



**CUISR:**

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Community – University Institute for Social Research

***"Off Welfare ... Now What?"***  
***Phase II, Part 2: Analysis***

**by Carmen G. Dyck**



*Building Healthy Sustainable Communities*

## **Community-University Institute for Social Research**

CUISR is a partnership between a set of community-based organizations (including Saskatoon District Health, the City of Saskatoon, Quint Development Corporation, the Saskatoon Regional Intersectoral Committee on Human Services) and a large number of faculty and graduate students from the University of Saskatchewan. CUISR's mission is "to serve as a focal point for community-based research and to integrate the various social research needs and experiential knowledge of the community-based organizations with the technical expertise available at the University. It promotes, undertakes, and critically evaluates applied social research for community-based organizations, and serves as a data clearinghouse for applied and community-based social research. The overall goal of CUISR is to build the capacity of researchers, community-based organizations and citizenry to enhance community quality of life."

This mission is reflected in the following objectives: (1) to build capacity within CBOs to conduct their own applied social research and write grant proposals; (2) to serve as a conduit for the transfer of experientially-based knowledge from the community to the University classroom, and transfer technical expertise from the University to the community and CBOs; (3) to provide CBOs with assistance in the areas of survey sample design, estimation and data analysis, or, where necessary, to undertake survey research that is timely, accurate and reliable; (4) to serve as a central clearinghouse, or data warehouse, for community-based and applied social research findings; and (5) to allow members of the University and CBOs to access a broad range of data over a long time period.

As a starting point, CUISR has established three focused research modules in the areas of Community Health Determinants and Health Policy, Community Economic Development, and Quality of Life Indicators. The three-pronged research thrust underlying the proposed Institute is, in operational terms, highly integrated. The central questions in the three modules—community quality of life, health, and economy—are so interdependent that many of the projects and partners already span and work in more than one module. All of this research is focused on creating and maintaining healthy, sustainable communities.

Research is the driving force that cements the partnership between universities, CBOs, and government in acquiring, transferring, and applying knowledge in the form of policy and programs. Researchers within each of the modules examine these dimensions from their particular perspective, and the results are integrated at the level of the Institute, thus providing a rich, multi-faceted analysis of the common social and economic issues. The integrated results are then communicated to the Community and the University in a number of ways to ensure that research makes a difference in the development of services, implementation of policy, and lives of the people of Saskatoon and Saskatchewan.

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by  
Carmen G. Dyck



Community-University Institute for Social Research

432-221 Cumberland Avenue

Saskatoon, SK S7N 1M3

phone (306) 966-2121

fax (306) 966-2122

e-mail [cuisr.oncampus@usask.ca](mailto:cuisr.oncampus@usask.ca)

[www.usask.ca/cuisr](http://www.usask.ca/cuisr)

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Community-University Institute for Social Research

University of Saskatchewan

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## **ABSTRACT**

What is the impact of labour force attachment programs on the quality of life of people who participate in them? That is the research question answered by the analysis report of the research project, "Off Welfare...Now What?" The author walks the reader through a group analysis process that explores the experiences of real people on these programs, and looks at the realities that go beyond mere statistics of people on social assistance. The conclusion of the analysis is that these programs do not take into consideration the diverse needs of people on assistance, and that job searches are not quick fixes to a challenging labour market and a provincial social system that does not readily promote the health and well-being of its recipients.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report is a continuation of a previous publication, also published under the name “Off Welfare... Now What?” This research project has been an ongoing effort on behalf of community members, the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition, and the researcher. While the previous report was based on the researcher’s knowledge and work, the analysis in this report is the work of both the Coalition and community members, and was collected using a group analysis method. This report documents the process of that analysis and the outcomes of the group effort.

The Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition is a group of concerned citizens and organizations dedicated to addressing the root causes and effects of poverty. The Coalition formed in October 2000 as a response to changes to the income assistance policy under the auspices of the Department of Social Services, which is now known as the Department of Community Resources and Employment, (hereafter cited as DCRE). At a Coalition meeting, members discussed their concerns over changes in DCRE policy. One common concern was related to the focus on “labour force attachment.” There is no evidence to suggest that these labour force attachment programs are having a positive effect on participants.

