

# **It's Everybody's Business:** **Engaging the Private Sector** **in Solutions to Youth Homelessness**

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By Amanda Noble



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**Raising the Roof** provides strong and effective national leadership on long-term solutions to homelessness through partnership and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, investment in local communities, and public education.

This report comes out of a year-long Private Sector Engagement Project, a component of our *Youthworks* initiative. The project's main objective is to learn more about ways to increase private sector involvement in solutions to youth homelessness.

Also available:

- A **Summary Report** – *It's Everybody's Business: Engaging the Private Sector in Solutions to Youth Homelessness* (a hard copy may be requested by calling 416-481-1838).
- An **online toolkit** for prospective employers and community agencies that offer employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth. This is one of the first accessible and practical resources of its kind in Canada.

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# Contents

<b>2</b>	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>The Community Agencies</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Overview</b>	<b>27</b>	Profiles
<b>7</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	27	BladeRunners – A.C.C.E.S.S.
8	Who are ‘At-Risk’ Youth?	28	EMPLOY – Community Futures Development Corporation of the North Okanagan
8	Literature Review	29	Growing Opportunities Program – Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY)
8	Homeless Youth and Employment	30	Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC) – St. Christopher House
9	Employment Programs for Youth Experiencing Homelessness	31	CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program – Carpenters’ Union Local 27 Training Trust Fund Inc.
10	Private Sector Engagement	32	The Youth Retail Employment Program (YREP) – Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre
<b>11</b>	Methodology	33	TAPAJ – Spectre de Rue
<b>13</b>	Structural Barriers to Employment	34	Train for Trades – Choices for Youth
<b>14</b>	Other Barriers to Employment	<b>35</b>	Youth Employment Placements
<b>15</b>	The Importance of Youth Employment Programs	<b>36</b>	Agency Challenges
15	Opportunity	36	Financial
16	Transition with Support	37	Outcomes
17	Moral and Economic	37	Finding Quality Employment
<b>17</b>	<b>The Private Sector</b>	38	Finding a Balance between Support and Work
18	Does the Private Sector Have a Role to Play in Homelessness?	38	Agency Capacity and Burnout
18	Private Sector Motivation	39	Challenges with the Youth
18	Giving Back	<b>40</b>	Advice for Other Agencies
19	Good for Business	40	Hire the Right People
19	Program Merits/Reputation	41	Stay Focused on the Youth
<b>20</b>	Job Responsibilities	42	Accountability
<b>21</b>	Youth Outcomes	42	Advice for Starting a Program
<b>22</b>	Private Sector Challenges	<b>43</b>	A Note on the Local Context
22	Challenges Pertaining to the Jobs	43	BladeRunners
22	Challenges Pertaining to the Youth	43	EMPLOY
23	Providing Extra Support	44	Growing Opportunities
24	Other Challenges	44	CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program
<b>24</b>	Advice for Other Employers	44	Toronto Youth Job Corps
<b>26</b>	In Sum	44	Youth Retail Employment Program
		45	TAPAJ
		45	Train for Trades
		<b>45</b>	In Sum

## **46 Working Together: Engaging The Private Sector**

- 46** Critical Success Factors
  - 46 Agency Support
  - 47 Communication
  - 48 Keeping it Simple
  - 48 Clear Expectations
- 49** Strategies for Engaging the Private Sector
  - 49 Getting the Word Out
  - 50 Relationship-Building
  - 51 Choosing a Business to Approach
  - 53 Initiating Contact
  - 54 The Pitch – Highlighting the Benefits of Participating
- 56** Challenges in Engaging the Private Sector
  - 56 Availability of Resources
  - 57 Availability of Jobs/ Competition
  - 58 Economic Context
  - 59 Making Contact
  - 59 Employer Fears/Stigma of Youth Homelessness
  - 60 Burning Bridges
- 61** In Sum

## **62 Youth Participants**

- 62** Reasons for Joining the Program
- 63** Benefits of Participating
  - 63 Necessities and Experience
  - 63 Learning new Skills
  - 65 Guidance and Support
  - 65 Improved Self-Esteem
  - 65 Reducing Social Exclusion
- 66** Youth Challenges
- 68** Next Steps
- 69** Advice for Employers
  - 69 Provide Sufficient Training
  - 69 Treatment from Employers
  - 70 Give Youth a Chance
- 71** Advice for Agency Staff
- 72** In Sum

