

**SUPPORTS FOR INDEPENDENCE
(SOCIAL ASSISTANCE)
PRIOR TO UPGRADING**

Prepared for the
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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1. Background

During the Summer of 2000, Northern Lakes College proposed to other members of the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse that research be undertaken on changing the distribution of Skill Development Program learner grants from the beginning to the end of each month, similar to the payment of a wage in an employment situation. Other Clearinghouse members agreed that such research would be of value to them as well.

Under the Alberta Vocational Training Program, the precursor of the Skills Development Program, learners received grant payments at the end of each month. Those who support end of month payments of learner grants believe that learners are more inclined to attend and take part in their programs when grants are paid at the end of each month instead of the beginning of the month.

The Skills Development Program offered through Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) provides adult Albertans in financial need with access to the basic education and training necessary to increase their employability and employment. In 1999-00, 14,150 Albertans were enrolled in Basic Foundation Skills Training through the Skills Development Program. (Alberta Human Resources and Employment. *Annual Report 1999- 2000*). Those Albertans who are receiving Supports for Independence (social assistance) may be eligible to receive grant funding for tuition, books, and living allowance.

2. Creation of the Skills Development Program Review Team

In September 2000, Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) established the Skills Development Program (SDP) Review Team. It consisted of staff from AHRE, Alberta Learning, and public and private providers. The purpose of the Skills Development Program Review has been to:

- Identify and assess current SDP program issues.
- Seek ways to better meet the needs of adult learners.
- Consider how to better prepare learners for today's work force.

While exact membership in the Skills Development Review Team is unknown, it is known that Northern Lakes College has a representative on the Team.

The Skills Development Program Review Team began its work by reviewing Skills Development Program issues. It held consultations with public and private providers in November 2000. In early 2001, the Review Team vetted a number of possible changes to the Skills Development Program.

The Review Team is currently in the process of developing a Ministerial Report which will be going forward to the AHRE Executive Team (the Deputy Minister and Assistant Deputy Ministers) for review in March prior to being sent to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment in late March or early April 2001. There is also the possibility that the Review Team's recommendations may go forward to the Standing Policy Committee of the Alberta Legislature for its consideration.

The Minister's Report on the Skills Development Program Review is a "work in progress". As such, its recommendations are confidential at this time. However, during the Review Team's consultations in November, public and private providers raised as an issue the distribution of grants at the beginning of each month. Given the frequent identification of this issue by these stakeholders, it seems likely that the Skill Development Program Review Team may recommend that Skill Development Program grant payments be made to learners at the end of each month. However, specific recommendations by the Review Team, and their resulting implications, must await final AHRE analysis and approval.

3. Other Issues Related to Supports for Independence (SFI) Recipients and the Skills Development Program

a. Eligibility of SFI Recipients

Being in receipt of SFI does not appear to negatively affect a person's ability to access grant funding under the Skills Development Program. SFI recipients are eligible for the program and comprise a significant, though unknown, portion of the Skills Development Program learner population.

Someone receiving SFI has the same entry requirements for the Skills Development Program as other Albertans. In order to be in a position to qualify for the Skills Development Program, current program criteria requires that a person must be:

- Unable to obtain or maintain a sustainable job due to a lack of basic academic skills;
- An Alberta resident;
- Eighteen years of age or older when Skills Development Program funding begins;
- Out of the regular school system for one calendar year or having parents receiving SFI and be turning 18 years of age;
- In financial need (unable to get funding for training anywhere else and have no other means of paying for training);
- Planning the return to school carefully; and,
- Planning to attend an approved school on a full-time basis (taking at least three subjects for upgrading high school courses or, if enrolled in a program other than high school upgrading, the program must have at least 20 – 25 hours per week of classroom instruction). (Alberta Human Resources and Employment/Alberta Learning. *Stepping Stones to Work. A Description of the Skills Development Program 2000- 2001*).

b. Issue of Learners Leaving Program

Public and private providers of the Skills Development Program have raised the issue of learners leaving programs once they receive their last payment without completing the full term/year. There is no specific data to identify the significance of this factor in contributing to early program withdrawal. However, changing the grant payment for learners under the Skills Development Program to the end of the month could act as an incentive for learners to complete their program.

4. Conclusion

The Skills Development Program Review Team's recommendations are currently being developed and are confidential. Once the Team's recommendations are reviewed and approved by AHRE's Executive Team and the Minister, they will be circulated to public and private program providers. At that time, the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse members may wish to revisit the Skills Development Program grant payment issue.

5. Sources

Alberta Human Resources and Employment/Alberta Learning. *Stepping Stones to Work. A Description of the Skills Development Program 2000-2001.*

Alberta Human Resources and Employment. *Annual Report 1999-2000).*