

Catch the wave

by Sid Tafler

Trading welfare for work under a BC government contract

WORK OR WELFARE – a perennial issue in Canada and much of the rest of the developed world.

Most Canadians would agree that people in need who are unable to work should receive welfare benefits. But many also believe that people should work if they are able, both for their own benefit and the greater society. But the transition from welfare to work is easier said than done. Many people who have been out of work for years barely know how to begin their job search, let alone find and keep a job.

In British Columbia, a private company under contract to the BC government has had more success than any other similar venture in the country at helping welfare clients find jobs. WCG International Consultants Ltd. held a celebration at their downtown Victoria Customer Support Centre earlier this year to mark the company's 30,000th job placement since WCG first signed a contract to help 25 people find work in the Victoria region in 1995.

"All of you who are working here have done exceptional work for people across the province," Premier Gordon Campbell told the gathering of 50 employees.

"Our task is all about making BC a better place to live and work in, one job at a time," said WCG President and CEO Ian

Ferguson. "To know we've made a difference in the lives of 30,000 people and their families and employers is very gratifying."

In the last 10 years, the contract between the BC government and WCG has been renegotiated six times and expanded across the province to every region and sector of the economy. Nearly every time, WCG exceeded their job placement target, finding jobs for 33 people in 1995 and, between January 2000 and June 2002, for more than 10,000 when the goal was 7,000 placements.

WCG estimates this program, known as JobWave™, has saved the province more than \$100 million in welfare payments.

And not all those jobs are at entry level. The average wage of JobWave clients is \$11.49/hr, 43 percent above minimum wage, and about three times as much as they received on social assistance. WCG research indicates that 80 percent of JobWave clients remain employed and off the welfare system.

Behind the numbers and milestones is the premise that most people collecting welfare would prefer to work, but need some help overcoming barriers and navigating the employment marketplace. To achieve this, WCG developed a multi-pronged strategy that involves tens of thousands of busi-

nesses across the province and ensures that every job seeker is well trained and equipped to enter the workforce.

Each client is assigned a placement coordinator who helps develop a résumé and provides personal career coaching. Clients are also given a variety of training seminars on subjects such as job-search techniques, interviewing skills and job retention. Some are also offered specific skills-based courses such as hazardous materials handling and security guard training. Many of these programs are delivered at JobWave centres in nine communities across the province, staffed by career coaches who have the autonomy and flexibility to find jobs and are equipped with computers, copiers and fax machines clients use in job searches.

But perhaps the most important advantage provided to clients is access to thousands of job leads developed by the JobWave Customer Solutions Department, a phone bank located in central Victoria. The centre makes more than 300,000 calls a year to businesses across the province looking for work for JobWave clients. They also provide employer solutions representatives in each region of the province to establish relationships with businesses and search out job opportunities.

“At all times, the focus of the program is to find meaningful, unsubsidized employment for our clients,” says Ferguson.

The program is also supported by exclusive partnerships with the BC Chamber of Commerce and 43 local chambers who market and promote JobWave to its members. “Our relationship with the chambers gives us credibility with small businesses throughout BC,” Ferguson said.

The company has also developed software to manage client files and to assist clients in their job searches. CaseFLO™ is a case management system with job matching technology that helps match clients’ skills and interests to available employ-

ment in their area. And YourCareerWave.com, co-developed with Axia NetMedia Corporation of Calgary, is a Web portal that links users’ skills and interests with a database of more than 400 job profiles.

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A major barrier to employment is often the money required for the job search – expenses such as clothing and transportation. Placement coordinators supply funds for bus passes, work boots, uniforms, even car insurance for clients who find jobs as truck drivers or delivery people.

Helping a client find a job is only the beginning. The objective is to work with the client to remain on the job and independent of welfare. JobWave personnel keep in touch with clients for up to 24 months to ensure they remain employed and often work with employers to overcome problems that arise on the job. Some clients don’t stay with their first job and require help finding a second or third placement.

This long-term link between JobWave and its clients is a key element of the program – and of WCG’s compensation from the BC Ministry of Human Resources. JobWave is a performance-based contract, based specifically on employment and

job retention, not job training or referral. The company is paid a series of milestone payments over a period of 19 months of client employment and independence from welfare. WCG does not collect its full fee unless the client remains employed for more than a year and a half.

nerships with organizations like WCG’s JobWave and the BC Chamber of Commerce – successfully working together to find jobs for British Columbians and skilled labour for British Columbian businesses.”

The BC government offers nothing but encouragement for its contract with WCG. “Government is committed to helping BC businesses find the employees they need to prosper and grow and to helping income assistance clients realize their potential through good employment opportunities,” said BC Minister of Human Resources Susan Brice. “That’s why we value our part-

The partnership has been so successful it was adapted recently to a new WCG program called Triumph Vocational Services, which provides similar services for people with disabilities.

JobWave has attracted the attention of the Ottawa-based Conference Board of Canada, which has studied similar programs, known as Labour Market Transition Models, across Canada, in the US and Europe. Kurtis Kitagawa, senior research associate at the Conference Board wrote the report “Making the Skills Connection,

Labour Market Transition Models that Work.” According to him, several factors distinguish JobWave from many other programs.

For one thing, JobWave focuses on job placement, while other programs are more directed at job training and job-search skills but don’t actually find employment for clients. Another factor is ongoing relationships with employers. “They actually build partnerships with business to identify real business needs and then go about filling those needs,” he said. “They have a well-established employer network mediated by the BC and local chambers of commerce. A lot of labour market transition Programs have not managed to place people; they are not sustainable. But in this case, the government is getting specific measurable results for the money invested – 30,000 people have been removed from the welfare rolls.”

Another important and distinguishing factor is the linkage of payments to WCG to actual performance. “If they are not successful in placing people, they don’t get paid,” said Kitagawa. “WCG walks the talk; they deliver the jobs.”

Sid Tafler is a Victoria journalist who has covered provincial government in Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia. He is former editor of Monday magazine.

Ed. Note: On April 28, 2005 Ontario announced that it has entered into a pilot program with WCG International to move people off the provincial welfare system (Ontario Works) and not only get them back into the workforce, but into sustainable jobs. WCG will be paid based on actual savings achieved through its partnership with the province and participating municipalities. In Ontario the program is known as JobsNow (www.ontariojobsnow.com).

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