## **73 Conclusion**

## **75 Recommendations**

- 75** Government
  - 75 Institutional Obligation
  - 75 National and Local Coordination
  - 75 Funding
  - 76 Education
- 76** Private Sector
- 76** Community Agencies

## **77 References**

## **78 Thank You**

- 78** Raising the Roof Board of Directors
- 79** Youthworks Board of Advisors
- 79** Private Sector Engagement Board of Advisors

# It's Everybody's Business:

## Engaging the Private Sector in Solutions to Youth Homelessness

### Overview

The issue of youth homelessness in Canada and in many countries around the world is of growing social, economic and moral concern. While the circumstances of homelessness are complex, so too are the solutions. Yet one thing is certain: to secure adequate, stable housing, youth must be able to support themselves. Unfortunately, homeless youth, or those at risk of homelessness, face great difficulties in obtaining and maintaining employment.

Community agencies across Canada offer a variety of employment programs that provide youth with counselling, supports and skills training to help prepare them for employment. Many of these programs also serve to connect the youth with employers who are willing to provide work experience and employment opportunities. As this report discusses, these programs provide many benefits. However, there is a general lack of understanding about the range, intensity and duration of supports that many youth need for both immediate and long-term employment success. This results in many programs struggling to attract and maintain the resources they need to do their work.

Potential employers, many of whom are influenced by the negative stereotypes associated with homeless and at-risk youth, are often reluctant to open their doors to at-risk youth. Most are also unaware of the existence of community employment programs and the resources and supports the programs offer to employers who are willing to give youth a chance.

This paper describes societal, economic and structural barriers to employment for homeless and at-risk youth, the importance of youth employment programs, and the role that the private sector can and, we suggest, should play in helping to integrate willing and able, if somewhat inexperienced, young people into the workforce.

Informed by interviews with employers, community employment program staff, and youth program participants, this report includes multiple perspectives. Employers speak frankly about their motivation for involvement, the program supports that they find most valuable, the rewards and the practical issues that encourage or challenge their continuing participation.

Program staff talk about the complexity of needs that a homeless or at-risk youth may have, and how they provide or facilitate services and supports to help the youth address those needs. They articulate challenges around securing stable funding, the lack of resources for longer-term supports to youth who may struggle after an early employment success, and the challenge of finding 'quality' employment opportunities that will hold youths' interests, utilize their skills, and offer career potential.

Youth program participants discuss why they needed the help of an employment program and comment on the program supports and training that helped them eventually secure employment. Several youth speak to the importance of employers providing them with adequate training and orientation to their work duties, and to the need for their new boss to withhold judgement until they have had a chance to prove their abilities. A number of youth describe the difference being steadily employed has

made in their lives, including their ability to afford rent, their increased self-confidence and their more positive outlook on the future.

Community agencies such as those profiled in this research have a critical role in helping at-risk and homeless youth take care of their basic needs and develop the skills necessary to secure and maintain employment. The successful outcome of their work, however, depends on the existence of employers who are willing to take a chance on these youth. Private sector engagement is crucial in providing at-risk youth with pathways into the labour market. It is important that the private sector be provided the tools and resources to support their participation. This report outlines several strategies for doing so.

Increased private sector engagement will not, by itself, solve the issue of youth homelessness. Long-term, sustainable solutions require action across society, including government, community agencies, and the private sector. A well-coordinated strategy must include emergency services (shelters, drop-ins), mental health and addiction supports, and structural changes such as an increase in affordable housing, universal access to post-secondary education, and the availability of meaningful jobs that pay a living wage. For example, a homeless or at-risk youth can hardly be expected to hold down a job if he or she lacks a stable, decent place to live.

Interestingly, the costs of emergency shelter, social services, additional health care costs, and the use of the criminal justice system to ‘address’ homelessness is much more expensive than preventive measures such as affordable housing and income security. But perhaps the greater, incalculable, loss is the wasted potential of disenfranchised youth. With demographic shifts occurring, such as the mass retirement of the baby-boomer generation, our country needs skilled, knowledgeable and engaged youth to take their place and ensure the continued health and prosperity of our country.

