

Halton Region launches Ontario Works video

By **MELANIE HENNESSEY**
The Champion

About five years ago, Oakville resident Bozena Labocha left her husband and fled to a women's shelter with her two children. She couldn't speak English, and she didn't even have a high school diploma.

While Ms Labocha's situation is heartbreaking to hear, local residents got to see the happy ending and how Ontario Works turned her life around Tuesday afternoon at the Halton Regional Centre, where Ontario Works launched its new orientation video.

The film tells the story of nine current and former recipients of Ontario Works assistance throughout Halton and shows how the system got them back on their feet.

The video, aimed at new Ontario Works applicants, emphasizes that it's more than just a financial assistance program — it also helps people get an education and get back out into the workforce.

"I think the idea of Ontario Works being just welfare is a mis-conceived idea. It's not just the money you're provided with — you're provided with the support and ability to improve yourself and to be able to move on," said Sue Bond of Burlington.

Ms Bond was a single parent with no income or employment experience when she enlisted the help of Ontario Works. "I thought I was going to be a housewife for the rest of my life."

Within two years, Ms Bond became a registered practical nurse and is now working at the Brant Centre.

"Now, I know who I want to be. I'm a better mother," she said.

For Mohammed Akbari of Oakville, Ontario Works helped him gain Canadian experience necessary to get into the job force.

Mr. Akbari fled Afghanistan with his young family and spent 10 years in a refugee camp. Although he's a civil engineer by trade, he wasn't able to convince potential employers of his credentials because they're foreign.

Through a community placement in Halton's public works department, Mr. Akbari has been able to get valuable local experience under his belt.

"I am happy to the extent that I am exposed to new things, new technologies, new methods, computer operations, things like that," he said.

Today, Ms Labocha is fluent in English, has a high school diploma, a college diploma in business administration and finance and is working at the Region's Business Development Centre through a placement.

"The reason was for my children.... a future for my children," she said of her hard work.

The video participants also had many tidbits of advice and positive thoughts for new Ontario Works applicants.

"Keep an open mind," said Ms Bond. "This isn't the end of the world — it's just the beginning."

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Photo by RON KUZYK

From left, celebrating the video launch are Burlington Regional Councillor Rick Craven along with video participants Sue Bond, Bozena Labocha and Mohammad Akbari.

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