

Does Working for Welfare Work?

BY TIM DEVLIN

“I’ve led an interesting life, in the Chinese sense of the word interesting. I was almost 42 when I returned to Canada penniless and applied for welfare for the first time in my life—after spending 18 months in a Bangkok prison. I have no trade skills, so Calgary’s booming construction industry was not an option for me. I began applying for simple labouring positions, unloading trucks, factory production lines—jobs I would have had no trouble getting 20 years earlier. Nobody wanted to hire me, and after years of drug addiction and a trip through a surreal Third World death camp, I was terrified of life in all of its jangling chords. I fully accept responsibility for the situation I found myself in, but it was frightening nevertheless, and I eagerly grasped at the hope that Alberta Job Corps purported to represent.”

Marianne (all names have been changed) is a single mother of two teenage children. After a serious illness she lost her job and became a statistic on the provincial welfare rolls. She was drafted into Alberta Job Corps, the Alberta government’s work-for-welfare program, and has since found an office job—a “stepping stone.” She says the program provided motivation at the “right time” in her life. Marianne is a true success story, but she looked decidedly out of place at Alberta Job Corps. An intelligent and well-read 41-year-old, she was hardly a typical recruit. Given the mandate of the program it’s difficult to understand why she was drafted in the first place.

Alberta Job Corps (AJC), or “the Corps” as some of the troops laughingly refer to it, was ostensibly set up to get the chronically unemployed back to work. The program was launched in 1995 with plenty of fanfare. It is administered by Supports for Independence (SFI), which falls under the Ministry of Human Resources and Employment.

According to internal SFI documents, the Job Corps is intended for welfare recipients who are poor candidates for “academic upgrading or formal skill development.” They have “issues” ruling them out of other government programs because “they would not be hired or would drop out of jobs after short stints.” These “issues” include alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness. While acknowledging the client group in question is unsuitable

for “pre-employment training” or “training on the job,” the document warns they are in danger of being cut off financial support: “For these clients Alberta Job Corps is the last opportunity.”

Cecelia is in her early 40s and she wants to work, but has been diagnosed as suffering from bipolar disorder. Mathew is 32 years old and able bodied, but he was in a car crash in 1994, suffers from severe brain scarring, seizures, alcoholism and serious anger management issues. Subsisting on welfare since the crash, living in a seedy downtown hotel, Mathew says when he was referred to AJC, he was interested “right off the bat.”

After interviews, Cecelia and Mathew were asked to sign documents and congratulated as new recruits making \$5.65 an hour, the minimum wage at the time. Both were told they would be learning marketable skills directly transferable into the workplace, supplemented with training courses including the handling of dangerous goods and first aid. If they had the right stuff for the Corps they would move into lead hand positions and receive \$7.50 an hour. They were also told that 80 per cent of the people in the AJC program were off financial assistance one year later. “She (the employment development worker) glorified it and made it sound like I was going to come out with something, and it sounded like a real good program,” says Mathew. But instead, he discovered “it’s a joke.”

He says all he did during his time at AJC was paint, and



“not very well.” Mathew complains he found the experience, “very, very disorganized” and “confusing,” and says he learned very little in the way of marketable skills. Mathew “flipped out” on several occasions and says his anger problems grew worse because of the frustration he felt. He was taking an expensive medication to control seizures. Before AJC, Mathew’s prescriptions were covered by SFI. He maintains he couldn’t afford to buy his medication working at minimum wage, and he quit after SFI refused to help pay for it. Mathew didn’t have enough hours for Employment Insurance benefits and was refused welfare because he had quit AJC. He later approached the Southern Alberta Brain Injury Society, which is helping him with a claim under the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program. Mathew adds that paying minimum wage to people who have been trapped in the system is not enough incentive to motivate anyone. He feels that raising the wage “even a dollar” would be enough to stimulate people to “get something going with their life.”

Cecelia has also found it hard to pay for her medication at minimum wage and no benefits. “It’s a catch 22” Cecelia sighs, “I’m so fed up.” She has stopped taking one medication, which costs \$150 per month.

