignity, builds a stable support and contains elements that build the independence of the client.

Abstraite

Un modèle d'approvisionnement de services intégrés combiné au partenariat communautaire de services de garde, une formation centrée sur les

besoins spécifiques de l'employeur et autres ressources reliées au retour à l'emploi, assurent aux individus une méthode efficace et humaine d'assistance à la recherche d'emplois significatifs.

Bon nombre de facteurs ont contribué à la déshumanisation des clients du Bien-être social, notamment les réductions considérables récemment effectuées qui ont occasionnées aux usagers un manque de fonds pour se nourrir et se loger convenablement. Également, la répartition de services entre plusieurs agences suscitent la nécessité de naviguer parmi un labyrinthe de locations, de faire affaire avec un personnel trop varié, et de négocier une abondance de paperasse. De plus, les agences étant limitées à un ou deux services se voient forcées d'effectuer la rotation d'un grand nombre d'usagers afin de produire un revenu, réduisant ainsi leur chance de développer un rapport avec leurs clients.

Ce modèle intégré employé par *Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre* procure un service complet de l'évaluation jusqu'au placement d'emploi. Les usagers débutent avec une évaluation d'aptitudes, ils passent ensuite à une formation en recherche d'emploi. Le placement communautaire offre de l'expérience à court terme contribuant au développement des compétences et de la confiance en soi. Le placement d'emploi assure la liaison entre l'employeur et l'utilisateur de façon à corroborer une adéquation maximale. Les conseillers en emploi guident les usagers vers le maintien d'emploi à long terme.

Ce modèle procure une approche interactive et holistique du système *Welfare to Work*, centrée sur le client. De plus, il conserve à l'utilisateur sa dignité, établit un soutien stable, et comporte les éléments qui engendrent l'indépendance chez le client.

Integrated Service Delivery to Humanize the Welfare to Work System

No one ever set out to dehumanize delivery systems for social assistance. However, the confluence of a series of events, policies and environmental factors did indeed lead to a system that often left social assistance recipients feeling nameless, degraded and marginalized.

In Ontario, the Progressive Conservatives brought about a 21.6% cut in assistance amounts. The PC party's document outlining these cuts relates, "Under the plan, a family of four currently on welfare would receive less than it gets today. However, we will allow anyone on welfare to earn back the difference between the current rate and the new, lower rate without penalty and without losing their eligibility." (PC Party of Ontario, 1994) This plan did not account, however, for two important facts. Most individuals are not on assistance because they do not want to work, but rather because they have numerous obstacles to finding employment. Therefore, a program that seeks to offset cuts to their assistance dollars, by allowing them to earn income, misses the essential issues facing recipients. The other fact is that during the period of these cuts the cost of living increased by approximately 18%, with no accompanying rise in assistance.

Another result of the *Common Sense Revolution* was a restructuring of service delivery under the auspices of the "Business Transformation Project", which introduced the two-stage application process, including the telephone pre-screening and the consolidated verification project. This initiative, designed to bring new levels of efficiency and accuracy to the delivery of social assistance has instead brought a

new level of rigidity and bureaucracy to the system. In his article "Rhetoric and Retrenchment" Herd (2002) writes that the "social safety net in Ontario is being eroded piece by piece and the constant adjustment of labyrinthine rules to winnow the rolls has become an ongoing part of administrative practice" (p.5). While there are other, happier, stories of those who found sensitive caseworkers guiding them through the system, the level of frustration is rising.

As a result, fewer and fewer individuals qualify for assistance, while greater numbers of discouraged individuals simply give up on the application process altogether (Herd & Mitchell, 2003). Those who do endure the application process and qualify are subjected to a more rigid, less personal system that often requires the client to fulfill exacting regulations that they neither understand nor are equipped to accomplish.

At the same time that the legacy of the *Common Sense Revolution* has made accessing the social net more difficult, the economic climate has added to the burden. Leschied, Whitehead, Hurley and Chiodo (2003) report a 17.1% family poverty rate in London and Middlesex County. For children under the age of 15 the poverty rate is 24.5%. According to the same report, 693 children seen by Children's Aid Society (CAS) London between 1995 and 2001 65% were on social assistance. The Canadian Policy Research Network (Maxwell, 2003) indicates that families and individuals are being asked to bear greater social risks stemming from costs of education, benefits and pensions, costs associated with frequent job changes and the potential trap of low paying jobs.

The combined effect of these factors is the creation of new levels of frustration, stress, and dehumanization of social assistance recipients. In Herd and Mitchell's 2002 report for the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, they interviewed dozens of social recipients in seven different focus groups. They reported that social assistance recipients experience repeated frustration with having to move from agency to agency; aggravation due to inability to contact caseworkers; confusion and humiliation caused by

regulations, directions and forms that require more education than many recipients possess; and an aura of suspicion and hostility as though they are trying to "get away with something".

