

# Public forum takes a look at Innovations

by Denise Dicy

OHSWEKEN - A variety of issues affected by proposed provincial social reforms were scheduled for discussion at the public forum held at the Social Services gymnasium on Dec. 16th, but it was the presentation on Innovations, First Nations' alternative to Job Link, that dominated the agenda.

Job Link is the last of the provincial government's general welfare and family benefits reforms to be addressed, the rest having been shelved, said Tuesday Johnson MacDonald, First Nations Social Assistance Reforms Co-ordinator, who made the presentation.

The intent of Job Link is to facilitate a transition from dependence to independence by preparing social assistance recipients for and actively link-

ing them to the job market. It was determined that although Job Link was fine for the Province it was inadequate for the needs of First Nations.

A draft framework of what has come to be known as Innovations has been drawn and is being taken to First Nations

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communities for input and direction, thus the forum.

The forum, according to Chief Councillor Steve Williams, who chaired the meeting, was to gauge the community's response on two levels: first, should Six

Nations be participating in the program, and second, to hear input and suggestions for amendments to the draft framework based on the community's needs.

It is intended that the presentation of the draft framework to various First Nation communi-

ties will provide a focus for further discussion, that will hopefully result in a framework for the development of community based program designs, responsive to First Nation circumstances and concerns.

The purpose of the Innovations program is to create a system that actively supports social assistance recipients by helping individuals to access the various existing programs "to provide a wholistic education and training system," said MacDonald who emphasized that Innovations is not being designed to take over the role or responsibility of any existing program.

It is "not to erase what is already in the community but to enhance it," she said.

When it comes down to it, Innovations will encompass Opportunity Planning and Social Assistance Training Funds (SATF). Both of these programs have been utilized by Six Nations by way of work placements and other programs like Operation Facelift, all of which run on a volunteer basis with the requirement that the individual be on social assistance.

With these programs, however, there are certain inherent problems. One problem, as pointed out by Cynthia Jamieson from Social Services, is

the circular pattern of going from being on welfare to working under a SATF program for 52 weeks, then collecting Unemployment Insurance Benefits, only to find your way back on welfare - unless you get economic development, and some jobs for them, she said.

Another problem with SATF is the rule against entrepreneurial small businesses which, MacDonald suggested, be removed.

"Within Innovations, we can be more creative with the SATF, make it more flexible," she said.

Other problems with SATF that were mentioned include the project by project approval system and the amount of paperwork that was termed an "administrative nightmare" by Helen Miller who administrates the program.

As a compliment to MacDonald's general presentation, Helen Miller, from Social Assistance Employment, and Sam Hill, from Opportunity Planning, presented some of the concerns raised by a working group that has been formed to address the framework, changes and concerns from Six Nations point of view.

The first concern listed was the availability of funding for training the existing program staff to deliver the Innovations program. To this, MacDonald answered that in addition to the core money that is already in place they are trying to get outside funding for such needs.

The second concern was the purchasing of services elsewhere if existing programs cannot provide adequately due to the increase in client base. Six Nations has to identify priorities of the community and allot the funding accordingly, responded MacDonald.

A third concern was the volunteer nature of the program and how the individual's welfare sta-

tus will be affected if he/she does not function to the expectation of the employer or counselor. In such a situation, the individual will be put back on welfare and their space on the program made available to someone else.

The Innovations program provides more program co-ordination, said Sam Hill, pointing out that as things are now, the individual feels like he/she is "being bounced around" and "people are falling through the cracks."

The Innovations program is being funded on a 50/50 basis by the provincial Ministry of Community Social Services and the federal Indian Affairs, to a sum of \$2.8 million with \$344,000 coming to Six Nations, if accepted, explained MacDonald who had to repeatedly underline that this available funding is new funding.

With an understandable distrust of any overture by the Canadian government in addition to what is required, there were many questions as to how the government would benefit from this new program.

The short term plan of the NDP government is to spend more money to stimulate the economy, explained Cynthia Jamieson. In the long term, this stimulation is, if all to plan, to provide jobs and qualified workers and, therefore, less people on welfare (and, consequently, more people to take income tax off.)

The concept behind Innovations was met with some criticism lodged by Brian Doolittle who raised the possibility of hidden agendas and by Norman Jacobs who questioned whether Six Nations should be part of creating a provincial policy to be applied on the reserve. Six Nations "should do our own thing with our own government," said Jacobs.