

Region Profiles

Region's Social Services director no "do-gooder"

by Diane Hart
At 32 years of age, the Social Services Director at the region has the responsibility of controlling the largest department. With 278 full time employees, Director Debbie Oakley has her hands full overseeing the operations in the big green machine.



Debbie Oakley

She received her Planning and Administration Master's Degree from the University of Toronto and is planning on doing her Masters in Business Administration this year.

She was born and raised in the small town of Coldwater, Ontario, near Orillia, then moved to Toronto. Presently, she lives in Oakville.

In the past, Debbie has had jobs as a day care worker, a full time employee in a mental institution, a family benefits worker and an administrator of a local field office for the Ministry of Community and Social Services. "I know what I'm talking about because I know the jobs," she stated.

But this is no bleeding heart liberal.

"Some people see people in this business as do-gooders, but I'm not one of them," said the director. "In my position, you have to have a sense of social responsibility, but also a sense of public accountability for funds being spent."

"Somewhere in there is a healthy balance," she claims.

"I'm under continual pressure to cut back on spending, but I know if I do that, people are going to be hurt, so it's difficult," she said.

The director of social services, like other directors at the region report to the top boss, Chief Administrative Officer Dennis Perlin and to regional council.

"I find that accountability very good," she says.

"When your backside's on the line, you've got to keep your wits about you."

Her department consists of four major areas, with four different managers reporting to her. There is a manager of the Halton Centennial Manor, an income maintenance manager who deals with welfare benefits among other things, an administrative services manager and a manager of children's services.

"A lot of what we do is cost sharing (with the province)," she explains, "and this is why we have such a large administrative services area."

The cost sharing is up to 80 per cent.

not worry Debbie one bit. "I've had other experience working with men in an administrative position, so maybe that's why there's no problems," she explains, adding she is certain she has the respect of her colleagues. "There really is no distinction made, and I certainly don't get any special treatment."

"Historically, social service was 'women's work', but there's a lot more men around here," she said.

Debbie's main role is to oversee the workings of the department. "I'm in somewhat of a trouble-shooter position," she said. "I guess I'm more a team leader but I have very strong management."

Her direct responsibilities are fiscal, planning and organization as well as staffing.

"But I don't have direct contact with clients, which is something I miss sometimes," she says.

The bureaucracy of the municipal process doesn't frustrate her because, according to Debbie, the "municipal level works a lot faster than the provincial."

And the smaller size helps, too," she added.

A major project on the go is the study of the region's role in the needs of the elderly. And the job allocation program, a joint venture of the provincial and federal government, is also a priority. "Sure the rules are complicated, but in these days, when someone is handing you that amount of money to be used for jobs, it shouldn't be criticized."

One of the difficulties Debbie encounters is long range planning. "This is a very uncertain time economically and this is not a static department, because we change as people's needs change," she said.

Being the lone woman in a male oriented management position does

Halton's hard pressed welfare system might get a little relief from the latest federal make-work programs.

Regional councillors were told last week their staff are trying to find ways to use \$417,900 granted under the recently federal-provincial job creation program.

In a report to members of the health and social services and planning and public works committees, Dennis Perlin, chief administrative officer, said the program is designed mainly for people who have exhausted unemployment insurance benefits and are currently on welfare.

"Since we're involved in the delivery of welfare, this has to have some benefits for us," commented Councillor Walter Mulkewich (Burlington).

"I just hate the thought of sending a cheque to people who can work, to just sit there," he added.

Welfare system may get relief



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