Social service agencies were facing their own challenges in this environment. Downturns in the economy and cuts in available revenue place financial stress that threatened viability. Outcome-focused funding with no infrastructure revenue available placed great pressure on agencies to focus on statistics rather than client interaction. The "workfare" tag created a level of animosity between agencies and clients alike and became a significant attitudinal barrier. The temptation to get numbers through the system rather than to provide significant relational assistance grew as the financial pressures increased.

The Response

The challenge for the London Community generally and for Pathways specifically has been to retain a sensitive and personal approach to client care within this difficult environment, and within the constraints of the changes to the social assistance system. The remainder of this article will focus on the significant choices made by the City of London, the role of the Employment Sector Council of London Middlesex (ESCLM) in integrating agencies for ease of client movement and on Pathways' particular service delivery model as means of providing value-based, client-centered service within the context of the Ontario Works System.

The City of London

The City of London made two significant choices that have shaped their delivery of service and which have helped them alleviate some of the problems identified in other areas of Ontario. The first of these was to deliver Ontario Works programs through purchase of service contracts with community based training organizations. The partnership with purchase of service agencies has grown in the London area to encompass 14 different agencies, providing a full range of services from employment planning and counselling to employment related clothing.

Each of these agencies is a member of the ESCLM. The mission of the ESCLM is to be "a dynamic service delivery system that provides opportunity for all people to meet the changing labour market needs in our community." Educational partners who are also members of the ESCLM include the London District Catholic School Board, Thames Valley District School Board, Fanshawe College and community based literacy organizations.

This decision to use community agencies has brought a number of advantages to the London Middlesex Community and to the area social assistance recipients—advantages that have gone a long way to counteract the negative impacts described in the opening section of this paper. Community agencies offer clients a sense of advocacy, a support for the clients in dealing with the regulations of the system. As the partner agencies of the ESCLM continue to integrate and improve communication, the need for clients to redo paperwork and retell their stories is diminished.

Community partnerships enable participants to experience collaborative support for addressing multiple issues. The dialogue built over a period of a decade in the London Middlesex region through ESCLM has enabled organizations to celebrate their strengths and offer real value to participants. This environment has required mature leadership from funders, ESCLM and community based agencies. Shared training for employment planning, service delivery standards, information sharing agreements and common technology platforms have enabled closer working relationships, which translates into less duplication of information, maximization of resources and a client-centred community infrastructure.

Another significant choice of the City of London was to resist the *workfare* concept, and instead focus on Community Placement as an employment preparation tool for those who are not yet job ready. In conjunction with the purchase of service partners, Community Placement was positioned and implemented as a positive employment step, which at times ended in individuals being hired by the agencies with which they volunteered.

Community Placement offered the opportunity to gain experience which resulted in improved skills, increased self confidence and filled gaps in resumes. Furthermore, many clients reported, a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

The impact of these two decisions has had a significantly beneficial impact on the delivery of Ontario Works in the London Middlesex Region. While clients still face the difficulties of meeting the requirements of the validation process, the added layer is one of advocacy and support that assists them in navigating those requirements.

Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre

The move to purchase of service agencies by the City of London proved to be a defining moment for Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre. Prior to that time period Pathways primary service was a ten week property management training course funded through the Transitional Skills Development Fund of HRDC. The opportunity to become a Purchase of Service provider allowed Pathways to expand its service to the community and more fully express the mission and values upon which it was built.

Pathways entered into purchase of service agreements with the City of London for Employment Planning and Preparation, Community Placement and Employment Placement. At the same time, Pathways redefined its understanding of the mission and values and the critical stakeholders in achieving its goal. A focused strategy integrated the values and key success factors for all stakeholders but particularly for clients and front line workers.

The mission of the agency was to assist individuals to overcome multiple barriers to meaningful employment. However, the mission at times was overly focused on employment as the end result and the vision was reframed to better reflect the individual and community development impact desired. The vision has become "unleashing the potential of individuals to build new futures."

The core values were identified as follows:

Value of Work

We believe that work is essential and gives dignity and provision to people.

Integrity

We strive to live and work consistently. We are committed to aligning our actions with our words.

Proud of What We Do

We believe our service is essential to assist people. We believe in its value and consider it a privileged mission.

Embrace Change

Change is the constant of life. We do not fear change but welcome it as a fresh opportunity for growth.

Value of the Individual

We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person.

Cooperation

Our mission cannot be accomplished alone, but only as we work together with various stakeholders.