Alberta Job Corps operates in Calgary, Edmonton and the two northern corners of the province. According to a

government spokesman the program cost \$8.8-million last year. Province-wide, 938 welfare clients were hired. The Regional Income and Employment Program Management Committee, composed of the managers from district SFI offices, meets monthly. Attached to the minutes from a meeting held in 1999 are statistics circulated by Donna Daniluck, the manager of Alberta Job Corps. The numbers show that even with pressure to keep the program supplied with bodies, it was only operating at “about 60 per cent of capacity.” Highlights from a study by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation were also attached to the minutes. The study notes that while successfully enforcing a work-for-benefits approach, “workfare programs have not reduced caseloads or led to unsubsidized employment.” More disturbing is another “key lesson” the document identifies: “Welfare-to-work programs have not usually increased the overall incomes to families,” because “increased earnings have largely been offset by reductions in benefits.”

A confidential source who works for Supports for Independence explains that the province’s galloping economy and tightened eligibility requirements have led to a big drop in the number of welfare recipients in recent years. He says that while AJC draws its employees from a diminished client base, pressure at the district welfare offices ensures clients are referred to AJC. Social workers try to screen those who are obviously unsuitable, but others are directed to the program simply to find out what is wrong. He agrees it’s an expensive way to weed out the unemployable and says part of the screening problem lies in the fact the provincial government has “de-skilled” the profession. He points out that in the last few years, people with no training, some with “nothing more than Grade 10,” were promoted from secretarial jobs into front line positions as financial benefit workers.

Single mothers make up a significant percentage of recruits at AJC. Many have children under school age; some have children under the age of one. The SFI source explains that once a baby is six months old, mothers are required to look for work, some type of job preparation program or school “even if the woman is breastfeeding.” In some cases he says, women are forced into low paying jobs, and the daycare bill, which SFI picks up, means the government actually loses money on the deal. He calls the guidelines a “harsh, harsh policy,” and describes as hypocritical the cries of “family values” from members of the Klein government. He feels that women “should not be referred to Job Corps because the chance of their being able to support their families is slim to none.”

In Calgary AJC operates out of a building in a busy northeast warehouse district. The comprehensive program claims to develop basic plumbing, electrical, automotive, carpentry and painting skills. The schedule is laid out in week-by-week modules which combine training with on-site work experience. In the last weeks of what is supposed

to be a six-month program, the emphasis shifts and participants begin actively searching for a full-time job.

Eight Employment Development Workers (EDWs) oversee the clients daily. Four of them are social workers. The rest are skilled tradesmen or journeymen who have abandoned the volatile construction industry for the questionably more secure bosom of the Alberta government. Ministry spokesman Tom Neufeld says that to qualify to work at AJC tradesmen have to possess proven supervisory experience. He says they are encouraged to take “human services training” but that is not a mandatory requirement.

Serious ethical questions arise when construction workers are placed in charge of welfare clients. Three women interviewed say they saw inappropriate behaviour that would not have been tolerated in the private sector, let alone in a situation where “vulnerable people” are involved. One AJC trades supervisor was suspended for two weeks after complaints about his behaviour, but returned to work with no explanation offered, not even to the woman who laid the complaint.

Emily was recently referred to Alberta Job Corps. She is in her 50s and entered the job market a few years ago following a marriage breakdown. Although she has upgraded her clerical skills, and is intelligent and warm, Emily continues to have difficulty finding full-time, continuous employment because of her age. You would be hard pressed to find anyone more ill suited to the Job Corps experience. An AJC employee who painted on various projects with Emily says it was “like trying to work on a construction site with your mom.” Of the initial referral, Emily says “I didn’t want to go; I just went because I had to.” How appropriate is it to refer women like Emily and mothers with babies to Job Corps? The trades are seasonal. Women usually don’t work out in the trades and they can run into a lot of discrimination.

The universal complaint from people attending AJC is that while they are initially told they will be learning a variety of construction skills, nearly all of the projects are painting jobs. Despite that, everyone interviewed (more than 20 people) maintains that no one really has any idea of how to paint to a professional standard. For the most part crews are dropped off at job sites in the morning and the supervisor doesn’t return until the end of the day. “We weren’t taught anything,” according to Emily, “the trades people were not out there.” Mathew didn’t find the supervisors much help either: “They just dropped you off and you had your lead hands come and show you what to do.”