## Introduction

Solutions to homelessness are often considered to be the responsibility of NGOs, various levels of government, and the individuals experiencing homelessness. Homelessness, however, affects everyone in society – morally, socially, and economically. Hence, genuine solutions require action across society, including in the private sector. In short, homelessness is everybody’s business.

After years of inattention, there is a growing consideration of the ways in which the private sector can play a role in addressing social issues such as homelessness (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Change Toronto, 2010; Street Kids International, 2008; Burnett & Pomeroy, 2008). To date, however, there is little research that outlines successful strategies to engage the private sector in doing so. Recognizing this gap, Raising the Roof sought to learn more about ways to increase private sector involvement in solutions to youth homelessness through our “Private Sector Engagement Project”, one component of our *Youthworks* initiative.<sup>1</sup>

The private sector can contribute to solutions to homelessness in many ways, including donating money to service organizations and lobbying the government for change. Although these are important and necessary contributions, we are particularly interested in strategies to engage the private sector in supporting the integration of at-risk and homeless youth into the labour market through training, mentorship, and employment opportunities.

**1** Launched in 2006, Raising the Roof’s *Youthworks* initiative is aimed at finding solutions to homelessness for young Canadians. During the first phase we released the report *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions*, which gave voice to nearly 700 youth experiencing homelessness. The second phase has been aimed at advocating for the recommendations made in this report through a combination of community, government, and private sector engagement, as well as by designing a public education campaign. For more information, visit [www.raisingtheroof.org](http://www.raisingtheroof.org).

**Factors that contribute to making an individual “at-risk”: precarious employment or sudden unemployment, abuse, low education, discrimination...**

There is currently a myriad of community agencies across Canada that prepare youth for employment by helping them to secure their basic needs and develop valuable life and employment skills. While this work is vital, it relies on youth having access to jobs where they can put their newly learned skills into practice. At the beginning stages of their career, everyone needs someone to take a chance on them. This is particularly true for at-risk and homeless youth, who often lack the invaluable connections and supports necessary to find entry-level jobs.

Raising the Roof’s *Private Sector Engagement Project* was created with two objectives. First, to learn about the ways businesses and community agencies are currently working together to provide training, employment and mentorship opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth. Second, to use knowledge gained from this research as a catalyst for change in attitude, policy and practice within the private sector, paving the way for new employment opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth across Canada.

### Who are ‘At-Risk’ Youth?

The employment programs profiled in this research provide life and employment-related skills to youth who are either experiencing homelessness or are ‘at risk’ of homelessness. Although the entrance requirements vary between programs, there are some common factors that render a youth at risk of homelessness (a youth is generally defined as between the ages of 16-24, but some programs may include individuals up to age 30).

The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN, 2012) has identified several factors that make an individual at risk of homelessness. These include: precarious employment, sudden unemployment, pending eviction, breakdown in family relations, abuse or fear of violence/abuse in a household, severe mental health issues, substance abuse, or behavioural concerns. These latter concerns can make youth at risk of homelessness even if these factors are not experienced in person, but are manifested in the youth’s parents/guardians.

Other factors that can place youth at risk of homelessness include low educational attainment, involvement in the criminal justice or child welfare systems, and discrimination based on sexuality or race (particularly for Aboriginal Persons or new Canadians of colour). Although any one of these variables can place a youth at imminent risk of homelessness, they often occur in conjunction. In general, the more risk factors present the more at risk of homelessness an individual will be.

### Literature Review

**Homeless Youth and Employment.** The problem of youth homelessness in Canada continues to be a pervasive one. As the pathways into homelessness for youth are complex, so too are the solutions. One thing is certain, however – if youth are to achieve and maintain adequate, stable housing, they need to be able to support themselves. To achieve this, they must develop the skills necessary to secure and maintain meaningful employment. According to Karabanow, Carson, & Clement (2010) employment is key to facilitating a transition from street-life to mainstream culture and reducing feelings of social isolation. It is also a pivotal factor in youth forming their sense of self and self-esteem. Unfortunately, much research has shown that homeless youth face great difficulties in obtaining and maintaining employment. For example, Raising the Roof’s (2009) research with nearly 700 youth experiencing homelessness

in three Canadian cities found that 73% were not employed. Similarly, in a study with 360 homeless youth in Toronto, only 15% identified paid employment as their primary source of income (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). This raises the question – why can't youth experiencing homelessness simply 'get a job'? Do they not want to work?