In order to address this issue, the Coalition decided that further research and exploration was needed to more precisely determine the impact of these programs on people living in poverty and how the Anti-Poverty Coalition can address any resulting problems.

This analysis will answer the following question: what is the impact of the labour force attachment programs on the quality of life of people who participate in them? More specifically the interest is in the extent to which participation in the Jobs First and Transitional Employment Program has affected participants’ economic status and the overall sense of health and well-being. (The 2002-2003 Annual Report of DCRE states that there have been significant reductions in the number of people receiving income assistance.<sup>1</sup>) Reductions in the number of Saskatchewan citizens accessing social assistance is often cited as a success, even though the quality of life of those no longer receiving social assistance is uncertain. To answer this question, this research assesses that impact on a sample group of people who have experienced this shift.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVIEWS**

Interviews were conducted with twenty-five participants over a one-month period. Information collected through the interviews included demographic information, personal experiences with DCRE and the job training programs, barriers to finding work, specific experiences with the DCRE Call Centre, and rating indicators of well-being based on the usefulness of the job training programs in which they participated.

## ***INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS***

The criteria for being a research participant was anyone currently or formerly enrolled in a Jobs First training program, or any other kind of provincial government welfare to work initiative. Coalition members, a local community-based employment centre, and word of mouth were used to recruit participants for this study.

### *Demographics of the interview participants*

Of the twenty-five interviewees, eighteen were women and seven were men.<sup>2</sup> Although two interviews were reserved for rural participants, many participants spoke of living in smaller communities or on reserves and moving to Saskatoon in order to access better Social Services, such as job training. Seventeen participants were of Aboriginal descent. The participants' age range was twenty-one to forty-nine years, with an average age of thirty-five years.

One question that participants were asked was to explain their household situation. No two interview participants gave the same answer and, indeed, the results showed incredible diversity.

- One woman worked part-time at a big box store and Social Services subsidized her income. However, her rent subsidy was cancelled because her children moved out. As a result, though she is still working, she was living in a women's shelter.
- A young man described sleeping on friends' couches whenever he could, "but sometimes it was just easier to sleep on the street."
- One woman lived with her sister and her three children. Two of her kids also stayed with her, while two others lived on-reserve.

Only three out of the twenty-five participants described "nuclear family" households (i.e. made up of a mother, father, and several children).

Twelve interviewees described their living situation as staying with friends or family because they could not afford to live on their own. During the group analysis, these people were described as "the hidden homeless."

Seventeen participants were single mothers; only one of the women interviewed was a married mother. The three single men interviewed made it known that they had children who were not in their custody. Two of the three disclosed that, as a single parent, DCRE would provide more money to their children's mothers if they were in a live-in relationship, common-law or otherwise. In a way, then, DCRE is exacerbating the number of single parent households among the working poor with this policy.

Another interesting aspect of this group of participants is that thirteen of them have a post-secondary education. All participants recognized the importance of education and were currently trying to, or had done so in the past, access educational training, either on their own initiative or through Social Services.

## **METHODS OF THE GROUP ANALYSIS**

### ***GROUP ANALYSIS PARTICIPANTS***

The original plan was to ask interview participants to reconvene with Coalition members and talk about their experiences as a focus group. Coalition members then hoped to create an analysis based on the focus group findings. Participants, however, had been interviewed a year before funding for the group analysis was secured and a date scheduled. This delay made it difficult to reconnect with the original interview participants. Instead, Coalition members, community members, and others interested in this research attended the group analysis.

Those involved in the group analysis included nine people from the community, an independent facilitator, and the primary researcher. Community members included six Coalition members, with the remainder being citizens and students representing non-profit organizations and other academic institutions, including CUISR and the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute.

