

W A T E R
F I R S T

DRINKING WATER INTERNSHIP

The water crisis in Indigenous communities

It is unacceptable that sustainable access to safe, clean water in Indigenous communities continues to be an issue in Canada. Nobody understands the evolving challenges and needs of Indigenous communities more than the people who live there. Understanding what community members have to say about their priorities has been the catalyst for building lasting solutions.

*What COVID-19 has made abundantly clear is that access to **clean water is essential to maintaining public health and that water operators are essential workers.***

Technology alone does not provide clean and reliable drinking water; the **people who run the systems are critical**. Boil water advisories in First Nations communities across Canada have a clear association with the challenge of local capacity. Many First Nations in Canada have identified the need for more young, qualified, and local personnel to support solving water issues, independently and for the long term. However, there is a lack of opportunities for young adults to gain the relevant skills and experiences.

The Water First Internship directly addresses this by training young Indigenous adults for a career in water science. The internship is welcomed by Indigenous communities that view training and skill development as a key part of the solution to drinking water challenges.





A solution to critical drinking water challenges

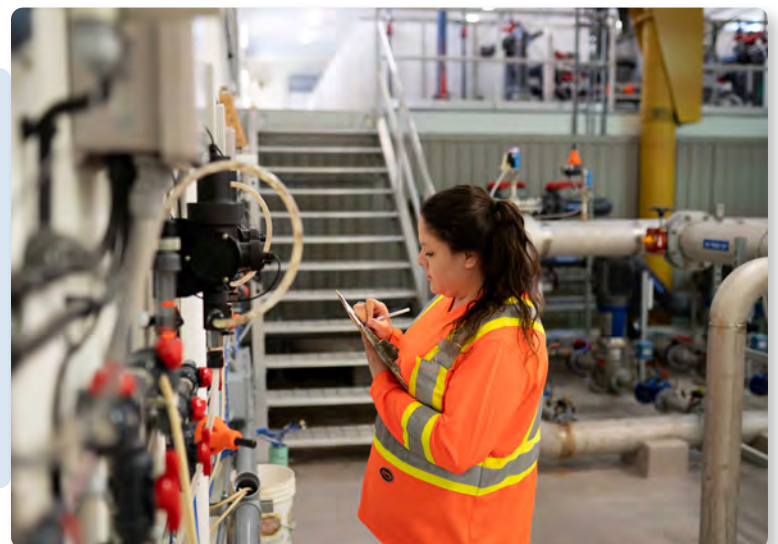
The Water First Internship Program supports young Indigenous interns to become certified water treatment plant operators. This approach ensures sustainable access to safe drinking water in Indigenous communities for the long term.

In 15 months, interns receive over 2,000 hours of training and experience in the classroom, at local water treatment facilities, and out on the land. The program is a paid internship that provides hands-on skills training and supports interns to obtain three provincially recognized certifications. The Internship also looks beyond technical skills, providing interns with support in areas such as resume writing, employment coaching and networking opportunities. Wrap-around supports are provided, like access to childcare services, to ensure the program works for a diverse set of participants.

Custom designed to engage young Indigenous adults, the program is informed by their perspectives. Along with skills and experience, interns feel an increase in confidence, and a deeper connection to the land and their community. They flourish in being part of a program that leads to not only a job, but a career. They are part of a long term, sustainable solution - providing safe drinking water in Indigenous communities.

First Nations skills training with partnership at heart

In May of 2020, Water First was published by CareerWise. In [the article](#), we shared how building trust and relationships are helping our partners overcome water challenges, especially through the pandemic.



More than just a water science training program

The program was originally developed in close partnership with the United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Mnising, Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, and the Anishinabek Nation, representing 39 First Nations in northern Ontario. Piloted in 2017-2018 with seven First Nations communities on Manitoulin Island, the program was incredibly successful and significantly exceeded expectations among the project partners.

90% of graduates were employed or pursuing further education within weeks.

In a male dominated profession, 40% of the graduated interns were female. Over two years later, our graduates continue to play a significant role in their communities. Eight out of ten graduates are still employed in the field, with two returning for further education in the water sciences.

Together with community partners, we have proven these results again on a larger scale.

In 2020, a second internship was launched in partnership with the Bimose Tribal Council representing 11 First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario. To date, 11 of the 13 interns have earned their Operator In Training certifications and have successfully completed their Entry Level Course. Interns will challenge the Water Quality Analyst certification in the coming months, thus opening doors to work within the environmental field as well. Interns will be graduating in the spring of 2021.

During the pandemic interns have navigated lockdowns, virtual learning, and communications barriers. And they have thrived.

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“Water is fundamental to life. Without the operators to provide clean drinking water, the community would be under a boil water advisory.”

***Alex Cartagena, Water First Graduate,
Sheshegwaning First Nation***

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The results of your investment can be seen in the individuals we train and support and the increased capacity they provide to communities - providing critical services. Interns like Alex, who will create a lasting impact over the course of his career and throughout his entire life.

The learning doesn't stop there. Many of our graduates have continued to pursue further certifications after completing the program. Through the Water First Alumni Network, they can remain engaged, build local networks and access opportunities for on-going professional development and peer support.

**To the best of our knowledge,
Water First is the only
charitable organization
in Canada focused on
addressing First Nations'
water challenges through
education and training.**



“The internship has been welcomed by our communities, with all Chiefs fully on board. Everyone understands how important it is for our youth and young adults to receive training in the water sciences, because it’s key to our ability to sustainably provide safe drinking water in First Nations communities.”

**Amy Comegan, Executive Director,
Bimose Tribal Council**



Expanding to meet pressing community demand

A prospective First Nations partner recently shared, “This program will solve all of the problems we are having on so many different levels.” The internship represents a profound shift for the community and their members.

In November 2020, the Waabnoong Bemjiwang Association of First Nations and Water First announced our new water training partnership. In 2021, we will be launching a third internship to support approx. 12 young Indigenous adults from six participating First Nations communities. This recent [CBC Radio interview](#) covered our new partnership and the Tribal Council’s goals for the program.

First Nations in the driver’s seat

Water First interns play an important role in increasing water science capacities in First Nations communities - both now and for the future.

We know that given the opportunity, knowledge and skills - young Indigenous adults will take the lead in providing safe, clean drinking water, sustainably, to their families and communities. They are **committed**. To their community. To the water.

The water crisis in First Nations communities requires effective and ambitious community-based solutions. Be part of the solution. Today.



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