Research has shown that many youth experiencing homelessness do in fact desire paid employment. For instance, Gaetz & O'Grady (2002) found that 83.4% of males and 87.8% of females in their sample had a strong desire to find paid employment. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that many youth *do* have some previous employment experience. Baron (2001) interviewed 200 male youth in Edmonton, Alberta and found that youth held an average of 7 jobs in their past. Similarly, Gaetz & O'Grady (2002) reported that youth in their sample held an average of 3.1 jobs over the past 12 months. This indicates that for many young people, the predominate concern is not necessarily *obtaining* employment, but overcoming the barriers that inhibit their ability to maintain employment.

**Employment Programs for Youth Experiencing Homelessness.** There are a variety of programs available to assist homeless youth in securing employment, including drop-in centres, paid employment placements, life skills workshops, and social enterprises. Most programs address the development of 'soft' employment skills such as resume and interview preparation, while others also facilitate the development of 'hard' skills including computer training and construction (Robinson & Baron, 2007; Bridgeman, 2001). These programs have been shown to provide many benefits to homeless youth including the development of self-esteem, the acquisition of new skills, and much-needed social support from staff (Karabanow, Carson, & Clement, 2010; Robinson & Baron, 2007). In a pilot program of a social enterprise with 16 youth, Ferguson & Xie (2008) found that participants experienced significant improvements in life satisfaction, fewer depressive symptoms, increased peer support and contact with family compared to a control group. Similarly, Karabanow, Carson & Clement (2010) describe employment programs (particularly those providing paid placement) as delivering the necessary transitional step for youth to move from the street to formal employment. They add that these programs can assist youth in saving money, working towards a career path, and in some cases gathering enough confidence to return to school or some form of training. The researchers report that longer programs are particularly helpful in assisting youth to gain important skills and focus in their lives.

There were two criticisms of some employment programs, however, identified by Karabanow et al. The first concern was that some youth felt very "let down" once the program was complete, particularly if it did not lead to an employment opportunity. Many youth were able to develop a routine and gain confidence in their abilities, only to have it all end. The second was a concern that some programs did not focus enough on the development of skills but instead acted as "make-shift" employment centres. In fact, other authors (Robinson & Baron, 2007, for example) have argued that some employment programs serve as a "mechanism for social sorting" by not ensuring that youth further their education and training, and hence youth become pigeon-holed into low-wage labour. The flip side to this argument is that employment programs can also be an important way for youth to 'get their foot-in-the-door' and acquire learning opportunities that can be used down the road in meaningful employment (Karabanow, Carson, & Clement, 2010).

**These programs have been shown to provide many benefits to homeless youth including the development of self-esteem, the acquisition of new skills, and much-needed social support from staff**

## There are many myths regarding hiring youth, particularly in regards to at-risk and homeless youth...

Robinson & Baron (2007) interviewed 32 homeless youth participating in employment programs in Toronto. They found that the majority of youth (27) participated in programs that addressed soft skills exclusively, and in many cases, youth were able to get a start in the formal labour market. Unfortunately, in several instances, participation in the programs did not lead to employment or have an impact on post-program earnings. The authors did report, however, that several youth identified indirect benefits of participating in such programs, particularly in the relationships they formed with staff. As many youth do not have an extensive social network, they were able to gain much-needed support from staff members. Youth also reported having the opportunity to explore various work options, build confidence, and increase their social skills. The authors argue that there is a need for research with service providers to determine what works and what does not when structuring programs. They also point to the need for more education of potential employers, many of whom are influenced by the negative stereotypes associated with homeless and at-risk youth. This bias will limit a youth's potential for success, regardless of how well they have done in an employment program.

