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Program addressing needs of low income earners

Catherine Whitnall

For: www.thepost.ca

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Years ago, many individuals experiencing barriers to employment literally fell through the cracks.

Today, a special partnership between the City of Kawartha Lakes' social services and a dynamic new Community Living Kawartha Lakes is helping address employment needs of low income residents.

Job Quest is an employment program targeted to meet the needs of people with high barriers to employment. These barriers prohibit people from obtaining and, in other cases, maintaining, employment. There is a wide range of barriers that many people cannot overcome solely with financial assistance such as literacy challenges, difficulty focusing and completing tasks, stress, anxiety and depression, chronic pain, visual, hearing and other physical impairments and requiring extra time to perform work duties.

"We are here to assist people with hidden barriers to find employment," said Dorla Pearn, Job Quest program supervisor, noting the service is the only one of its kind in the area designated with this mandate. "In fact, that's where the whole initiative came from."

Pearn explained the program has been running for about three years with the city partnership coming courtesy of current mayor Ric McGee. A councillor at the time, McGee was concerned about residents who were struggling to make ends meet and were desperate to find employment, but were experiencing difficulties accessing opportunities. McGee brought Pearn and city social services manager Rod Sutherland together and the rest, as they say, is history.

Sutherland is thrilled to be part of the Job Quest program.

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"The social assistance case load, in the last 10 years or so, has seen a steady number of those who have social barriers to finding employment," said Sutherland. "We have been changing our programs over the last few years to try and make them more focussed on addressing the needs of our clients and assist them in finding - and maintaining - independence."

In recent months, clients have enjoyed many successful employment outcomes, much in part due to the successful partnership with Job Quest.

But it's more than just finding someone a job, notes Pearn.

Every client has a support worker who assists them in indentifying what services and programs they need, and what barriers they need to overcome. Each person is assessed in terms of a broad spectrum of facets ranging from personal interests and abilities to past experience and education. Referrals to specific agencies are made where necessary.

Through Job Quest, clients can access employment planning, pre-employment skills training, assistance for training, certification or licenses, job placement and access to adaptive technology and assistive devices. Support workers also assist clients with life skill development such as goal setting, self-esteem and job readiness.

"We look at it as an access point," said Pearn.

Clients meet with assistant employment counsellor Gloria Clark who has an extensive human resources background as well as Andrew Hodgson - who gained a great deal of contacts through his time with Victoria County Career Services. Staff continue to work with clients through the hiring process, including setting up job trials where the client works (unpaid) for two or three weeks to determine whether the job is a good fit.

"Liking a job is a very important factor in keeping a job," said Sutherland.

Job Quest participants remain on social assistance until it is determined it is no longer necessary and case workers remain connected to clients throughout the process.

"There are so many options available based on income and criteria," said Sutherland. "It's not just about finding the shortest route to employment. It's about developing long-term strategies and helping people retain their independence. It's an investment in the future." Supports are also available through Job Quest to assist with such things as transportation, tools and clothing.

"We don't stop at just getting them employment. We continue to work with them as long as we're needed. We want them to succeed," said Pearn.

Job Quest has recently moved to 64 Lindsay St. W.

For more information on the program and services please call 878-5627 or visit their website at www.Job-Quest.ca.

cwhitnall@thepost.ca