

WHAT WORKS:

Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Persons with Low Income

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For copyright information, contact:
Alberta Employment and Immigration
Career and Workplace Resources
Telephone: 780-422-1794
Fax: 780-422-5319
Email: info@alis.gov.ab.ca

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Statistics

Percentage of families that were low income by gender of the major income earner in Alberta in 2004

11.7% women
4% men¹

Children who lived in poverty where at least one parent worked part time or part of the year in 2006

1 in 8 in Calgary
1 in 6 in Edmonton
1 in 10 in Lethbridge
1 in 10 in Medicine Hat²

Industries with the highest incidence of low pay in Alberta in 2006

Retail
Accommodation
Food³

Context

Causes of poverty

“There are so many issues that push people into poverty. For many, health issues are prevalent. Family support may be lacking—they may be geographically separated. And for some, a generational situation exists where a second generation now needs help.”

Susan Watson
Edmonton Food Bank

Persons with low income may be working part time or full time or not working at all. They may be parents who need additional income for basic needs for themselves and their dependants or they may be learners in a training program. They may be recipients of income support payments and other benefits, such as health care.

The common experience of this population is that of receiving a low income—in most cases, a lower income than they require for their day-to-day needs.

Poverty

Canada has no official definition of poverty. Different organizations use a variety of approaches and measures to determine at what level people are judged to be poor.

“Although Canada has no official measure of poverty, the Statistics Canada measure [low income cut-off line or LICO] is probably the best known...Statistics Canada itself does not claim to measure poverty; rather, it defines a set of income cut-offs below which people may be said to live in *straitened circumstances*. Most social policy analysts, politicians and editorial writers treat the cut-offs as poverty lines.”⁴

In this chapter, the term *poverty* will be used to refer to a level of income below the low income cut-off line.

Terminology and definitions

Low income

The term *low income* is a relative one. In this chapter, *low income* is used to refer to the situation of persons who may or may not be employed and who, for various reasons, are in positions of not only limited financial resources, but also limited opportunity to share in other resources. Low income may result in living below a poverty level although individuals may be working or receiving some form of income support.

The poverty rate for unattached individuals historically has always been three to four times higher than the poverty rates of families.⁵ Poverty rates for unattached working-age women historically are always higher than those for men.⁶

Depth and duration of poverty

Depth of poverty is how far below the poverty line (low income cut-off or LICO) a person or household unit's income is. The average depth of poverty has increased dramatically. Working-age households have experienced the greatest increase in depth of poverty.⁷

Duration of poverty is the amount of time a person's income falls below the poverty line. Certain groups are more likely to experience lengthy periods of poverty:

- lone parents
- persons with disabilities
- members of visible minorities
- recent immigrants
- individuals with low levels of education
- unattached individuals
- Aboriginal people

The longer a person remains in poverty, the more difficult it is to move out of poverty.⁸

Income support recipients

Although people talk about welfare as a single entity, there are many welfare systems in Canada: one system in each province and territory and another system for Aboriginal people. Despite the fact that each is different, they have many common features. They all have complex rules that regulate all aspects of the system, including eligibility for assistance, rates of assistance, allowable income from other sources and appeal processes regarding their cases.

Persons who receive income from government financial assistance programs may have the qualifications and the desire to work, but may fear jeopardizing their benefits if they take a full-time job. Considering that medical costs may also be included among their basic needs, many feel a potential loss

of government assistance is too big a risk to take. In addition, some fear losing benefits, not just because of the cost, but also because of the difficulty in reinstating benefits if they lose their jobs.

People receiving financial assistance are encouraged to maximize self-sufficiency. Individuals who are working while receiving financial assistance may receive a supplement to their earnings. In other words, a portion of their wages may be considered exempt when their benefits are calculated. In Alberta, people leaving financial assistance for jobs may continue to receive health benefits both for themselves and their children. So, while loss of health benefits may still be a concern for clients, it may not be a reality.

Financial pressure

Decision-making under stress

"We often meet people in crisis situations in their life. Their behaviours and concerns are not long-term focused. Stress is high and their decision-making abilities are not at their best."

