WATER FIRST

DRINKING WATER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The **water crisis** in Indigenous communities

Sustainable access to safe, clean water in Indigenous communities continues to be an issue in Canada. As of January 2025, 15% of First Nations communities* across the country are affected by drinking water advisories. Nobody understands the evolving challenges and needs of Indigenous communities more than the people who live there.

The water challenges faced by many Indigenous communities in Canada are complex. In some communities, the concern may be around infrastructure; for others, source water concerns. And some communities have challenges with capacity and training.

Infrastructure and technology alone cannot solve the water crisis. **Having enough skilled people to operate and maintain the systems is also critical.**

Though existing water treatment staff are doing an amazing job with available resources, many Indigenous communities 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 locally available opportunities for young adults to gain the required relevant skills and experiences.

*Note: this number does not include Métis or Inuit communities.

> "Just knowing that there's going to be a lot more Indigenous water operators helping out in their own communities makes me proud to be part of the program."

Nathan Copenace, Internship Alumni
Washagamis Bay First Nation

Nathan was valedictorian of his class and is now working as a water treatment plant operator in his home community, which recently came off of a boil water advisory that had lasted for over a decade. Watch this video to learn more from Nathan about Drinking Water Advisories and how he is supporting his community in the long journey to trusting the water once again.

Part of the solution to critical drinking water challenges

Welcomed by Indigenous communities that view training and skill development as a key part of the solution to drinking water challenges, the Drinking Water Internship Program **locally trains young Indigenous adults to become certified water treatment plant operators.**

This in-depth training program addresses community-identified needs, supports building local capacity, and helps to ensure sustainable access to safe drinking water in Indigenous communities for the long term.

During this paid 15-month program, interns receive over 1,800 hours of hands-on skills training and experience – in the classroom, at local water treatment facilities and out on the land – to help interns obtain four provincially recognized certifications. The program 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 transportation and access to childcare services, to ensure the program works for a diverse set of participants.

Much more than a water science training program

Building the knowledge and skills required to become a certified water treatment plant operator is the main objective of the Drinking Water Internship Program. However, the program is customized to the base of knowledge and experience each intern brings with them. Designed to engage young Indigenous adults, the program meets them where they are at and builds from there. This approach is unique, and requires dedication, effort and building trust with each intern.

Along with skills and experience, interns gain an increase in confidence and a deeper connection to the land and their community. They flourish as part of a program that leads to not only a job, but a career. They become part of a long term, sustainable solution – **providing safe drinking water in their communities**.

The learning doesn't stop when the program finishes. Many 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.

> "Clean and safe drinking water is very important and a must for our communities. Communities struggle with accessing local training resources. New technology and a new generation of trained individuals will enrich the communities and provide advancement and growth within."

Theresa Teddy, Executive Director
Waabnoong Bemjiwang Association of First Nations

Indigenous skills training with **partnership at heart**

First piloted in 2017-2018 on Manitoulin Island, Water First has delivered six Internship Programs across Ontario and Manitoba, with a seventh and eighth launched in 2025.

Each internship is a partnership between Water First, Tribal Councils and communities, employment agencies, local Elders and Knowledge Keepers, water treatment staff, and more. These partnerships are critical to the success of the Internship. In fact, partnerships are at the heart of what we do. We work with partners to identify training needs and long-term goals, and ensure the program is geared towards those needs and goals. Along with the Water First board of directors, our staff and the Indigenous Advisory Council, donors and other supporters are key partners in the success of the program. Together, we're creating opportunities for young Indigenous adults to gain the skills, qualifications and confidence for careers or other valuable opportunities in water science.

Isaiah Tabobondung, a graduate from Wasauksing First Nation, said in his graduation speech, "When you start working in water treatment, it's like a pinhole. When you put your eye up to that pinhole, it opens up into something wider. Much more than the pinhole."

It's not just the individual participants who benefit from the Internship Program. Water First programs are designed in collaboration with each community to help strengthen capacity for the future. Our commitment to lasting results means these benefits stay within the community, supporting their specific goals and building on their unique gifts and expertise.

65 graduates of the Internship Program from 40 communities to date

Over 142,000 hours of hands-on training in water treatment plants to date

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"The Water First Internship brings valuable learning opportunities to our communities, while building local capacity and offering sustainability to current and future generations.

This program is unique in that it incorporates skills workshops, hands-on training, on the job training, and traditional knowledge."

Debbie Recollet, General Manager
Gezhtoojig Employment & Training

> “That my people are safe, they have clean drinking water, and they can turn their tap on every morning and have water. That’s my biggest accomplishment at the end of the day; making sure that my people are safe.”
>
> **Hunter Edison,** Water First Graduate
> Niisaachewan Anishinaabe Nation

Hunter Edison is a graduate of the Drinking Water Internship Program with Bimose Tribal Council and is now employed as the lead operator at his community’s water treatment plant. In a recent video, Hunter shares the story of how he took a leadership role in providing his community with safe, clean water in the face of an emergency.

It is clear that the water crisis in Indigenous communities requires effective and ambitious **community-based solutions**

And this work isn’t possible without the support of donors and other champions. The results of your investment in the Drinking Water Internship Program can be seen in the individuals we train and support – in their increased capacity, confidence and excitement to provide critical services to communities.

In October 2021, the Internship Program was featured in an article in the Toronto Star. In the article, graduates Jamie Lee Parenteau from Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation and Nathan Copenace from Washagamis Bay First Nation share their experience of participating in the program. They shed light on what being part of the next generation of young adults providing clean drinking water to their communities means to them, their families and their communities.

With generous support from donors like you, more graduates of the Internship Program – graduates like Jamie Lee, Nathan, Isaiah and Hunter – will create lasting impacts over the course of their careers and throughout their entire lives.

Expanding to meet **pressing community demand**

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

Interest for the Internship Program is flowing in from communities across the country. We are planning to launch two internships in 2026. Join us. Be part of the solution. **Donate today.**

For more information, contact Ami Gopal, Director of Development at ami.gopal@waterfirst.ngo or 1-800-970-8467 ext. 106

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