

Social services board website undergoes major overhaul

by Michael Erskine

ESPANOLA—The Internet has grown into the first information resource for many people over the past few years, and so it is that a major portion of the communications improvement strategy for the agency which delivers social services on behalf of Manitoulin's municipalities centres on revamping the agency's website.

Some of the more significant changes, such as those on education and employment resources, are designed to help people avoid the need to access social services in the first place.

David Court, a consultant whose experience includes serving as the Algoma Social Services CAO since 1972, took municipal representatives with the District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB) through the changes and improvements being made to the site during a recent DSSAB board meeting.

"We made a lot of improvements," said Mr. Court, "but the object was not to chuck everything that has been done and start over from scratch—that would have been much more expensive. Rather than that approach, we decided to build upon what was already existing."

As such, the task force dealing with the site concentrated on streamlining and organizing current content and making the site more user-friendly for those accessing it.

One of the first items to go was a superfluous English/French button at the initial portal. "Since there was no French content, it really didn't serve any purpose other than to slow down entry to the site," explained Mr. Court. The question of provision of francophone content will be the subject of a later review.

The DSSAB website contains an immense source of information for clients and administrators, including flowcharts of the organization (so people can work their way up the chain of command on an issue); budgets and audited financial statements; assessments of funding issues facing the DSSABs and their funding municipalities; and the reports of managers from each area of responsibility within the organization. Not all of the information has been set up as yet, noted Mr. Court, but a significant amount is now available.

Mr. Court asked the members of the board to access the site at their leisure and to provide feedback to the task force as to improvements or any difficulties in accessing the site.

Different areas of the website were designed with the end user in mind, and so there are significant differences in approach on each segment, he added. "Nobody would use the EMS section to call for an ambulance," Mr. Court noted by way of example, "but people can now apply for Ontario Works online."

The issues of computer literacy and access were also considered in the design. "Although the degree of literacy amongst Ontario Works clients is actually quite high," explained Mr. Court, "that is not the case with those seeking social housing, where age likely plays more of a factor."

In designing the new website, the task force reviewed many of the websites of other DSSABs, adopting the best practices of each. "At Algoma we received a significant amount of money to build an information portal for the DSSAB services there," said Mr. Court. "We were able to

leverage a lot of that work here."

Many of the resources accessed by the site are actually links to programs and webpages for other levels of government, meaning that the local DSSAB will not have to expend resources to keep the pages current. In other cases, the information is quite local and will therefore have to be maintained by the local administration office. This will not require a 'portable' increase in staff of the Manitoulin-Sudbury DSSAB, however.

The task force paid particular attention to the web pages dealing with employment services and educational resources, as well as those dealing with alternate sources of income.

"If all you talk about is Ontario Works, then guess what? You will be paying Ontario Works," said Mr. Court. "If you are unable to work, then maybe you should be looking at other options."

Those options may include the Canada Pension Plan, Ontario Disability, Old Age Security or other programs offered and/or paid for by other levels of government. The revamp is about 95 percent complete, noted Mr. Court.