OVERCOMING THE BARRIER OF A DRIVER'S LICENCE FOR ABORIGINAL WORKERS

By Ian MacNeill

Not having a driver's licence is one of the biggest barriers to employment for Indigenous people living on reserves in British Columbia.

"It's a real problem," says Lucy Sager, owner of All Nations Driving Academy, a company that provides customized driving-training packages to far flung communities throughout the province. In her peregrinations around BC—she estimates she's put as many as 50,000 klicks on her Toyota 4Runner since she started up 18 months ago—she says she's discovered that the percentage of people living on reserves that have a licence ranges from a high of about 40 per cent to a low of just five, as compared with 75 per cent for British Columbians as a whole. Of course not having a licence is no big deal if you can hop on a bus or SkyTrain, but those options don't exist if you live in places like Kitasoo and Soda Lake.

Bob Joseph, a Gwawaenuk Nation member and founder of Indigenous Corporate Training on his website (Ictinc.ca), says that acquiring a driver's licence when you live in a remote community can be problematic at best. "Just getting to the nearest office to write the initial test can be challenging; taking driver's training is similarly a challenge as there may not be easily accessed training providers or, for that matter, a vehicle on which to learn," he says.

Statistics for what the impact of not having a licence has on employability for Indigenous people in BC are sketchy, but a study by The George Institute for Global Health in Australia is revealing. It found that having a driver's licence quadruples the chances of obtaining full-time employment for Aboriginal people.

Photo courtesy of Shoot Me Sideways Productions

On an anecdotal level however, the impact of not having a licence in a remote area is easily illustrated, says Sager. She tells the story of a young woman living on the south side of François Lake who landed a job working at a bank in Burns Lake. However, lacking both a driver's licence and access to reliable public transit she had to hitchhike to work, a process that could take as long as two hours each way, every day. It was fine in the summer, but fearful of freezing to death at the side of the road in winter, or in town waiting for the bank to open, she quit her job and is now living on social assistance. "She wants to work," says Sager. "But the situation makes it difficult for her to do so."

The impact is not just felt in terms of lost employment opportunities. With no viable transportation alternatives people living on reserves have difficulty shopping and accessing needed government services. "People are driving all day just to get to a laundromat, and when it comes to shopping, a lot of communities run on Amazon," says Sager, which probably goes a long way in explaining why the online retailer is investing so heavily in drone-delivery technology.

Ironies abound. "The government's giving tenures to First Nations they can't use because they can't get to them," she says. "So they end up contracting out and watching others working them simply because that can't drive. People have been taught to be be aware and about chainsaw safety, but somewhere along the way they forgot to teach them how to drive."

The government's giving tenures to First Nations they can't use because they can't get to them.

Not surprisingly, there are an unknown number of people who may not have a licence but know how to drive and have access to a vehicle. And while it may be true that you don't need a licence to drive on reserve, it is to be suspected that vehicles with unlicensed drivers are venturing out onto ublic roads. This is a dangerous and potentially costly alternative. According to RoadSafetyBC, the first time you get pulled over without a licence you will get a violation ticket and "you will not be permitted to drive the vehicle any further on the road." A second offence will get the vehicle impounded for seven days and an immediate driving prohibition. A third offence is when the legal rubber really hits the road; anyone caught behind the wheel while prohibited is liable for a $500 fine and as much as six months in jail.

On the other hand, having a licence can be transformative, not just for an individual, but for communities. Sager tells the story of a young Wet'suwet'en man living in Moricetown adjacent to the Bulkley River. He obtained a Class 2 licence with air brakes and now drives a bus for the local community, providing himself with employment and the community with opportunities, including swimming lessons for the children, something that's pretty important when you live alongside a river.

Sager is attempting in her own small way to rectify the situation; she currently has a contract to travel around the province providing driver training, and she is currently working with 13 nations along Highway 16. She has trained as many as

240 individuals, ranging in age from 16 to 74, because the no-licence problem is one that is often intergenerational. "For some of the older people their first memory of a car is traumatic," she says. "The first time they saw one was when they were being put in one for the drive to the residential school." And of course if mom and dad don't have a licence they're in no position to teach their children how to drive, and so the cycle becomes self-perpetuating.

Obviously she can't train everyone by herself, and even if she could, it wouldn't solve the systemic problem that exists. "It's like I'm handing out fish," she says. "But when I leave the people are still hungry; we need to teach them how to fish themselves." She's doing that by helping bands set up driver training programs of their own. It's not a franchise gig. She's not empire building here. Once the job is done she hands over the keys to the operation and moves on. So far the biggest success story has been with the Haisla in the Kitimat area. The band now has cars, a curriculum and two driving instructors, but more needs to be done elsewhere.

Sager says she's met with Attorney General David Eby and officials from ICBC and reports that they are supportive of government programs that would result in the establishment of driving schools on reserves. She estimates that the setup costs for 20 driving schools, 40 instructors, some new vehicles, a website, and a curriculum would ring up at about $3.5 million. "It makes sense when you think about how much more money people would be injecting into the community if they could just get to work," says Sager.

Industry can, and in some case, is helping to turn the wheels. According to Nation Talk, an Aboriginal news and employment website, BC Hydro is working with several First Nations and a local driver training company to train Indigenous people from Halfway River, Saulteau, Blueberry River and McLeod Lake First Nations. And earlier this year LNG Canada announced it will be contributing $80,000 to driver training sessions in Terrace and Kitimat areas that will be offered by the Kitimat Valley Institute (KVI) in partnership with Haisla Driving School.

The TLA and its Aboriginal Affairs Committee fully support the work that Sager is doing. "It is absolutely stunning that as an industry we routinely think that First Nations are a potential workforce to tap into, without identifying why that hasn't already happened," says David Elstone, executive director, Truck Loggers Association. "Sager shines a light on this subtle but real barrier."

Sager says she'd like to see more driver-training initiatives from the forest industry as well. "They have a vested interest in building relationships and accessing a workforce, they should be putting some money in the pot," she says. "And if all the resource industries worked together they could reduce costs."

Until that happens she'll keep the pedal to the metal, conducting training and setting up turnkey programs on reserves whenever and wherever she can. "Strong, able-bodied and willing people are watching work going by because they don't have a licence, "says Sager. "My dream is to never hear that a driver's licence is a barrier again."