Lynn Crump

Alberta Employment and Immigration,
Cold Lake

For income assistance recipients, "the most prominent aspect of [their] experience was the stress and tension they encountered due to financial hardship. This factor was mentioned almost three times as frequently as any other category. In addition to being repeatedly expressed as a source of tension, it also was seen to be a catalyst for other 'downward pulls,' such as family friction, loss of self-esteem, inability to provide for family and feeling misunderstood by friends."⁹

Financial pressures for income support recipients are distinct from pressures experienced by displaced middle- or high-income earners. Income support recipients report enormous difficulty in meeting their families' basic survival needs, such as food, clothing and shelter.¹⁰ Lack of money for transportation and child care becomes a major concern when they begin to look for work.¹¹

Duration of income support

The length of time that people receive income support varies considerably. For some, it is a temporary situation: the assistance they receive tides them over until they find work and they are able to move forward without requiring further assistance. Others with more complex situations, who find maintaining employment a challenge, may require assistance over a much longer period.

Working poor

The downward slide

"Many people could experience some of the challenges that drive people into poverty, for example, mental illness. Without sufficient support, a downward slide can happen very quickly. People's savings are eaten away, and they have no further resources. Both financial and emotional support are so important."

Marjorie Bencz
Edmonton Food Bank

The incidence of low income in Alberta is particularly high for earners with the following characteristics:

- living outside of Calgary or Edmonton
- aged 18 to 24
- female
- separated or divorced
- recently immigrated
- disabled (but not if they are working more than 2,000 hours per year)
- Aboriginal (not if working more than 2,000 hours per year)
- completed high school or less
- unattached (sole earners)
- lone parent
- working part time, seasonal or on a temporary basis
- working in a small firm with under 20 employees
- not receiving medical or dental benefits from the employer

According to a Canadian Policy Research Networks report, the majority of low-income children in Alberta live in households where there is a lone parent who either works full time or part time.¹²

Precarious jobs

"Precarious jobs—low-wage jobs that carry a high risk of termination—are a major cause of low family incomes and poverty. Precarious work is a key challenge...because it condemns a significant proportion of citizens to lifelong exclusion from progressive job ladders and opportunities for skills development, and because these risks are concentrated among defined groups who face multiple sources of disadvantage, such as recent immigrants and lone parents. Precarious work is also highly gendered and undermines the goal of labour market equality between women and men."¹³

Health

Adults with low incomes tend to experience more health-related problems than those in higher income brackets. Low incomes do not cause these related health concerns. In fact, in some cases, health issues may be the cause of low incomes. In any case, there is no doubt that “low income is associated with a disproportionate number of special problems.”¹⁴

The following social determinants interact with basic determinants of health, such as genetic endowment and the physical environment, to determine why some people are healthy and others are not:

- income inequality
- social inclusion
- employment and job security
- working conditions
- contribution of the social economy
- early childhood care
- education
- food security
- housing¹⁵

When compared to adults with middle incomes, a higher percentage of adults with low incomes have two or more of the following chronic conditions:

- asthma
- high blood pressure
- stomach ulcers
- effects of stroke¹⁶

Emotional health

Persons with low income tend to experience more difficulties related to emotional health than their counterparts with middle or high incomes. The experience of unemployment is marked by varying degrees of depression and characterized by

- continual struggle to meet survival needs
- pessimism about becoming employed
- low self-esteem
- negative feelings about being on welfare
- lack of significant or lasting positive emotional shifts¹⁷

Employment readiness

Persons with low income may experience both systemic and personal challenges to gaining employment such as

- sense of personal failure, low self-esteem and fear of trying again
- physical and mental health concerns
- transportation issues
- shortage of low-cost housing
- addictions
- single parenting, often as very young parents
- parenting concerns and child care
- lack of basic skills
- relationship difficulties
- low education and literacy level
- unstable work history

Trying to address these complex issues with limited resources creates a very challenging situation for most clients.

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

What do I wish I would have known when I first started working with persons with low income?

“I wish I would have had a better grasp of the complexity of their life issues. No one client walks in with one or two things. They have so many things happening that are extremely complex in depth and with layers intertwining. It is important to get to know clients as individuals before jumping into career planning activities, to explore some roots to their present situation, to identify presenting and pressing needs, to work on their agenda, not mine, to identify support systems (good and bad), to identify what their attitude is and how it will support or defeat working successfully and enjoyably.”