### ***GROUP ANALYSIS PROCESS***

Each group analysis participant received interview transcripts of two or three of the research participants. Group analysis participants reviewed the completed “Off Welfare... Now What?” literature review as well as other selected readings. Participants reviewed the interviews (data) beforehand to try to understand the life story of the research participants. This information was then used to create headings (themes) for the group session.

The group analysis was a one-day event held in a community meeting room. The day began with introductions around the table, followed by a brief overview of the research project and demographic information on the research interviewees. Each participant presented a brief overview of the data that they were representing. The interviews sparked a topic of conversation with the participants, and these were recorded for the purpose of creating themes in the afternoon session. Some participants immediately saw similarities in the data. The social reality of those who experienced Jobs First training programs was also portrayed through this exercise.

The afternoon session was used to sort the interview material into themes. Each participant cut out statements from the interviews (referred to as bibbits) that reflected the themes that were created. Additional themes were also developed during this process. Participants worked simultaneously and discussed the information with each other. These themes became the primary findings of this report.

After this task was completed, small groups worked together to arrange the themes so that they made sense as a whole by looking for patterns and relationships between the data. The small groups created three models so as to explain the relationships of the themes.

The bibbits are used throughout this report to express the experiences of the interview participants alongside the work of the group analysis.

## GROUP ANALYSIS FINDINGS

It has become apparent that while labour force attachment programs teach job finding skills and provide access to education, they have not directly affected welfare recipients' ability to find work in today's challenging labour market, and in some cases have negatively affected those who have accessed these programs. This point was clarified at great length by the group analysis and is the central focus of this analysis.

Themes that emerged around this outcome were identified by the group analysis participants, and include the following: racism; disrespectful treatment; housing/stability issues ("hidden homelessness"); mental health; over-qualification; no flexibility for different circumstances; access to education; transportation issues; unsupportive job market; cyclical treatment's negative impact on mental health; child care; "casualties of war"; bureaucratic disenfranchisement; positive outcomes; "beaver dam"; self/goal-directed; building self-confidence; punitive measures for those trying to get ahead; frustration; expectation of others that it is easy to get a job; need to manipulate the system to get ahead; food insecurity; disability barrier; and ageism.

The negative nature of the themes pulled out by the analysis created an atmosphere of disparity and sadness amongst the group analysis participants. Open conversation allowed for participants to voice their feelings about the information extracted from the transcripts.

Three of the developed themes—the "beaver dam"; "casualties of war," and bureaucratic disenfranchisement—inspired considerable discussion and will be explored further. Assumptions about social assistance and welfare recipients were also discussed (and proven incorrect by the interview material) and will be examined below.

### ***"THE BEAVER DAM"***

As the analysis group was sorting through the interviews and trying to discern themes, the task seemed impossible. The data was so intertwined that sorting out particular themes was a frustrating experience. This condition was given the term "the beaver dam," meaning a cyclical situation where events have such an impact on each other that there is no way to try to separate the barriers that some interview participants were facing.

*You can't sit and not do something. But you do have those days where you're just gonna be like, I'm tired of worrying, I'm tired of trying, I'm just not gonna try for a while, and pretend it's not there, but it's always there the next day. Somebody's gotta leave the house, though.*

The group analysis participants could only begin to imagine how frustrating and depressing living in that kind of stressful atmosphere must be like, and worried about the impact that this cyclical pattern has on the mental health of the people involved.

*Some participants' stories*

One interview participant had been through three job training programs with nothing to show for it. He had difficulty getting to his appointments because he lived in a rural area and was also having a difficult time coping with mental health issues. He had a cooperative social worker, but when that person went on holidays, the replacement quit paying the participant's utilities without telling him. The participant ended up with a large utilities bill and had his file "red flagged" because he tried to stand up for himself.

Another participant was on social assistance but wanted to go on the Provincial Training Allowance (PTA). However, she was disappointed to learn that it was the same type of "hoop jumping" as with social assistance. Her hope was that by furthering her education she could lose the stigma of being "on assistance."

