

**Family Services à la famille Ottawa – 312 Parkdale Avenue
Celebrating Our 90th Anniversary
(A series of 9 articles leading up to our Birthday Celebrations in May 2005)**

***Did you know..... Our role during WW II?
(1934-1944)***

After spearheading a number of new social programs 1914-1924, and providing relief for thousands of citizens through the Great Depression, the Ottawa Welfare Bureau (OWB), now known as Family Services à la famille Ottawa, finally got a reprieve when the City of Ottawa took responsibility for the unemployed. OWB saw a chance to turn its attention to its mandate of casework and counselling. But despite the changes, with the City assuming responsibility for the unemployed, social services, churches and citizens of Ottawa still saw the OWB as the place to turn to. Thus, the third decade of OWB's work began much like the second ended, with ongoing demand for relief support.

The City had strict eligibility requirements for assistance, and those people that “fell through the cracks” found their way to OWB's doors at 102 Bank Street. OWB, supported by the Zonta Club, operated a Single Woman's Assistance unit, as the City was particularly strict with single and separated women seeking financial aid. The Municipal government felt that all women should be with husbands or their families.

Another group that had to turn to the Ottawa Welfare Bureau for help were non-residents of Ottawa. Families and individuals who re-located to the city either having secured a job or hoping to secure one were often in dire straits when the opportunities evaporated. The City refused to provide support, and OWB did what it could to provide both material support and counselling.

The main role of OWB from 1933 to 1937, however, was to act as the lead investigator on behalf of the City to determine eligibility for its services. This role left staff feeling conflicted, because those people whom the OWB staff determined did not meet the strict criteria for public assistance with the City, ended up seeking help through OWB. Gradually, this investigative role with the City diminished, and Miss Williams' vision of more casework and opportunity to counsel families began to re-emerge.

Once again though, those plans were put on hold September 1st, 1939. As Europe descended into war, Canada joined Allied Forces, and Ottawa was a changed city. Since its early days, OWB had been contracted by the Department of National Defense to look after the wives and children of servicemen and to administer funds

to soldiers struggling because of injuries to gain employment. In 1940, OWB was essentially conscripted to perform investigative counselling and administrative services for two DND organizations: Dependant's Allowance Board and the Dependant's Board of Trustees. OWB more than met its obligation to these organizations, looking after the emotional well being of servicemen's dependants by starting sewing clubs for the wives of soldiers and organizing day trips and summer camps for the children. Staff even wrote letters to soldiers on behalf of family members, or simply on their own behalf to let soldiers know that someone was thinking of them.

OWB and its director Miss Williams recognized that two other groups of people were dramatically affected by the war and could too easily be ignored or persecuted. One of these groups was families of "alien internees" – imprisoned Japanese and Eastern European Canadians who were considered guilty by ethnic and cultural association with the enemy. These families were often scorned and ostracized, but OWB was humanitarian first and patriotic second, looking after material needs and offering to help families connect with loved ones imprisoned or detained by the Canadian government.

The other group that the Bureau reached out to were the children sent to Canada for security reasons -- children from Great Britain and Continental Europe whose countries were being ravaged by war. The Bureau did what it could for these children to ease their loneliness and fear of being in a strange land, far away from their family, sometimes offering a gift, such as a stuffed animal, or perhaps coordinating with other agencies to provide day excursions to Britannia Beach.

The work of OWB during this era took place in a new building at 283 Bank Street, as the Federal Government had taken over 102 Bank Street and OWB had to look for a new home. The day-to-day frontline relief work continued, employees of OWB sitting down with families in their living rooms, or telephoning a church or the Victorian Order of Nurses to help a mother who could not afford medicine for a sick child. By 1944 OWB provided support for over ** individuals and families.

Not unlike today, Ottawa lacked an industrial base during this time, and so, despite having an economy geared to the war effort, the City still had unemployment problems. Miss Williams' vision of an agency focused on counselling thus remained on hold. But OWB continued to do good work, and families felt less alone and less frightened having visitors from OWB paying attention. An interesting note from a file in 1940 speaks of OWB's willingness to go the extra mile to meet the needs of Ottawa's people, "Mr. G. calls at office. Said he is just out of hospital and wants to get a pair of pants. He had an accident. Was struck by a baseball on the playgrounds and is suing for damages. Can we help with pants".

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