Lynn Crump
Alberta Employment and Immigration,
Cold Lake

Counselling clients with low income

A consistent theme for working effectively with persons with low income is starting where the client is and helping them work from there. For many clients, this process will include identifying and addressing present challenges before, or while, considering future employment options. Addressing current challenges helps clients lay a firm base for gaining and maintaining employment, a critical component of the career-building process.

Edwin Herr outlines three broad principles for counselling persons who are underemployed or unemployed. He encourages counsellors to help clients

- understand the psychology of unemployment
- use community resources
- address the multiple challenges of unemployment¹⁸

Understanding the psychology of unemployment

Help clients understand and anticipate the psychological facets of unemployment, particularly the relationships between jobs, joblessness and mental health. Literature exists on the relationships between unemployment and psychological and health problems, low self-esteem, mental illness, family discord and domestic abuse.

Clients need help to

- develop an understanding of mental health that recognizes some problems as internal, but many, if not most, as provoked and sustained by external circumstances, such as unemployment
- avoid blaming themselves for circumstances they can't control
- confront and cope with external factors¹⁹

Using community resources

Help clients examine community resources available to them.²⁰ Various resources or supports may be able to help clients during employment or help them avoid unemployment.

Clients need help to

- see themselves as part of a social system, rather than isolated from it
- recognize the services and groups that can provide experience, skill development, livelihood and well-being
- become active, rather than reactive²¹

Addressing multiple barriers

Recognize that those who experience unemployment are likely to need more than support. The multiple problems of persons in this group include

- lack of transportation resources
- racial discrimination
- lack of basic skills
- family discord
- drug or alcohol dependence or addiction²²

Counsellors may assist clients by

- helping them understand the additive, interactive effects of these problems
- helping them gain access to information about skills training in these problem areas
- acting as advocates for them with employers, community groups and government bodies²³

A focus on listening

“Address human aspects of why people are where they are rather than jumping directly into employment. It is important to maintain an ongoing recognition that what we counsellors perceive as a failure to meet commitments to, for example, an employment plan may be more about circumstances. That person wants to follow through, but circumstances get in the way. Try asking, ‘What else is going on in your life right now?’ or ‘Is there anything else limiting your ability to follow through with this plan? What might that be?’ It may be that child care or bus fare is getting in the way. They may be embarrassed about their lack of resources. Counsellors can help with their willingness to listen. Listening is key. Listen to clients’ barriers to success and then try to help them address them.”

Phil O’Hara

Edmonton Social Planning Council

Other successful strategies

Counsellors working with clients with low income consistently identify the following qualities and approaches as critical:

- Be non-judgemental. Recognize that many circumstances have brought clients to their current situation. Any person, given such circumstances, might end up in the same position.
- Be respectful. Value clients and their experiences.
- Stay positive.
- Help clients reframe experiences to identify the positive.
- Use a holistic approach. Help clients work through life issues as part of addressing employment issues.
- Be client-centred. Don’t make assumptions.
- Ask clients what they need. Find out what they want *their* goals to be, not what *you* want them to be.
- Be consistent. Continue to use this approach and demonstrate these qualities. Clients will begin to trust and will return when they experience this consistent approach.

Counselling barriers

Counsellors may experience the following barriers in relationships with clients:

- client’s lack of trust in the relationship
- poor communication by either or both parties
- fears based on lack of information

Counsellors can resolve these problems by

- examining their attitudes and respecting individual differences
- communicating honestly and encouraging clients to do the same
- making any hidden agendas explicit²⁴

Individual baselines for success

“Every person has an individual baseline to judge success from. We have to see every individual as unique and we can’t have blanket expectations for everyone.”