A third participant had two children of her own, plus foster children. She was trying to access money from Social Services because she lacked the money to properly look after her family. She also babysat for others to earn additional income. One of her foster children had special needs that required a special diet and special care. However, her social worker said that she was not entitled to any Social Services additional monies because she was already receiving money for her foster children and was not reporting her outside income.

**"CASUALTIES OF WAR"**

Many of those interviewed had similar stories of being victimized by the Social Services system. They often move between low-wage employment and social assistance, regardless of the work or training program in which they are involved, remaining a part of the cycle.

The people interviewed were not specially picked because of their situations. Unfortunately, their stories, far from being unusual, are rather common to anyone on social assistance. During the group analysis, these people who had experienced such amoral and unethical treatment were described as "casualties of war."

*Some interview participants' stories*

*Landlords don't want to rent to me because I have lots of kids. Landlords charge me \$1000 for rent. I have to lie to them about the number of kids I have. And we practically starve living there because the rent is too much. I sleep in the living room and the kids share the rooms. Welfare won't help me out.*

*When all this started with this new work and the training allowance, I didn't have enough money to get to school and was missing time. So*

*I talked to the counsellor and told her I was going to withdraw until a later date so that if I do decide to come back I would still have the option to go back, whereas if you get kicked off you can't go back. So basically I was forced to withdraw.*

*Someone told Social Services I was in a common-law relationship and they came to my house and I said I don't even have a boyfriend. I asked them if you had to be single to be on Social Services. They said I was living with some guy named \_\_\_\_\_. They started looking around at my stuff and I said I'm poor, I don't have much stuff. They pulled out all these men's clothes, and I have a son whose a teenager and a pretty big guy, and sometimes I wear men's stuff. And they asked to see some receipts for clothes and so I showed them some and there was no men's stuff on the receipts. Sometimes I wear men's shirts. I'm a large woman and sometimes I wear men's clothes. They didn't believe me.*

### ***BUREAUCRATIC DISENTITLEMENT***

Many interview participants expressed frustration with paperwork, information, mis-information, and social workers who either concealed pertinent information or gave inaccurate information about access to social assistance. The participants all experienced difficulty in completing the process of providing information needed to be considered for any kind of social assistance, whether it be job training or otherwise. Some became so frustrated with the process that they claimed "anything is better than having to go through welfare again."

Herd and Associates (2003), from *Social Assistance in the New Economy (SANE)*, University of Toronto, define bureaucratic disentanglement as:

rather than receiving assistance based on need, people are denied welfare through bureaucratic disentanglement: for example, they are unable to supply all of the information requested or they are discouraged by the difficult and drawn out application process.

It has been documented in a Canadian review of welfare reform initiatives that social welfare administrators use a wide variety of contractual agreements, case plans, and orientation sessions with conditions that are difficult to meet in even the best of circumstances (Herd et al, 2003). These impossible standards are used to scare people away and intimidate them from using the welfare system. However, when faced with welfare as a last option, many do not have the luxury of foregoing the welfare process. Barriers to accessing social assistance include excessive requests for information, long

application processes and appeals, and confusing language. Interviewees spoke about the phenomenon of bureaucratic disenfranchisement, meaning that potential recipients were unable to supply all the necessary information to qualify or were discouraged by the long and tedious application procedures to even go to Social Services.

*Some interview participants' stories*

*I got cut off [of assistance] two or three months ago without any warning or anything. Me and my girlfriend were living just down here, and she moved out to her own place, and then they cut me off. She [the social worker] gave me a letter saying I was cut off and had to fill out proper forms or whatever, and so I filled them out and I never heard back. But I got a job after that. It's not only me it's happened to.*

*We moved out at the end of June, and I thought that we would get help for July, but I didn't get anything. The reason they gave was that they said we didn't fill out the proper forms.*

*I was off and on [assistance]. They wouldn't subsidize anything. I bugged them about that because they didn't give me anything. I wasn't making any money. And still they gave me nothing. Probably like \$400 for two weeks but because now they say I'm working they won't give me anything. They won't help me with rent or washing or anything.*

