



Cowichan Tribes

5760 Allenby Road, Duncan, BC V9L 5J1

Telephone: (250) 748-3196 Fax: (250) 748-1233

NEWS RELEASE

F O R I M M E D I A T E R E L E A S E

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New Masters Degree in Social Work for First Nations

COWICHAN VALLEY, BC – After many years, the dream of a comprehensive and accessible Masters in Social Work program focussed on First Nations is finally becoming a reality – the first of its kind in Canada. Practicing social workers in First Nations communities will be able to access the program through a unique combination of on-campus and distance web-based learning, something they have been advocating for a long time, and now the University of Victoria is poised to fill the gap, with Hul’qumi’num Treaty bands leading the pilot program. The inaugural class begins today.

“The partnership is aimed at developing the specialized skills needed in First Nations social work and promoting best practices in child and family service delivery,” said Dr. Leslie Brown, Director of the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. “Unique to the program is the focus on the distinct circumstances and issues related to Aboriginal communities. First Nations history is one of generations of forced removal, adoption, and residential schools – decisions made by political authorities in which parents and First Nations communities had no choice.”

“I applaud the First Nations in the Cowichan region and the University of Victoria in their success in establishing the first comprehensive Masters degree program in First Nations Social Work in Canada,” said Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine. “This demonstration of strong leadership and determination will ensure that the services provided for our people are not only culturally appropriate but are also of high quality.”

“Unique circumstances which exist in many First Nation communities due to past colonial practices, such as the residential school policy, demand such a program,” stated the National Chief. “It is somewhat of a "specialty" and fills a need that a mainstream program cannot fully address. Such programs, and community support for such programs, will ensure a much brighter future for First Nations children and families.”

Chief Philip Stewart, President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, has been a strong advocate of First Nations rights to look after their own child welfare. “To overcome this legacy, First Nations – at both the family level and the community level - have to be re-empowered to look after child welfare themselves, feel secure that they will retain this right, and confident that they can do so,” said Stewart.

“Families have to re-establish connections that were intentionally severed, for the sake of emotional healing for both the children and the families. And for all children who have been removed from their families – and this applies to all children – research has proven that their emotional well-being depends on knowing who they are, where they come from, and who their families are.”

As with other First Nations, children are sacred to Cowichan Tribes. Every effort is made to reunite children with their families and extended families, or at least have access to their culture and identity. “It is not only the children that have to heal from this legacy but the community as well, said Harvey Alphonse, Chief of Cowichan Tribes. “Children in care are a benchmark of the health of our community. Our Child & Family Services has done a tremendous job in leading us on the road to recovery but the number of children still in care tells us that we still have far to go in our journey.”

“The legacy is still evident today by the number of First Nations children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Families – there are more in care now than historically placed in the residential schools system,” said Lise Haddock, Executive Director of Lalum’utul Smun’eem Child & Family Services at Cowichan Tribes. “The pilot we are starting today will serve as the foundation to build a stronger and more effective service delivery model based on inherent right, cultural sensitivity, and the empowerment of children, families, and their communities. It is time to provide First Nations Child and Family services through a First Nations lens.

“We are committed to building capacity within our community by enhancing our resource banks,” added Lexi Charlie, Administrator of Cowichan’s Culture & Education Department.

Contact: Mary Venneman
Communications Manager
Phone: 250-748-3196, Ext. 412
Cell: 250-709-5424
Email: mary.venneman@cowichantribes.com

Dr. Leslie Brown
Director and Associate Professor
School of Social Work, University of Victoria
Phone: 250-721-6275
Fax: 250-721-6228
Email: lbrown@uvic.ca



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Backgrounder

Historical Context

Around the turn of the century, the governments began the practice of forcibly removing First Nations children from their homes and community and sending them to residential schools miles away and for years at a time. But “education” primarily consisted of stripping them of their language and culture; very little was taught in the way of academics or life skills. In addition, the schools were notorious for their emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

Residential schools were phased out in the 1960’s, but were replaced by an equally virulent – if less well-known – strategy by the Ministry of Children and Families of adopting out or fostering aboriginal children to non-native families in the ‘60’s, 70’s, and early 80’s.

The result was successive generations of First Nations who found themselves without a clear-cut identity or a secure place in society, stranded between two cultures without the life skills or qualifications necessary to bridge the gap, and missing the role models for effective parenting. First Nations successfully fought to end these practices, but they are now left with the job of healing the scars of this legacy.