Lead hands don’t necessarily lead. Emily says it didn’t matter if people had the necessary skills or leadership ability. Lead hand appointments were “based on attendance and being on time.” Emily relates how four lead hands, working together because hardly anyone else

showed up that day, were suspended after they were caught drinking. Another employee became the poster boy for new recruits, even though he freely admits to drinking on the job. Jerry agrees he has a serious alcohol problem but he was able to drag himself to work in the morning and that was all it took to advance at AJC. He was appointed lead hand and was twice lauded for his flawless attendance—at an awards presentation held each month when new clients join the program. During his time as lead hand Jerry was in charge of a crew painting a Government of Alberta office. He says that was his favorite project because the place was like “a maze. You could disappear and nobody knew where you were. And there was a liquor store across the street.”

Marianne had no experience with addiction. She immediately noticed that most of the people had alcohol or other drug problems, but trained social workers seemed blind to the fact. Marianne was “quite surprised they were not helping these people in that way,” and says the root problem, addiction, was ignored except in the most obvious cases.

Alberta Job Corps attempts to educate clients in a number of life skills areas, but Emily calls the one-day seminars on topics like household budgeting a waste of time, “just information.” She observes that other people didn’t pay much attention in class, nor did they apply any of the

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lessons offered. “They still would have no money. They still were doing the things they were doing before.” Attendance at morning muster is usually lowest after payday (sometimes half the workforce stays home) and Emily says there are “suspensions constantly, letters, written warnings.” Emily believes that most of the people cannot survive in the real world because “they’re having a hard time in a place where they are given so many chances. A real employer is not going to take that.”

Employees at AJC attend abbreviated courses in a number of areas including the transportation of dangerous goods, first aid and bobcat training. Marianne says none of the workshops offered at the Corps were “long enough or in-depth enough.” She feels not enough attention is paid to individual needs and likens it to a “school where there’s not enough teachers compared to kids.”

From a practical point of view, the most valuable training offered at Alberta Job Corps is the St. John’s Ambulance First Aid course. Marianne says the teacher

was professional and helpful, but she estimates only half the people in her class of 10 would be competent in an emergency. When asked how she would feel about someone from AJC performing first aid on her, Emily laughs, "Thanks but no thanks."

Despite taking minimal certification courses in the handling and transport of dangerous goods, and passing, Emily still doesn't feel confident about working with toxic substances. She believes there should be more supervision on the projects because there has been carelessness and the supervisors don't really inspect the job sites at the end of the day. She says that job is often left up to the lead hand and "God only knows what kind of mind frame the lead hand is in."

The bobcat course at AJC is an example of wasted dollars. A small skid-steer front-end loader, a bobcat is expensive to maintain and transport. Three hours are spent on classroom instruction, followed by a short writ-

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ten test. Each person operates the bobcat for roughly ten minutes, sometimes simply driving up and down the back alley behind AJC headquarters. Everyone who passes the written exam (and people are given more than one chance) is issued a meaningless certificate. In the real working world it takes 300 hours of training and practice before someone is considered proficient in operating a bobcat.

An African immigrant, who calls himself a "citizen of the world," says that the social workers at AJC are totally out of touch. Frank, who instantly passes from street-smart wise guy into charming offbeat philosopher, feels the staff doesn't understand the people directed to Job Corps. He grins as he describes how one individual told him she knew what it was like to be a visible minority because she'd been to Barbados on a two-week vacation. The EDW couldn't understand why Frank found her comments so amusing. Although Frank received the training and accompanying certificates provided by AJC, he says the "pieces of paper" haven't helped him get a job, because "in the real world nobody wanted to see them." He is collecting Employment Insurance and points to his list of employer contacts as evidence he is still looking for a job. "I played the game the way they wanted me to play it," Frank laughs ruefully.

In literature distributed to potential employers, mostly

church and community groups, AJC is described as an "effective program" which broadens job skills and allows welfare clients to break free from government assistance. It promises "hands-on" skill development that approximates "actual work" situations. On an average day, however, less than five hours is actually spent on the job. Mathew says that sometimes crews sat around at the rear of the building until 9:30, and after driving to the job site, in some cases 40 minutes traveling time, it was nearly coffee time. "You work a bit till coffee time. Then by the time you figure out what you're supposed to be doing again, there's more time wasted. It's almost lunchtime." Emily says with another coffee break, cleanup and a pickup time around 3:30, on a good day there was four hours of "actual work."

