

Counselling Training for Teachers and Health Care Professionals

Opportunity Report

**Prepared for the Northern Labour Market
Information Clearinghouse**

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Introduction

Research for the Clearinghouse report on services for children and families (June, 1997) found that most plans for these services looked for entire communities to become involved in looking after children and families. Part of this idea was the suggestion that professionals other than social workers and mental health personnel should receive some training in counselling. With this training, teachers, nurses and others would be better able to identify and help people in crisis or at risk.

This report looks primarily at the need for this training among teachers and health professionals. These two groups were chosen as being among the most likely to be in a position to recognize and deal with children and families in crisis. Broader community training needs are also discussed.

In general, those interviewed for this study agreed that counselling training is widely needed but they expressed serious concerns about the accessibility and cost of such training.

Methods

This report is based on a series of formal and informal interviews with educators, health care professionals and related government and community service personnel.

Needs Identified

Those who see a need for this training tended to be enthusiastic in their support for it. In many communities access to mental health services is limited. In addition, many health care clients do not fit the criteria for mental health treatment but they still need help to cope with changing life circumstances. As a result, they turn to other health care personnel who often have little training in this area.

Teachers deal with children in difficult circumstances on a regular basis. As one contact put it, the real professionals do counselling every day, based on their “gut feelings”. Many would find it useful to have additional training to help them identify problems and to deal with them as much as they can in the little time that they have available.

The particular needs identified by contacts are:

- communication skills
- understanding of family dynamics
- how to talk with young people and how to identify “at risk” youth
- aboriginal counselling issues
- how to help people cope with changes in their lives.

Demand Issues

According to the 1996 Census, the Clearinghouse region is home to some 6,160 employers in the categories of “Nurse Supervisors and Registered Nurses; Technical and Related Occupations in Health and Assisting Occupations in Support of Health Services.” The number of these who would be counted as “front line workers” is probably in the range of 4,000. The same data set lists 7,245 “Teachers and Professors” in the Clearinghouse region.

The demand for this training seems to be greater in smaller communities where there are fewer mental health resources.

Contacts in both the health and education sectors stated that those individuals who are interested in pursuing this training usually do so on their own, outside of work hours and at their own expense. In some cases, administrators may not recognize counselling as a part of an individual’s job and therefore will not support the training. In other cases there simply is no money available to pay for training or to allow the person to take time away from work for courses.

As a result, both time and money are significant concerns. Many people cannot arrange for time away from their jobs to take courses, which makes timing of training an important issue. This is particularly true if more than one person in a given department or school is interested in the same course. A contact at one health region pointed out that college courses tend to be too expensive for them. They can bring in a speaker for in-house training for much less than it would cost to send several people to a course. Both cost and time factors make it impractical for people to travel for this training.

Beyond Teachers and Health Professionals

One contact suggested that the real need is to access and increase the capacities of the community at large. Improving the preventative skills of people throughout the community would do more good than would overburdening already overworked professionals. In this view, a college’s role would be to bring in a speaker or an established seminar for the community. Cost would once again be a major factor, as this would be aimed at a wide cross-section of the community.

In Peace River, the local Women’s Shelter has been providing twice-yearly counselling training for their staff and, recently, other interested persons in the area. This low-cost (\$60 per person) two-day seminar proved popular this spring, with 18 people registered, from 11 different agencies. This is a skills-oriented, reality-based program taught to small groups. This may be a good model for training in this field.

The Alberta Mental Health Board is working with Alberta Learning and the Alberta Teachers’ Association to develop training programs on teaching children with emotional and behavioural disorders. They hope to offer awareness programs on a number of such disorders to service providers in communities throughout the province. Training would be provided on a contract basis, using a train-the-trainer model. For more information on this project, contact Janice Popp, Provincial Coordinator of Children’s Mental Health Initiatives with the AMHB at (403)297-4520.

Summary

There does appear to be a need for counselling training for teachers and health professionals in northern Alberta, particularly in smaller centres. The actual demand for this training would depend, to a large degree on the accessibility and affordability of the courses. The strongest opportunity for the Clearinghouse partner colleges is likely in helping to provide low-cost seminars to the wider community, perhaps in cooperation with the Alberta Mental Health Board.

Contacts

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Joyce Halliday, Peace Health Region, 836-3391

Dee Hample, Northwestern Health Services Region, 926-4388

Geoff Milligan, Services for Children and Families, Region 14, 624-4127

Wilda Mitchell, Mistahia Health Region, 538-7171

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Several less formal interviews were conducted with teachers and health care professionals as well.