

## Millions slated to get people off welfare rolls and into jobs

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Efforts by the B.C. Liberal government to get people on welfare back to work will involve one-on-one help through a revamped, \$35-million program.

Executives with JobWave, one of three main contractors in B.C., held an official opening Wednesday of an office on the 300 block of Victoria Street that will oversee training and counselling efforts in the region.

"The caseload has shifted so dramatically over the last four or five years," said Claude Richmond, minister of income assistance and the MLA for Kamloops. "The number of people expected to work has gone way down. ... Now the caseload has shifted to people with disabilities and with multiple barriers to employment."

After coming to power in 2001, the Liberal government contracted out job-placement programs to private companies. Payment for those companies was tied to how long ministry clients on welfare remained off the rolls.

Richmond said the program, riding on the benefits of a changing economy, found employment for about 48,000 people. Another 60,000 or so found work on their own or left the province.

In the past five years the provincial job picture changed dramatically with B.C. benefiting from a booming Interior forest industry, business investment, housing turnaround and record commodity prices.

Richmond said the unemployment rate in the Thompson-Okanagan went from 14.1 per cent in April 2001, the month before his party came to power, to slightly more than four per cent today. A review of statistics from the period, however, shows the rate was actually 10.3 per cent in April 2001.

A ministry spokesman, Richard Chambers, said the four-year, \$35-million contract focuses less on performance bonuses because "these clients are much more barriered."

Those barriers may include age, a long history of receiving income assistance, limited work experience and substance abuse problems.

Counselling and training for those who remain on welfare is more personalized, and therefore, more costly. About 18,000 people are in this

difficult-to-employ category.

Richmond said the new B.C. employment program comes after a year-long review. It is managed by three companies: GT Hiring Solutions Inc., BC Society for Training for Health and Employment (THEO BC) and WCG International Consultants Ltd., which operates as JobWave.

Those companies subcontract out to about 80 community-based companies and non-profit agencies in B.C. for specialized services, such as life skills training or resume preparation.

"There's never been a better time in B.C. for people wanting to work," Richmond said. "We have jobs chasing people."

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