The available research, although somewhat scarce, points to some conclusions. While there are many benefits to youth participation in employment programs, barriers that prevent youth from maintaining employment (including unmet basic needs) must also be addressed. Programs that focus exclusively on the development of soft and hard skills for employment cannot, by themselves, solve homelessness, and there is a need for more programs that assist youth in furthering their education. It is also possible that not all youth experiencing homelessness will be ready for full-time employment, as they may be caught up with the day-to-day struggle for survival (Gaetz, O'Grady, & Vaillancourt, 1999). It is hence important that there is a variety of employment supports available to meet youth where they are at. It must also be emphasized that there are many structural and economic barriers for youth entering the labour market, which need to be addressed at a social policy level (to be elaborated on further in the report). In addition, there is a need for employers in both the private and public sectors to become engaged in this important issue.

**Private Sector Engagement.** Currently there is very little research on specific strategies for engaging the private sector in solutions to homelessness. Some authors have articulated the importance of the private sector becoming involved in social concerns in general, such as Porter & Kramer (2011), who suggest that capitalist enterprises can include both social and business goals. These authors argue that the social service and private sectors exist in a mutual relationship where each depends on the other. Businesses require healthy communities made up of citizens who can buy their products, and communities require successful businesses to provide jobs and create wealth. Hence, "shared value", or "creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges" (Porter & Kramer, p. 4) can be created where both profit-making and healthy communities are of equal importance. Porter & Kramer argue that not only do businesses have an ethical obligation to their communities; they will also be able to increase their profitability by building stronger and more vibrant communities.

Although not specific to homeless or at-risk youth, there is some literature that provides strategies for employers hiring youth and individuals with lived experience of homelessness. For instance, the City of Toronto (2009) has published a toolkit for the private sector which highlights the benefits of hiring youth, provides suggestions for working with 'generation Y', and outlines myths about working with youth. These

myths include assumptions that all youth will be disrespectful, disloyal, have a sense of entitlement, and lack a strong work ethic. This is important, as there are many myths regarding hiring youth, particularly in regards to at-risk and homeless youth. Another report by Change Toronto (2009) outlines strategies for the social service sector to hire persons with lived experience of homelessness. These include developing more inclusive policies and practices, and pressing municipal governments to work with organizations to develop social enterprises. Social service organizations should also increase entry points so that individuals can get their ‘foot in the door’, including establishing volunteer and internship positions, holding job fairs, and hiring people with lived experience for relief positions. Additional support should be provided once an individual is hired, including a thorough orientation and ongoing supervisory meetings so that employees can speak directly to employers about their needs (Change, 2009).

In terms of outlining specific strategies to engage the private sector in solutions to homelessness, the literature is very scarce. Two exceptions include Street Kids International (2008), who identify factors critical for a successful partnership between the private sector and NGOs, and Burnett and Pomeroy (2008), who provide seven case examples of private sector involvement in initiatives related to homelessness in Canada. Street Kids International (2008) describe seven critical success factors necessary for an effective partnership between the private sector and NGOs, including that the purpose of the partnership is clear, the organizations are compatible in their mission and values, both organizations have a valuable role to play, open lines of communication are maintained, there is a process of continual learning, and both parties are committed to the relationship.

Burnett and Pomeroy’s (2008) report, developed for the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, provides seven case examples of programs in Canada where the private sector is involved in initiatives related to homelessness, including hiring individuals with experience of homelessness. Their main focus is to outline the motivation of private sector participants, as well as the benefits they received as a result. They found that while private sector members were primarily motivated by philanthropic or social reasons, they did in fact receive several benefits as a result of their participation, including social branding (building a good reputation in the community), new business opportunities and sources of labour, stronger human resources, and safer, more attractive communities.

Burnett and Pomeroy (2008) argue that a two-tiered strategy may be necessary to engage the private sector in solutions to homelessness. The first element requires recruiting ‘corporate champions’ who have experience hiring individuals who have endured (or are enduring) homelessness to share their experience with other members of the private sector. The second strategy involves building the capacity of community agencies to promote the benefits of hiring homeless or previously homeless individuals to businesses and to society as a whole and helping them to assess their local context and opportunities.