Tricia Haggarty

Central Alberta Housing Society

Helping clients build self-esteem

- Provide a long-term, supportive counselling relationship. This consistency will enhance personal development and assist clients in moving towards self-sufficiency.²⁵
- Use exercises that allow clients to explore their values, needs, aspirations, fears, preferences and relationships.²⁶
- Help clients assess the positive and negative factors that affect them as a means of increasing their awareness and enabling them to focus on the positive factors.²⁷
- Teach your clients the skill of positive reframing to promote positive thinking. Show them how to rephrase off-hand negative comments, such as “How could I be so stupid?” into positive affirmations, such as “I am in error, but I am smart.”²⁸
- Help clients determine at least three things they are good at and write these as affirmations to be read daily.
- Use your knowledge and your network to adequately inform and refer clients. Your competency will eliminate clients’ feelings of being shuffled back and forth from agency to agency, program to program. This shuffling quite often results in clients experiencing each of these incidents as a personal failure.²⁹
- Focus on helping your clients develop a better understanding of themselves. This will help them cope more effectively with negative feelings, feel more positive about themselves and facilitate their ability to create and pursue opportunities.³⁰

Help clients manage personal change and problem-solving by using the following techniques:

- relaxation training
- systematic desensitization
- assertiveness training
- modeling
- videotaping of role playing³¹

Strength-based approach

Building on strengths

“Every day is a new day. It’s important to focus on the positives and to see small successes. To us practitioners, they may be small, but for clients they are huge. Showing up clean and on time may be a big step. Keeping a job for one week or one month might be huge. It is important to look back at the person’s history and where they’ve come from and where they are now, to see the success, the movement.”

Tricia Haggarty

Central Alberta Housing Society

Counsellors acknowledge that using a strength-based approach does not mean ignoring the challenges that clients face. An important part of the process of helping clients with low income is helping them identify challenges and strategies that might address those challenges. A strength-based approach will effectively help clients identify strategies to address current challenges and move forward with career building.

Counsellors provide the following strategies to stay strength based and client focused:

- Listen, listen, listen. Try to understand clients' worlds, the vastness of their journeys, the twists and turns their journeys have taken.
- Allow client direction for topics and work options. Keep giving the control and decision making back to clients.
- Provide confirmation of clients' positive statements about abilities, dreams and values.
- Look for any motivating factors that light them up, such as money to buy_____, time away from kids, role model for_____.
- Give hope, encourage dreams and help clients develop some roots for those dreams.
- Separate goals into short- and long-term goals. Work with small manageable steps.
- No matter what biases you may develop about clients' past or present situations, think positively and believe in their potential.

Resilience, or the capacity to bounce back from adversity, is itself a strength. While persons with low incomes face complex issues and challenges, they also, in many cases, demonstrate a remarkable degree of resilience in handling the stresses and problems in their lives.

If clients have difficulty identifying their own strengths, ask the following, or similar, questions:

- What has worked for you before?
- What's happening right now?
- What have you been thinking about as far as work goes?
- If you could take pictures of your future, what would you like to see in those pictures?³²

Self-advocacy

An important role for counsellors includes helping clients to become self-advocates. Information can be a powerful tool. Clients will benefit from an awareness of programs, services and benefits available to them and their children. As self-advocates, they are best able to access such benefits. It is important for counsellors to maintain current information regarding the variety of programs and services available to clients federally, provincially and locally.³³

Multidisciplinary teams

Many lower income clients face multidimensional challenges. No one counsellor or agency is likely to have the resources to help clients through their complex situations. Experts in the field suggest a multidisciplinary approach.

A successful multidisciplinary approach requires that agencies work together to support clients and their movement forward. Some suggestions to make this approach work follow.

To gather information, ask clients questions such as these:

- What agencies are you connected with?
- What are your goals?
- How can we assist you?

You also may want to ask clients to sign permission forms that allow sharing of information with all collaborating agencies. Explain why you are collecting the information and how it will be used. Be sure to follow the requirements of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP).

With the multidisciplinary team, consider these approaches:

- Work from a strength-based approach.
- Check egos at the door and keep the clients' best interests as the focus.
- Collaborate to support clients in moving forward toward their identified goals.

Facilitated referrals

Facilitating effective referrals requires broad knowledge of community resources.

Your contacts in resource organizations will be invaluable.

Some suggestions for making facilitated referrals include the following:

- Take time up front with clients to identify their needs.
- Ask clients what other agencies they are receiving services from.
- Know the resources available in your community and their special areas of service.
- Try to know the people and their special areas of expertise in the agencies providing services.
- Ensure clients go to the person in the agency who can provide the most effective help.
- If clients fall between the cracks, help them brainstorm names of agencies that can provide necessary services.
- Encourage agencies to be flexible regarding their mandates.

