

New opportunities in Labrador for bachelor of social work students

This winter, two bachelor of social work students will complete their field practica in Hopedale, Labrador. In previous years the School of Social Work has struggled to place students in Labrador because of a lack of housing and high costs. The provincial Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development has partnered with the school to overcome these issues. Together, they've secured two placements per semester for students to complete field practica focused on Indigenous child welfare in rural and remote Labrador communities.

Two of the school's field education coordinators, Dr. Sheri McConnell and Cheryl Mallard, travelled to Labrador in November to become familiar with the sights and consult with elders, community members and leaders, and social workers. During their trip, they learned about the culture and history of various peoples in Labrador and the experience students will have while completing their practica in these rural communities. The team also trained local field instructors on the knowledge and understanding required by students to complete their practica.



Cheryl and Sheri in the Nunatsiavut Assembly Building in Hopedale



Cheryl on a skidoo while the kamutik is hitched up

Sheri and Cheryl got a feel for the lifestyle in Nain and Hopedale. They had a tour of the Nunatsiavut Assembly Building, visited the Moravian Museum, and even took a ride on a skidoo and kamutik (sled) — this is how most people there, including social workers, get around in the winter!



Social workers Jodi Beazley and Jerica Matthews and community service worker Emma Rose-Murphy with Sheri and Cheryl in Nain

Sheri reflected on how life is a bit different in the other half of our province. There's so much out of your control, especially the weather.

"It instills a sense of gratitude and really changes the relationship between people," she said. "It's a very different lifestyle and pace than on the island."

One of the biggest challenges in hiring social workers in remote communities is finding those who will be a good fit. If the students enjoy their experience this winter, there's great potential for future employment in the area. Sheri expects the first two students to take part in this new initiative, Lindsay Wilson and Megan Spurrell, will have a fabulous adventure. They'll be presenting their experiences to other students this spring and will also create an orientation manual for future students taking the opportunity to complete their field practica in Labrador.



Holly Richardson and Grant Gear, social workers in Hopedale who will be working with our students

“It was truly an honour to travel to the communities of Nain and Hopedale to learn about and experience a little of life on the coast of Labrador,” said Cheryl. “I am grateful to all the people we met on the journey, especially those for whom Nain and Hopedale is home, who shared their insights regarding their communities, its people and their land. I am humbled to be part of the process of building culturally safe, respectful and relevant practicum experiences for social work students in Labrador.”