*I don't think I want to go back to Social Services. You still end up paying with your child taxes.*

*Last year I was trying to get on social assistance, they gave me a rough time. I don't know why. I thought maybe it was because I was an Indian, I don't know. I wasn't doing anything wrong. Then one time I had to go see my social worker, and she asked me, why did you move back to Saskatoon? And I wondered why she asked me that. She didn't care. I'm sorry to say that, but she didn't like me.*

*Sometimes when you have the papers you have to fill in—for example, when you are moving, and you get a receipt, and you hand it into your worker. Last year I moved, and I got my landlord to help me move furniture to my place, and he charged me \$175, and I am still stuck with that bill. They told me they would pay it for me, but they haven't and I am still trying to pay that off.*

## ***ASSUMPTIONS DISCUSSED***

Group analysis participants raised the assumptions that people have around the issue of social welfare. Some of these assumptions include:

- *It is easy to find a job, especially because the job market is good in Saskatchewan.* In actuality, the number of people out of work in Saskatchewan is 68,816.<sup>3</sup>
- *Possessing an education guarantees one a job, or, similarly, people on assistance are not educated and do not value education.* Thirteen of the twenty-five people interviewed had post-secondary education and were still looking for work. All of those interviewed acknowledged that education was important to them and that they were receiving some form of training or had tried to do so in the past.
- *Aboriginal people do not value work and education like "the rest of society."* Seventeen of the people interviewed were Aboriginal, and all of them were looking for work. Lack of interest in working could stem from a culture of not being able to find work; it does not mean that the culture itself does not value work. One young man shared his experience of being Aboriginal and unemployed:

*I come from a family where my mom and dad were always employed. So when we [he and his girlfriend] first met each other eleven years ago, and now we have a ten year old daughter, we've been working really hard. It seems like we have to resort to this. It would be nicer if social assistance wasn't just assisting you to get by, if it would assist those who have contributed to the whole funding mechanism. And they could say, well, you need this extra piece in your life to get over here. It doesn't go far enough. I don't know. It's not like we're bad people. There's certain areas in our life where we have achieved certain results, but I need four more classes to get my degree, and I wasn't able to do that. And now I'll have to take a trade. If I start making decent money, I'll never go back and finish off what I started. Nothing is working right now.*

- *Social assistance and job training programs try to help people get ahead so that they can get off social assistance.* However, the experiences of the interview participants demonstrate that job training programs have not allowed them to get ahead, and, as a result, most of them report being trapped in the "social assistance cycle."

*I don't think anybody feels good about being on welfare, it's not a good thing. I feel better working or on UI [unemployment insurance] because it's not welfare, it doesn't have the same stigma.*

### ***INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING—WHAT THE INTERVIEWS SHOWED***

The interviews consisted of a question related to well-being: “How have provincial job training programs affected your well-being?” A definition of well-being was then presented to the interview participant. Well-being was defined as anything that helped a person physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally, and a table of indicators of well-being was shown to the interview participant.<sup>4</sup>

Over half the people interviewed indicated that the Jobs First training programs allowed them some kind of access to additional education. Of those who did not state that they were allowed access to higher education, five claimed that they nevertheless wanted access.

Six interview participants revealed that the Jobs First training program gave them some self-esteem and self-confidence when it came to looking for work, as well as a connection to the community.

*They give you confidence in yourself. The money helps a lot but it doesn't cover anything. At the end of it is when people really have a hard time. Those job searches, they are pretty good. It's helpful. ... That's it I guess.*

Participants claimed that the provincial training programs also negatively affected their physical and mental health, their family's nutritional needs, their sleep patterns, and their interpersonal relationships. They all experienced a decrease in livelihood security because the assistance rates while attending those programs did not cover basic needs.