## Methodology

Following preliminary research with 25 community agencies and corporations across Canada that offer employment/skills training for at-risk or homeless youth, eight community programs were selected to partner with Raising the Roof for a year-long research study:

**The agencies were selected to represent a diverse sample geographically (five provinces) as well as by the program model and the type of training/employment opportunity provided.**

- A.C.C.E.S.S. – BladeRunners, Vancouver, BC
- Community Futures Development Corporation of the North Okanagan – EMPLOY, Vernon, BC
- Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY) – Growing Opportunities, Winnipeg, MB
- St. Christopher House – Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC), Toronto, ON
- Carpenters' Union Local 27 – CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program, Vaughan, ON
- Pinecrest – Queensway Community Health Centre – Youth Retail Program, Ottawa, ON
- Spectre de Rue – TAPAJ, Montréal, QC
- Choices for Youth – Train for Trades, St. John's, NL

The agencies were selected to represent a diverse sample geographically (five provinces) as well as by the program model and the type of training/employment opportunity provided (from retail to construction to 'green' jobs). Site visits were conducted at each community agency and semi-structured interviews were administered with agency staff, their private sector partners, and youth participants. In a few cases, focus groups were conducted with agency staff, based on their availability. A total of 63 interviews were conducted with youth, 31 with community agency staff, and 31 with private sector participants (n = 125). Community agency staff assisted in the recruitment of youth and private sector members, and hence some were current and some previous program participants.

Programs varied according to the participation criteria (for example, some programs required the youth to have housing whereas other programs did not) as well as their definition of 'youth'. For instance, those programs funded by Service Canada defined youth as individuals between the ages of 15-30. This was the age range of youth in this sample, although the vast majority of youth were between the ages of 18-25, with a mean age of 20.3 years. The majority of youth participants were male (47), 15 were female, and 1 identified as transgendered. Nearly all of the youth were housed at the time of the interview, although most indicated they had previous concerns with housing. This likely reflects the strong need for an individual to have secure housing before they can maintain employment, as well as the assistance provided by agency staff in ensuring that the youth have their basic needs met. Youth were offered a \$30 honorarium for participating.

Additional data was collected at a roundtable discussion held in May 2011. Roundtable participants included at least one representative from each community agency, several private sector partners, and Raising the Roof staff. Other participants were selectively invited, including a former City of Toronto employee with over 20 years of experience with youth employment programs, and the Director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network. Participants were asked to discuss the role of the private sector, strategies for engaging the private sector and challenges in doing so. Individual interviews and transcripts from the roundtable discussion were coded thematically using N-Vivo 9 software.

## Structural Barriers to Employment

If Canada is to eradicate homelessness, a comprehensive strategy is needed. This includes increasing the supply of affordable housing, ensuring that employment pays a living wage, and addressing the deteriorating social safety net. There must also be ample, accessible educational and employment opportunities. At-risk and homeless youth face a tremendous number of structural barriers to employment, including poor labour market conditions. Canada's labour market has undergone monumental changes, including an increased reliance on secondary market positions characterized by part-time, temporary employment with lower wages and no benefits. Employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector, which once provided many stable employment positions, is slowly being eroded due to a growth in technology and the global market, where low skill-level positions are increasingly being outsourced to developing countries (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Similarly the public sector, which has been a staple of secure employment with decent wages and benefits, is increasingly being dismantled (Standing, 2011).

The culmination of these factors has led to a dramatic increase in precarious employment and a new class of society that perpetually shifts between un- and under-employment and faces monumental barriers to upward mobility and escaping poverty (Baron & Hartnagel, 2002).

Youth in general (let alone homeless youth) are at a marked disadvantage in securing meaningful employment. In fact youth face unemployment rates double that of Canada's total unemployed population at 14.7% versus 7.8% (Community Foundation of Canada, 2011). In times of recession, youth face even worse circumstances as they are often the most disposable employees, displaced by unemployed adults with higher qualifications who are forced to take the entry-level or bottom-rung positions that youth usually occupy. Youth now enter a labour market where life-long employment is largely a thing of the past, and employers increasingly utilize long probationary periods and temporary contracts with lower wages and no benefits (Standing, 2011).