And the scars are numerous and run deep, as evidenced by disproportionate share of alcohol and drug-abuse, high school dropouts, depression and suicide rates, unemployment, and single parents among First Nations. Exacerbating the problem are infrastructure problems such as inadequate housing, health care, and resources to deal with the problems. In this context, it is clear that First Nations have a daunting task ahead of them to create the kind of community environment that will foster healthy families and children.

Need for a Masters Degree Program in First Nations Social Work

Social work practice and theory is currently taught through the lens of the provincial paradigm. It is the provincial legislation, policy, and procedures, which guides the practice. There are not enough First Nations social workers graduating from colleges and universities. There are few First Nations social workers working in the Ministry of Children and Families. The Ministry does not adequately meet the needs of First Nations children and families. Provincial legislation, financial restraints, and a Ministry in constant change compound the problem. Re-designing child welfare, its legislation and practice has reached a critical threshold.

First Nations child welfare agencies need to be staffed with First Nations professionals who understand the realities of their children, families, and communities. And schools such as the University of Victoria feel an obligation access to appropriate and relevant education for First Nations social workers is provided.

Program Development

The University of Victoria, Cowichan's Lalum'utul Smun'eem and Kwumutlelum Child & Family Services (who support other First Nations in the Hul'qumi'num Treaty group) have had a long-standing relationship. It was these agencies that pulled together the concept for a Masters degree program in First Nations Social Work.

The pilot program was designed with the input from the Provincial First Nations Child Welfare Directors, the University of Victoria's First Nations Advisory Committee, and Indigenous faculty in other schools of Social Work in British Columbia. Graduates will get a Masters in Social Work accredited by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work. Course development work is being led by Andrew Armitage, Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria.

Program Funding

Funding for the program came from:
Ministry of Advanced Education, Aboriginal Initiatives
University of Victoria
Cowichan Tribes' Child & Family Services
Cowichan Tribes' Culture and Education Department

There is no Ministry of Children and Families support or funding for this training at this time, which is also aimed at meeting the Ministry's delegation requirements. The Ministry has not yet responded to requests put forward.

Program Description and Entry Requirements

Curriculum development is part of the pilot process. The first course is *Indigenous Perspectives on Knowing and Researching*, which explores the dimensions of Indigenous ways of knowing that influences researching activities in Indigenous communities. The specialized First Nations curriculum will be developed as part of the pilot, after which the University of Victoria hopes to offer it as a regular program in the Faculty of Social Work. First Nations throughout in Canada will be able to participate through web-based distance education.

Students are required to take eight courses and complete a thesis or major research project. It is anticipated that it will take students four to five years to complete.

There are 15 students enrolled in the pilot program; with the majority being First Nations. All of the students hold a Bachelors degree in Social Work or equivalent, and meet the standard entry requirements of the existing Masters program plus have experience in working in First Nations communities.

Biographies

Leslie Brown, Associate Professor and Director of the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, has been teaching social work at UVic since 1989. She holds a BSW from the University of Regina, a Masters degree in Public Administration from UVic and completed her PhD in 1996 at UVic where she focused on Aboriginal Governance. Aside from teaching in the School of Social Work, she is a core faculty member in the Masters of Indigenous Governance Program. Currently, she is involved in three collaborative research projects: Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren, Fathering in Child Welfare, and the History of Aboriginal Child Welfare in B.C. She has recently completed a co-edited book (expected publication release spring 2005 by Canadian Scholars Press) with Dr. Susan Strega titled Research As Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches. Some other publications include:

Andrew Armitage is a Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. His principal teaching and scholarly interests are: social policy, child welfare policy and practice, Aboriginal policy, international comparative social policy, administration and management, social work education. Andrew's current research interests are in the fields of child welfare policy and practice, social work education, interdisciplinary child welfare practice, Aboriginal social policy and international comparative child welfare policy.

Cowichan Tribes has taken a leadership role in First Nations child welfare in BC. Lalum'utul Smun'eem, Cowichan's Child & Family Centre, received partial delegation in 1994, and full delegation in 1996, the second in BC to do so. Since then, it has been a leader in stemming the tide of children going into care and reducing the removal rate. Lalum'utul Smun'eem's work has been used in the development of templates for subsequent First Nations Child & Welfare agencies. Executive Director Lise Haddock was also instrumental in setting up the Vancouver Island First Nations Directors Child Welfare Forum. Lalum'utul Smun'eem has also formed a strong partnership with the Caring for First Nations Children Society (Victoria) and together they share the joint task of providing social work training and developing capacity in First Nations communities. Lise Haddock sits as a Vice President on the Board.

Related References

Web Site Links

<http://www.fncfcs.com/pubs/onlineJournal.html>

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