*Decrease in livelihood security with my rent and for groceries. And I thought I would have money for school supplies, too, but that didn't happen. When I first started I wasn't getting much sleep because I was so worried. I had to go through an appeal process because I was still owing rent for the previous month.*

### ***GROUP ANALYSIS FINDINGS COMPARED TO PRELIMINARY FINDINGS***

There was some disparity between the group analysis findings compared to the preliminary findings, as explored by the researcher. Some findings were not discussed by the group analysis due to time constraints, but are still worthy of mentioning, including:

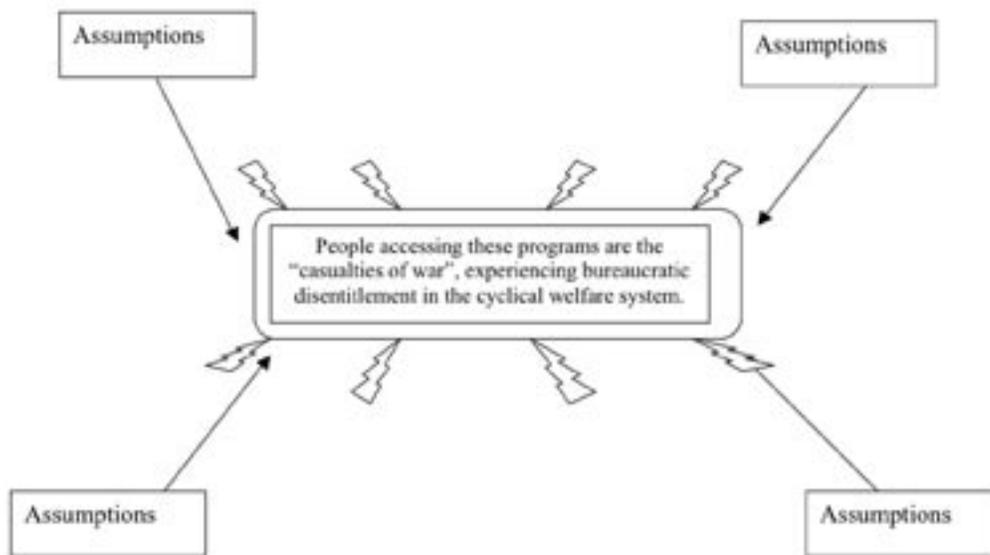
- the importance of volunteer and unpaid work, which is performed mostly by women, but has not been given value within the Saskatchewan labour force attachment programs;

- the shortage of childcare in the province has been exacerbated by welfare-to-work programs, further ignoring women's unpaid and invisible work;
- labour market opportunities are different for men and women, making their job search experiences different (women tend to more often take part-time, service-oriented, or lower skilled work); and
- rural residents do not have access to Jobs First or other training programs offered in Saskatchewan cities due to transportation constraints.

### ***THE BEAVER DAM MODEL***

The group analysis participants developed three models. All these models had some of the same components and have been included in the **Figure 1** diagram, which has been given the name, "The Beaver Dam Model."

**Figure 1. The Beaver Dam.**



### **CONCLUSION**

While labour force attachment programs teach participants necessary skills to look for work and provide access to education, they have not directly improved welfare recipients' ability to find work in today's challenging labour market. Furthermore, the social assistance system in Saskatchewan does not promote the health and well-being of its recipients through its work, and creates a cyclical system of despair that negatively affects the physical, mental, and emotional health of those whom it purports to serve. Poverty, it seems, makes people sick.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>THE ANNUAL REPORT 2002-2003 STATES THAT THE SASKATCHEWAN ASSISTANCE PLAN CASELOAD AVERAGED 29,863 CASES, REPRESENTING A DECREASE OF MORE THAN 10,500 CASES FROM THE 1994-1995 AVERAGE. IT FURTHER STATES THAT CASES WITH CHILDREN HAVE DECREASED MORE RAPIDLY THAN OTHERS (10).

<sup>2</sup>THE RATIO OF WOMEN TO MEN WAS NOT SKEWED.

<sup>3</sup>THE ESTIMATED UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FOR JULY 2005 IS 6.8% (SASKATCHEWAN LABOUR FORCE).