The SFI source says sometimes people hang onto low paying seasonal jobs for a few months, but for the most part "it's a revolving door." For a majority of the clients, all that is accomplished is a temporary shift from the welfare rolls over to the federal Employment Insurance program. He says attending AJC takes individuals out of the Alberta system briefly but it never relieves the pressure on the public purse.

Nonetheless, Clint Dunford, the minister responsible, says that overall he is happy with AJC, claiming he has had nothing but positive feedback and has no knowledge of any problems. Dunford has toured a couple of AJC work sites and says, "actually we're pretty proud of the program. I've just been moving merrily along, saying OK, of all the things that I'm responsible for I guess I don't have to worry about that one."

Dunford caused a flap when he took over as Minister of Human Resources and Employment last spring. Asked at the time to comment on statistics that indicate a large number of working families in Alberta were forced to rely on food banks, the Lethbridge West MLA implied that those people were taking advantage of the system.

When asked if tradespeople at AJC had received training that would prepare them to work with SFI clients, many of whom are emotionally damaged and easily manipulated, the minister laughed. Dunford said the working world isn't "a cocoon," and that the program is set up that way. "Clients have to have some sort of mentor and somebody with some skills so who should it be but a tradesman?"

Dunford says that roughly 70 per cent of the people initially hired by AJC are off social assistance one year later. He did not know how many people that figure represented, the cost per individual or the total cost of the program. According to ministry statistics, on a year-to-year basis, the number is closer to 65 per cent. By any standard the figures quoted are a poor measure of true success.

Although the program is nearly five years old, no reliable follow-up studies have been done. Ministry spokesman Tom Neufeld says that after clients leave they are never contacted directly. Instead, results are measured by checking the SFI rolls six months after a person leaves Job Corps and again at the one-year mark. If someone is not receiving welfare benefits at that point they are considered a success story. Most telling, in fact, is that the ministry stops monitoring clients after one year. No figures are available at the two-year mark, when an individual's Employment Insurance benefits would be exhausted and the program could be more accurately assessed.

Forcing people with serious psychiatric and emotional problems, often combined with crippling addictions, to participate in a program that neither improves their lot in life nor saves money seems pointless. Many of the clients at Alberta Job Corps are frankly unsympathetic characters, but they are still people. If conservative ideology demands that individuals considered unemployable in the private sector work for a subsistence existence, perhaps the Klein government should fully and honestly embrace the concept. A percentage of the clients, and the non-profit groups that make use of free labour provided by AJC, benefit from the program. Perhaps an ongoing workfare system could be developed that accepts the failings of these people and offers them continuous employment, to say nothing of a raise and some basic medical benefits.

What brings individuals to the brink of the abyss? In every case the reasons are different, but one thing is cer-

tain: no one chooses the streets or the welfare shuffle or the food bank because the experiences are fun, invigorating or financially rewarding. The human beings in question are damaged, and if there is a time in history and a place on the planet where we can afford to take care of such lost souls in a meaningful way, surely it is Alberta. ✕

“Both the minister and a senior government official have suggested I am simply someone with a ‘grudge’ because I’d had a ‘bad experience’ in a program. In fact, I enjoyed my time at AJC and I liked most of the people I met there. The social workers and the majority of the tradespeople are trying to make a difference, and there is a much different attitude than I’ve encountered at most welfare offices. Unfortunately the program is fatally flawed. Except for first aid, I did not learn anything of value and I would suggest, given my background and education, I had a better chance than most of the clients directed to AJC.

“Alberta Job Corps did help restore my confidence, and in an ironic twist the AJC experience got me back into the field of journalism. It also filled me with disgust that the government of the province I was born in would use damaged people to make a political point.”

Tim Devlin is Acting Director of TRUCK, an artist-run centre in Calgary. He has more than 20 years experience as a journalist and broadcaster. He is also one of the Alberta Job Corps success stories.