Helping clients build hope

Hope for a better future

“Acknowledge strengths and build on hope for the future. There is a human desire for the life of kids to be better. Even when coming from challenging circumstances, there is still hope and desire that for the kids, things will be better.”

Phil O’Hara

Edmonton Social Planning Council

Helping clients explore the role of hope in their lives can be a helpful strategy, as it

- provides physiological and psychological benefits that impact communication and decision making
- reduces anxiety about and fear of the future
- increases the likelihood of risking, keeping commitments and allowing exploration of alternative futures³⁴

Some strategies to enhance hope for clients include

- actively listening to people’s stories and acknowledging their losses and challenges
- using hopeful language, such as “yet,” “when” and “I believe,” which indicates that change is possible
- helping clients see the positives and find learning in their experiences
- helping clients explore alternative and hopeful possibilities³⁵

Looking to the future

Addressing clients’ present circumstances and related challenges is extremely important. At the same time, practitioners can emphasize the importance of looking to the future. To help clients focus on the future, try these strategies:

- Take time to get to know clients and to build a relationship with them.
- Plant seeds regarding clients’ future vision while strategizing to address short-term needs.
- Ask clients what they want their future to look like. Use questions and prompts that are meaningful for each individual.
- Help clients identify how they might move in their preferred direction. While clients’ hopes may seem unrealistic or unobtainable to counsellors, it is not the job of the counsellor to judge clients’ visions or dash their hopes. Helping clients articulate how they might move towards their vision is an effective strategy that ensures the career-building process is client owned and client driven.
- Accept that a six-month vision may be as far ahead as clients can imagine, given their present circumstances.

- Accept that building a vision is a process and may happen a little bit at a time.
- Seize opportunities to work with young single parents who, with new babies, may be quite hopeful and particularly open to planning for the future.

Helping clients with motivation

Empowering clients

“Keep trying to give ownership back to clients. When they come in, ask, ‘What has brought you in?’ This question provides information clarifying if someone has sent them and whether they are aware of why they are here. Give clients an overview of what is available: ‘Here are the things that we can do here. Does it sound like any of these might work for you?’ This question facilitates client buy-in. Try hard to keep giving it back to them; it is their decision.”

Lynn Crump
Alberta Employment and Immigration,
Cold Lake

To help clients with motivation, counsellors need to assess their clients’ current motivation, recognize competence and use locus of control to help clients take ownership of their future.

This process takes time, but it yields long-term benefits for clients.

- *Assessment.* Assess clients’ motivation. Why are they here to see you? Did they come of their own volition or because “the system” required them to? What activities do clients engage in on an average day? Who are clients in daily contact with?³⁶

- *Client competence.* Recognize competence in clients. Position yourself as one who reinforces clients’ competence to enhance their motivation. Identify and resolve any barriers in your relationships with clients.³⁷
- *Locus of control.* Determine if clients have an extrinsic or intrinsic locus of control. An extrinsic locus is related to outer-directed behaviour, that is, behaviour driven by the expectations of others. An intrinsic locus is related to inner-directed behaviour or behaviour that is self-driven. It is important that clients take ownership in choosing their own goals (an example of an intrinsic locus of control). Clients will be motivated only by making their own choices and setting their own goals.³⁸

Goals and visions

Helping clients relate their goals to their vision is a critical part of the career-building process. Any goal that helps clients move toward their vision is relevant and meaningful. The counsellor’s role involves helping clients define and implement their goals.

Show clients how to break their goals into manageable steps using short- and long-term goals. Encourage clients to keep chosen goals realistic, achievable and motivating. Encourage clients to assess their goals, modify them as necessary and identify the steps they are taking to accomplish their goals.