<sup>4</sup>PLEASE SEE **Appendix B** for the table of indicators of well-being used in the interview.

## REFERENCES

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## **Appendix A. Method for Conducting Group Analysis.**

### *Materials needed*

Interviews for each participant (in quite a large font), scissors for each participant, pens, paper, flip chart, markers, several copies of each interview, strings, and tape.

### *Participants*

Researcher, facilitator, Steering Committee members, Coalition members; up to ten people.

### *Proposed length of time spent in the group*

One morning to review interviews, one afternoon to summarize findings.

### *Preparation before the discussion day*

Each participant will receive the interview of one to three participants (depending on how many people are participating in the analysis). Participants will review the literature review and other selected readings. Participants will read the interviews beforehand to try to understand the life story of the person whose interview they are reading, and be prepared to give a brief summary of each person and their experiences on Jobs First programs. Other participants will ask pointed questions about the interview summaries that they have heard. The facilitators will record ideas and important information that emerges from the interviews in this manner. This information will be used to create themes for the afternoon session.

### *Method of analysis*

The facilitators will review the information collected from the group. It is hoped that the facilitators can also provide a critical reflection of the social context (i.e. the social reality of those on Jobs First programs based on the information collected in the literature review). Facilitators will review themes picked out of the information collected in the morning. Participants may be able to make comparisons between the interviews that they already have at this time. These comparisons will be a starting point for creating cross-references (with strings). Each participant will cut out statements from the interviews (some will be quite large, others very small) that reflect the themes created. Participants will work simultaneously on this and carry on discussions with each other. No theme is wrong, but some will not be used in the analysis. Themes do not yet need explanation in this early stage. Later on, themes will become findings of the research. If there is time, small groups will work on the findings of the themes and present them to the large group, otherwise the Steering Committee will perform this work.

The goal is to look for patterns and relationships between collections of data by using bibbits cut out of the interviews and put under appropriate themes. These themes can then be linked/cross-referenced using strings. Afterwards, definitions will be created for the themes.

**Appendix B. Indicators of Well-Being.**

<b>Mental</b>	<b>Physical</b>	<b>Emotional/Social</b>	<b>Spiritual</b>
1. Access to education and learning	7. Health	13. Relationship stability	16. Contributing to society
2. Stimulation in job or workplace	8. Sleep	14. Isolation	17. Access to community and/or culture
3. Using skills and abilities	9. Proper nutrition	15. Access to family and support networks	18. Meaning in life
4. Interests and capabilities match with work being performed	10. Exercise and recreation		19. Social connectedness
5. Confidence in self	11. Access to medical services (i.e. dental)		
6. Livelihood security (money to cover basic needs)	12. Healthy and safe environment in which to work		

### **Appendix C. Commitments of the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition.**

The Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition seeks to ensure that information released to the public, namely that job training programs are reducing the number of welfare recipients, is balanced and nuanced by providing access to the findings of this report. The Coalition is committed to educating the public and policy-makers on the full effects of job training programs through the following actions:

- making a presentation of findings at a national conference;
- publishing and distributing research reports;
- making presentations to the community, highlighted during Poverty Awareness Week;
- ensuring that this report is freely available on the internet;
- strengthening the alliance of the Coalition with government representatives and DCRE;
- searching for a funding initiative to have Coalition members act as a watchdog for new policies and procedures that affect the socio-economic stability of the citizens of Saskatoon and area; and
- working with DCRE to ensure that people's livelihoods are not threatened.

CUISR Resource Centre  
University of Saskatchewan  
289 John Mitchell Building  
118 Science Place  
Saskatoon SK S7N 5E2 Canada  
Phone: 306-966-2121  
Facsimile: 306-966-2122  
E-mail: [cuisr.oncampus@usask.ca](mailto:cuisr.oncampus@usask.ca)



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E-mail: [cuisr.liaison@usask.ca](mailto:cuisr.liaison@usask.ca)