Miner (2010) points out that there are two pivotal social trends occurring in Canada which pose a threat to the success of our labour market. First, the number of people available for work (those aged 15-64) is decreasing as members of the baby-boom generation reach retirement age. This will result in labour shortages as there are fewer people available to replace those who retire. Second, the growth of the knowledge economy has led to an increase in the need for credentials, or educated and skilled workers who possess more than a secondary school diploma (for example, completion of an apprenticeship, management training, a college diploma or university degree). According to Côté & Bynner (2008) the earning potential of youth without a post-secondary degree has declined dramatically over the past 30 years, and even the earnings of those with a post-secondary degree have remained stagnant. These two trends combined may not only lead to a labour shortage in some fields, but also an increase in jobs for which there are no skilled employees, resulting in what Miner (2010) calls "people without jobs and jobs without people" (from report of same name).

The implications of the state of the labour market for homeless youth are clear: with low educational attainment and work experience they are at a marked disadvantage for securing even the most menial, precarious employment positions (Gaetz & O'Grady,

**For youth who have left their homes or who have unsupportive home environments, many of the supports and networks available to others are absent.**

2002). This is particularly true for First Nations youth, as well as youth in regions such as Eastern Canada (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). For many, obtaining an employment position within the formal economy will not provide a living wage, or present any opportunity for upward mobility (Standing, 2011; Côté & Bynner, 2008). It is clear that Canada must not only find the necessary number of workers to replace those entering retirement age, but that those workers must also possess the skills necessary to occupy the positions available in the knowledge economy. It is hence pivotal that *all* of Canada's youth have access to meaningful education, training, and employment opportunities. For homeless and at-risk youth, this means ensuring that their basic needs are met and that they have enough support and encouragement to continue their education and training. This will not only require the support of NGOs, community agencies and educational institutions, but also unions and the private sector.

### Other Barriers to Employment

The staff and youth interviewed in this study identified a multitude of barriers that homeless and at-risk youth face in obtaining and maintaining employment. These included not having basic needs met, a lack of social support, low education and skills levels (or social capital), and other factors including trauma, mental health concerns, addictions, and criminal justice involvement. First and foremost, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible to maintain employment without having one's basic needs met. This includes access to safe and adequate housing, proper nutrition, clothing, and transportation. Housing is a cornerstone to maintaining employment, one that most of us take for granted. While the youth in this study varied in their current housing situations, the large majority have experienced some form of housing instability in their lives, either by being directly homeless, couch-surfing, or moving to several different places in a short period of time. For many, frequent moving was so common that they did not identify this as being precariously housed.

Housing provides a forum to rest, eat, prepare food, wash-up, and recover from illness (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). Homeless or precariously housed youth often have no address to put on their resume, no call-back numbers for interviews, and limited means of keeping track of time. Without housing, individuals are often forced to devote considerable time to searching for their next meal, a location to retire for the night, a place they can keep their possessions safe, and worrying about whether they will be victimized on the streets. Housing can thus impact many other determinants of employability, including physical and mental health, and overall well-being.

In addition, several agency staff spoke about the social stigma of being homeless, and how this may affect one's ability to secure employment. For instance, some employers are hesitant to employ youth once they find out they are homeless, perhaps due to the fear that their lives are not stable enough to maintain employment, or as a result of the stereotypes associated with homeless and at-risk youth.

This is important as employment is often seen as the main solution to escaping homelessness. It is our hope that society can begin to understand that in most cases the opposite is true; that in order for individuals to successfully maintain employment, they must have stable housing. It is for this reason that the programs in this sample either refer youth to housing services before they can participate, or provide very casual employment to youth before they are securely housed. For instance, RaY offers youth who are crisis-laden the opportunity to work in three-hour increments, when they are able to do so.

Homeless and at-risk young people often have limited human and social capital. According to Robinson & Baron (2007), human capital refers to “the currency one brings to employment” (p. 38) and includes skills, abilities, education, training, and work experience. Young people typically have limited human capital because, due to their age, they have not had the opportunity to develop this currency. This is particularly true for homeless youth who have had to focus on day-to-day survival rather than developing their human capital, and who generally have low levels of educational attainment and work experience. Similarly, many youth may not have had the opportunity to learn the fundamental skills necessary to find employment, including resume preparation, job search and interview skills.