Some clients will take longer than others to complete the steps towards their goals but are likely to be motivated by counsellor support. Counsellors are encouraged to discuss any difficulties clients may be having with them.³⁹

Helping clients build support systems

A frequently cited experience of unemployed persons, including those receiving income support, is isolation and lack of social support. In this situation, *social support* is defined as the perception that a person is cared for, esteemed and valued and belongs to a network of people who communicate and act on mutual obligation.⁴⁰

Considerable research shows that social support can be an important resource in times of stress. Research studies on social support for persons with low income suggest the following:

- Verbal support of family and friends may actually send contradictory messages if the legitimacy or importance of finding work is downplayed.⁴¹
- Positive support tends to be particularly important for older workers over 45, since they tend to become discouraged and drop out of the labour market.⁴²
- Entire families of unemployed individuals often become isolated due to humiliation and loss of self-esteem.⁴³
- Families may break up when the stress of unemployment becomes too unbearable.⁴⁴

Signs of social support

“People who have resources can pump each other up. Grandma can go and buy winter coats for the kids [that a parent can’t afford]. Someone else can share the use of the car. And, that car will probably work, so that it doesn’t break down or run out of gas on the way to the job interview.”

Marjorie Bencz
Edmonton Food Bank

Helping clients build relationships

A common characteristic for many persons with low income is a feeling of isolation and social exclusion. Counsellors can use a number of strategies to help clients build relationships, including group counselling or referrals to peer support groups. Employment training programs can also reduce the feelings of isolation: in one study, enrolling in an employment training program was the most positive critical incident reported.⁴⁵

Peer support groups can be particularly helpful, especially for women.⁴⁶ Provide referrals for clients to a peer support group, if available. If an appropriate group does not exist, counsellors may consider establishing a group in their area.

It will also be useful to help clients learn self-management skills that build and maintain a social support network. Since the supportive messages most valued by unemployed persons come from peers in a similar situation, encourage clients to develop a personal network of peers.⁴⁷

Where possible, maintain frequent and ongoing contact with clients to develop a trusting relationship.⁴⁸

Strategies for building life skills

Some persons with low income will benefit from training in life skills that develops positive attitudes and skills in communication, time management, stress management and financial management.⁴⁹

Attitudes

Use modeling and role plays to demonstrate positive attitudes and their effects on other people. For example, ask the client to role play asking or phoning someone for information. For the first role play, ask the client to display a good attitude and for the second role play, a bad attitude. Discuss how positive and negative attitudes affect our lives.

Communication skills

Help clients learn to

- speak clearly
- actively listen
- paraphrase
- use questioning skills appropriately
- use “I” statements, especially in potential conflict situations⁵⁰

Time management

Help clients become familiar with

- using a daily or weekly planner
- making appointments
- documenting meetings, appointments, names and phone numbers

When clients find work, they may experience an apparent lack of time. Talk with them about using time management skills to deal with the work adjustment period.

Stress management

Help clients to use the following strategies:

- Identify how stress will build up if not handled appropriately.
- Recognize and prevent burnout.
- Identify constant stress factors in life.
- Find a positive form of stress release that works for them.
- Realize that because stress is ongoing, stress release must also be ongoing.

Financial management

It is important for counsellors to be aware of the financial situations of clients who are receiving low income, as well as the limitations this situation will impose, such as lack of funds for transportation, child care and work clothes.⁵¹ Some clients may be excellent money managers, having survived on extremely limited funds. At the same time, many benefit from financial planning information provided in either group or individual settings. Also important is information about dealing with the stress that arises from financial deprivation and the inability to provide necessities for one's family.⁵²

Stretching the dollars

"Persons with low income are some of the best money managers that I have ever met. Some are really able to stretch their dollars beyond what many can. They manage incredibly difficult situations and keep on going when many would give up."

Phil O'Hara

Edmonton Social Planning Council

Counsellors are encouraged to become familiar with financial assistance programs and help clients get more information about income exemptions and health coverage available to them.

Helping clients explore education options

Education and training are important aspects of helping persons with low income move forward. Some suggestions you might use include the following:

- Encourage clients to consider how further education and training may be beneficial.
- Encourage clients to upgrade their education and training, if possible.
- Provide information regarding various options, including individual courses, part-time and full-time programs and funding that might be available.
- As funding options may have limits, encourage clients to consider education goals for long-term solutions as opposed to using education for a quick fix, such as training to fill a temporary labour shortage.
- Encourage clients to consider enrolling in one course per term if that is most appropriate, given their additional family and life commitments.
- Become familiar with not-for-profit organizations in your area that offer literacy and related programs.
- Provide clients with appropriate referrals.