Quality & Efficiency

We seek to provide quality and satisfaction to all stakeholders.

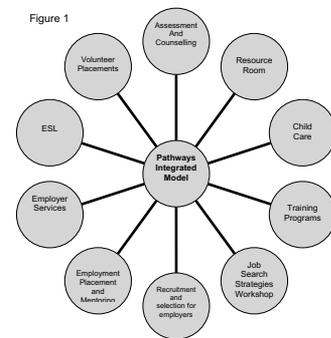
Leadership

We seek to be a leader in our community and develop leaders for our community

In order to support the intent of the mission and values, Pathways established new offices (7000 square feet) in order support the delivery of these intents and values. The offices are accessible by all public transit, one block from Ontario Works offices and are decorated in warm and inviting colours. A full employment resource with online resources, phones and staffing is provided.

The heart of Pathways' contribution to the humanization of the welfare-to-work system is the integration of Client Services. As shown in figures 1 & 2, Pathways is able to take clients from Employment Planning, through job search strategies, Community Placement, if needed, on through Employment Placement. Training in WHMIS, First Aid and basic computer literacy is available at each of these steps. Pathways' strategic plan for the next phase of growth and development is to further enhance this breadth of delivery by forming intentional partnerships which will allow us to offer a variety of skill development for clients.

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The database system, *WebTracker*, tracks client activity and counsellor's notes in a way that allows any staff member to quickly understand the client's history with the organization and reduces need for duplication of paperwork. *WebTracker* provides access to timely and comprehensive information about available programs and services, enables appropriate referrals and reminders for case management, reduces staff administrative time and so enhances client service. Nine of the purchase of service agencies are using *WebTracker*, leading to a greater facility of information sharing. An information sharing agreement has been signed by key agencies across the community that will enable inter-agency transfer with client consent for effective service.

Front-line staff nurture and develop strong working relationships with Ontario Works caseworkers and are effective advocates for both sides. Caseworkers rely on Pathways staff for communication of client activity and also respond fairly rapidly to requests from Pathways staff for client interventions. Pathways intentionally frames itself as a service organization to both the client and the caseworker and the fruit of that relationship is consistently positive service delivery to our clients. Four placement coordinators network with employers providing them with pre-screened candidates for positions. An employment mentor is available to assist employer and employee with any retention issues.

This combination of integrated service delivery, information tracking, and client-caseworker intervention has enabled Pathways to be a non-intimidating, supportive environment for Ontario Works clients. From the

Receptionist to the Employment Counsellor, Pathways staff is focused on creating an open and welcoming environment that affirms the value and dignity of each individual. Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre has created a wrap around service to clients through integrated service

delivery, community partnership and focused attention to the needs of participants. Integrated service delivery is not only an efficient means of providing services by maximizing economies of scale but also minimizes the distraction and frustration experienced by participants with fragmented service delivery.

