

Training group receives big boost in funding

BY JODI LUNDMARK
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With the support of the Anishinabek Employment and Training Services, Bele Wigwas became a personal support worker at Hogarth Riverview Manor three years ago.

"I feel like they have supported me in all different ways through my program and after — financially with housing and spiritually as well," said Wigwas on Tuesday at the Waverley Community Hub after the federal government announced almost \$17 million in funding for the next 10 years for Anishinabek Employment and Training Services.

The First Nation organization provides training, education and employment opportunities for individuals from its member communities.

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From left, Thunder Bay Public Library chief librarian John Pateman, Anishinabek Employment Training Services executive director John DeGiacomo, Employment, Workforce Development and Labour Minister Patty Hajdu, training services group president Sharon Ostberg and Red Rock Indian Band Chief Matthew Dupuis cut the ribbon to open the newly renovated training services space within the Waverley Community Hub on Tuesday.

Organization gave support '24/7'

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"They gave me the courage to take the step in the right direction where I probably wouldn't be where I am today or thinking about pursuing nursing if I wasn't able to do my PSW first and get a grasp on everything," said Wigwas, who plans to take nursing at Lakehead University in 2020.

Wigwas added the support from on-site personnel was vital in helping her through school.

"They were there for us 24/7," she said. "They were understanding."

That holistic approach is the difference between them and taking a program at the college, which Wigwas would have had to do on her own.

"I think it's to help bridge the gaps between employment and unemployment between Indigenous

peoples because I think we have different barriers than (non-Indigenous) people with our history," she said. "Through their understanding, they are able to open up and help us and support in that way."

Anishinabek Employment and Training Services executive director John DeGiacomo said they have been in operation for 20 years and the funding will help with long-term planning.

"Without that long-term funding, it prevents us from doing planning in a variety of sectors," he said. "We certainly will use that as an opportunity to work in longer term scenarios with organizations that need that long-term commitment."

DeGiacomo said the organization helps about 400 people a year on average and some of those people come with their high school diploma and others don't.

Anishinabek Employment and Training Services has programs to help people obtain their Grade 12 before they move onto other training programs in fields from forestry, mining and health care — anywhere there is a demand, said DeGiacomo.

Thunder Bay-Superior North MP Patty Hajdu, who is also the minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, said the funding is a 58 per cent increase to what the organization had been receiving since it was formed in 1999. The group has full autonomy on how the money will be used through the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program.

The funding is for skills training, but Hajdu noted they have flexibility in how they will deliver that money.

"The agreements are long-term, which gives that stability for the organization to do the long-term plan-

ning," said Hajdu, adding that includes addressing the labour market but also supporting individuals in obtaining their high school diploma all the way to post-secondary education.

"(Anishinabek Employment and Training Services) has been doing this work for a long time," she said. "They have the capacity to hold their own agreement. They have the capacity to deliver this for the communities they serve and they have the longevity and history in the community."

Tuesday's funding announcement coincided with the grand opening of Anishinabek Employment and Training Services's hub inside the library. DeGiacomo said they partnered with the Thunder Bay Public Library to decolonize the space so people would feel safe and welcome.