- Encourage clients to participate in technology training. Such knowledge and skills improve marketability and enhance confidence.
- Help clients take advantage of available work placement or on-the-job training programs.

Focusing on Employment

Encourage clients to participate in information interviews, job shadowing opportunities and volunteering. These activities will be of particular value to clients with low literacy levels.

Helping clients with work search

As with all clients, persons with low income will benefit from information regarding specific work search skills.

Networking

An effective strategy related to work search is to use personal networks to access the hidden job market for positions that are open but not advertised. Clients with low income may not have access to a broad variety and quality of work through their own personal networks. Research suggests that, in some cases, networks of persons with low income may be limited, so relying on those contacts will limit the opportunities available to them. “The social networks of the urban poor are constrained by family poverty and by segregation into poor neighbourhoods, both of which reduce the number of employed network members.”⁵³

“Job-related social networks of women may be even more restricted for mothers of young children... Similar to poor and minority job seekers, gender-based network constraints of this sort disconnect many women from potentially resourceful job contacts that can lead to better jobs. It is one reason why some argue that formal methods of finding jobs, that allow women to get beyond the limits of their network resources, promote better employment outcomes for women.”⁵⁴

Given the possible limitations of clients’ personal networks, counsellors can assist clients in finding ways to expand their networks and access other work opportunities.

Alternatives to full-time employment

Help clients become creative in their work search by combining different jobs or types of work to achieve full-time work. For example, if clients enjoy seasonal work, help them

- investigate ways of continuing seasonal work as year-round work
- explore training for complementary seasonal employment, such as
 - landscaper in summer and greenhouse labourer in winter
 - school bus driver in winter and farm labourer in summer

Resumés

Consider helping clients prepare their resumés:

- Help clients build resumés reflecting identified skills and strengths.⁵⁵
- Use resumé-building as a self-esteem and confidence-building experience for clients.
- Help clients identify transferable skills based on previous experiences, including both life and work experiences.
- Help clients access computers so that they can independently adapt resumés and cover letters for specific jobs.
- Provide appropriate referrals for clients with low literacy skills who may require assistance in preparing their work search materials.

Providing employment supports

Clients may require ongoing support as they adjust to employment. Self-esteem, self-confidence and, in some cases, anxiety related to moving away from income support may be factors that lead to challenges in the workplace.

Clients may benefit from assistance and support regarding problem-solving, decision-making and other workplace challenges.

Needs that frequently have an impact on employment include

- child care
- transportation
- appropriate clothing for work environments
- warm clothing in cold climates
- nutrition, including food for lunch at work

To help clients maintain employment, counsellors can help clients anticipate challenges and plan accordingly.

Workplace skills

Help clients appreciate the importance of the following behaviours while at work:

- grooming, cleanliness and appearance
- punctuality, such as being on time for shifts and meetings
- basic worker rights and responsibilities, which may be clarified by procedure manuals for specific jobs
- respect for co-workers
- respect for their employer
- appreciation of the benefits of employment

Job advancements

“One promising strategy for rewarding work seeks to create career ladders to enable low-wage workers to advance through a progression of higher-skilled and better-paid jobs.”⁵⁶ While this approach is typically structured and available through collaborative efforts of employers, training institutions and unions, counsellors can help clients duplicate the concept in their approach to career building. On-the-job experience combined with formal or on-site training are key aspects of this approach.

If clients are considering or are employed in entry-level jobs, encourage them to find out more about potential advancement:

- Ask questions about the possibility of advancement.
- Ask about on-the-job training provided by the organization.
- Consider the characteristics of the organization.

In Conclusion

Persons with low income face tremendously complex challenges. Counsellors consistently reinforce the importance of using a non-judgemental approach when working with clients. Counsellors need to take time to listen to clients and to collaborate with colleagues in a multidisciplinary approach. Practitioners identify resilience as an important quality frequently demonstrated by clients. Helping clients identify and address existing issues while building on their strengths will provide a sound base for future-oriented career building.

Endnotes

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