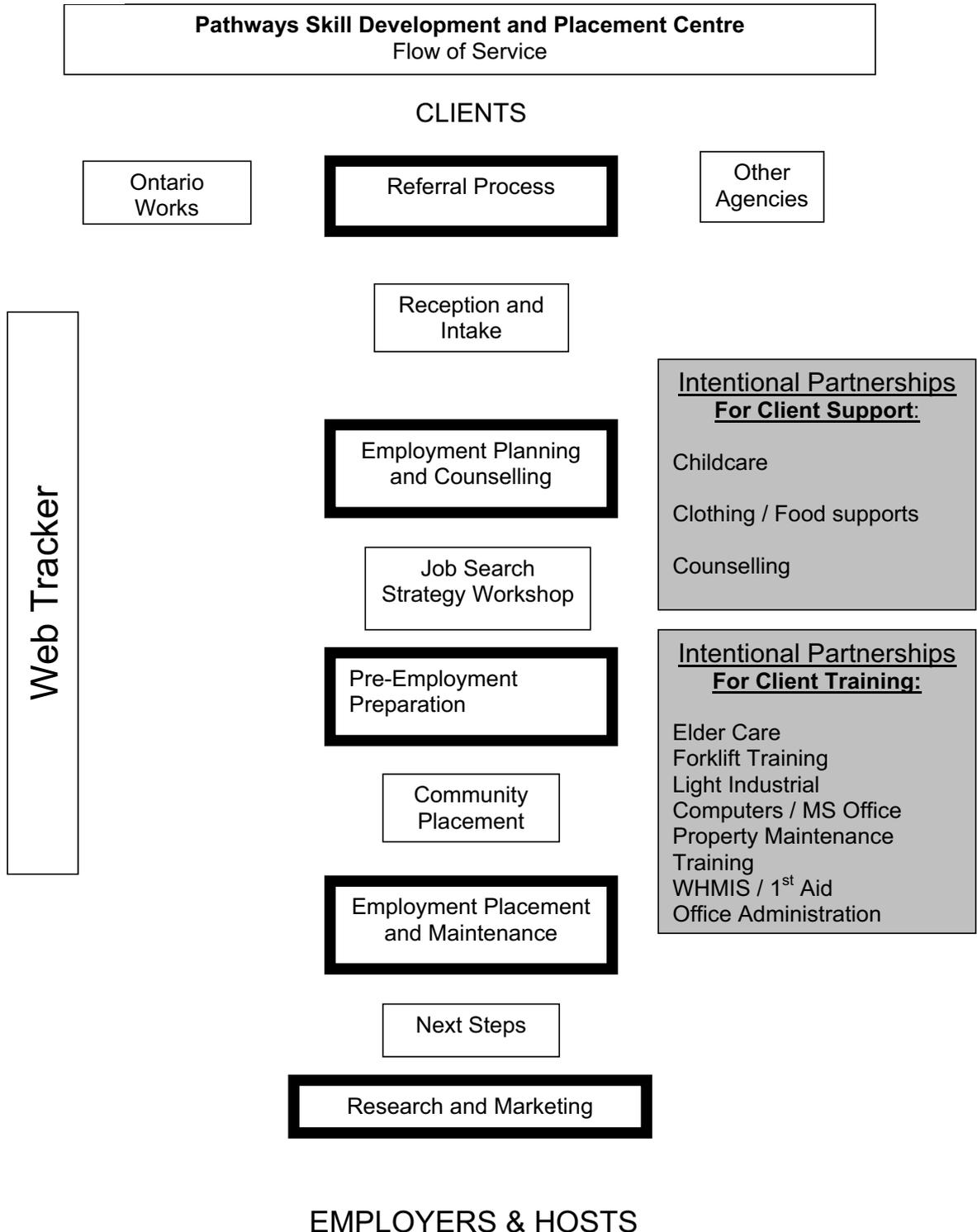
With the effective use of technology, staff have been able to keep track of participants, identify key windows of opportunity for intervention and follow up.

Implications

While Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre has been able to

Figure 2

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effectively serve many clients, it has also experienced and continues to experience significant challenges which impact both clients and agencies seeking to serve them.

A lack of funding available for infrastructure has made the upgrades in computer technology and the purchase of software for client management the responsibility of agency reserve funds. Agencies are delivering services at the same unit costs as five years ago and are wholly dependent on referrals from caseworkers.

Outcome based funding has threatened the soul of compassion. Pathways finds many clients who are in need of the resources we offer, but for whom no funding is available. The outcomes are at times overly restrictive and do not recognize the process steps that overcoming barriers requires. Client needs must drive these outcomes.

Participants require intensive case management. Humanization requires that someone know their name, needs and is able to intervene effectively at key junctures in their journey towards full employment. Employment counselors who are available and aware of the barriers being addressed provide a critical catalyst and support to participants. The availability of caseworkers must be increased in order to respond to the needs and questions of participants.

One of greatest challenges for the provision of effective service is the development of competencies for the current employment situation. The Ontario Works participant is arguably the most in need of resources and yet has limited access to skills development resources. Skills development and education have been identified as the clearest path to career advancement and higher wage jobs. Specific skill devel-

opment is critical to avoid increased marginalization. Basic computer skills are needed to combat the linking of "technology poor" and "working poor" (Heldrich Policy Guide, 1999).

There is a documented need for additional envelopes of funding to be able to provide entry level training in a timely manner without incurring debt and unreasonable delays. The spectrum of services provided for skill development must increase. While GED upgrading is critical, along with basic literacy and language skills, often there are little skills that will have relevancy in the current market place.

The enhancement of future productivity in the marketplace and the development of a skilled workforce will require greater levels of social investment from the public sector and higher wages for workers in low paid jobs. It will require a medium to long term perspective in program design, services offered and the roles assumed by public and private sectors and the individual citizen.

Finally, there is a constant need to be vigilant about the essential values that birthed the concept of social assistance. The case of Pathways in London, has demonstrated that a values driven service delivery model can, when delivered in concert with other like minded agencies and funders, provide service that will assist individuals to return to productivity.

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Many thanks to the sponsors of the 1st Welfare to Work: The Next Generation Forum. They include, Government of Canada (Human Resources Skills Development), Government of Newfoundland & Labrador (Human Resources, Labour, and Employment); Community Services Council of Newfoundland & Labrador; and Memorial University of Newfoundland.