



Poverty cycle must be broken

Written by Heather Douglas, President & CEO
As published in the *Calgary Sun*, Thursday, July 16, 2009

Former prime minister Paul Martin knew a thing or two about innovation.

"Today, the strength of a nation is measured not by the weapons it wields, but by the patents it produces; not by the territory it controls, but by the ideas it advances; not only by the wealth of its resources, but by the resourcefulness of its people," he said in a 2000 budget speech.

"In such a world, successful nations will only be those that foster a culture of innovation."

Canada's culture of innovation rests with its young people and children. During the 1970s, two in five Canadian children lived in poverty. Today one in five survive on welfare. More than one-third come from single-parent families and most live with their mothers.

The cycle of poverty is brutal and hard to shatter. It starts when families have little income and cannot afford nutritional food and safe water. This leads to hunger, inferior sanitation, disease and premature death. The local economy slows and welfare becomes a way of life.

Poor children are prone to health problems. Many run afoul of the educational system and quit school.

Others get caught in petty crime, drugs and alcohol. Poor children lack the opportunity to use their talents and creativity because their future is curtailed by the poverty of their parents and grandparents.

These kids are Canada's future workforce. We cannot afford to waste the potential of a fifth of our citizens.

Interestingly, the Native population represents the largest and youngest untapped labour force in the country. Unfortunately, many remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and rising levels of unemployment.

Almost 27,000 Natives call Calgary home. Statistics Canada reports about one-third are infants and school-aged children (7,060) and the rest are 15 and older. Of these, 6,005 earned post-secondary credentials (2,175 received apprenticeship or trades tickets, 3,680 obtained college diplomas or certificates and 150 attained university degrees).

According to a 2006 government survey, "First Nations children, aged six to 14 who lived in urban centres, were as likely as all children in Canada to do well in school." The study noted most parents were pleased with the discipline, quality of teaching and types of extracurricular activities their kids accessed.

There is a clear need for a holistic partnership approach to improve Native participation in the labour market that involves government, business, Native communities and service providers.

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce has pondered what choices Canada has to make today to ensure this partnership successfully encourages skilled and productive workers. Here are a few suggestions:



- Strengthen network links on and off reserve to better connect clients to urban services and employers.
- Develop and present Native awareness programming to small and medium-sized businesses and ensure these firms are recognized for best practices.
- Support industry and service providers to effectively deliver workplace preparation, education and safety programs for prospective Native employees.
- Use innovative K-to-12 course material to ensure Internet literacy and creativity.
- Prioritize high school upgrading and literacy.
- Align business opportunities with the interests of aboriginal communities by understanding the communities' needs and partnering for beneficial economic development.

This country will enjoy greater prosperity when the cycle of poverty is broken.

When our highly educated and skilled workforce uses everyone's talents and creativity, Canada will be known as an innovative nation.