In addition to having limited human capital, many homeless and at-risk youth also have limited social capital, or interpersonal networks and connections. For youth who have left their homes or who have unsupportive home environments, many of the supports and networks available to others are absent. This includes families, community members, neighbours, teachers, and counsellors. This means that many youth are not only lacking personal support and encouragement, but also connections to potential employment positions and employers.

Other barriers to employment identified in this study include trauma, addictions, mental health concerns, and criminal justice involvement. It is extremely common for homeless and at-risk youth to have faced multiple hardships in their lives including poverty, neglect, family breakdown, abuse, child welfare involvement, and discrimination based on race or sexual orientation. These factors can understandably lead to mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety, as well as substance use. Experiencing homelessness can greatly exacerbate these states. Many youth have also accumulated criminal records while on the streets, often attempting to survive by becoming engaged in activities such as petty theft, drug dealing, and sex work.

The final barrier identified by a great number of agency and youth participants in this study is a lack of self-esteem and confidence. Many youth simply do not believe in their own abilities, or that their low skill and education levels qualify them for a place in the labour market. For many, hope in a bright future is simply non-existent. It is here perhaps that these employment programs offer the most assistance. By introducing the youth to the labour market with much-needed support and encouragement, many youth begin to see that they are endowed with numerous abilities, and that they can begin to develop additional skills around which to structure a career.

### The Importance of Youth Employment Programs

In order for most at-risk and homeless youth to have the opportunity to obtain, and most importantly, maintain employment, it is vital that they have access to services provided by community agencies such as those profiled in this study. Agency respondents listed multiple reasons why these services are invaluable, including presenting opportunities to youth that they might not otherwise have, providing a transitional period between living on the streets and employment, and for moral and economic reasons.

**Opportunity.** Employment programs for at-risk and homeless youth provide an opportunity for young people with few other options. For instance, Garry, Coordinator at BladeRunners stated: “It’s about providing opportunities to kids that society has basically given up on”. Most of the youth that enter these employment programs have

**Many youth simply do not believe in their own abilities, or that their low skill and education levels qualify them for a place in the labour market.**

attempted to secure employment on their own and have been unsuccessful, have been unable to maintain employment as a result of their barriers, or have moved from one precarious employment position to another. Many have also attempted to join other employment programs but have been screened out because they present with too many barriers. For youth with few options, many are forced to turn to the 'street economy' to survive, and some may be tempted to join gangs. Christina, Executive Director at the Carpenters' Union Local 27 shared a quote from one of the youth in her program who spoke about the crossroads he was at before he joined the CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program:

You know I got to a point in my life where I had the choice to either pick up a hammer or a gun. Because that was what was offered to me at that point. I chose the hammer, and I haven't looked back since.

As youth enter the programs at various levels of readiness, it is important for staff to meet them where they are at. Jason from RaY observed: "Some youth are too crisis-laden to be available for full-time work, but it's also about including them". Due to their various situations, it is important that these young people have access to a wide continuum of programs. Not all of them are realistically able to work full-time initially. This does not mean that employment services should not be available to them, or that they should not be given the opportunity to develop their skill sets for when they are able to work full-time. It is for this reason that a variety of models was included in this sample, with RaY and TAPAJ offering employment for youth at various stages (including those who are extremely crisis-laden) and others offering full-time opportunities for youth who have attained a higher level of stability.

**Transition with Support.** For youth who face multiple barriers to employment, it is often not possible for them to transition directly from crisis to full-time, stable employment. Instead, it is often necessary for there to be a transitional step, or what is referred to as 'pre-employment', so that they have a chance to stabilize their lives. These programs differ from other employment programs in that they help youth address their barriers to employment while learning valuable soft and/or hard skills in a supportive environment.

Many youth have been deprived of an environment where they could learn the life skills necessary to live independently and maintain employment. Although there is variance amongst the programs in this sample, all provide a forum where youth can learn essential life skills including basic job preparation activities such as developing a resume and cover letter, interview skills, and job maintenance skills such as attendance and punctuality. Many programs offer assistance with other basic life skills including, but not limited to, budgeting, grocery shopping, and laundry. This is in addition to various types of training that make the youth more employable, such as Health and Safety training and Customer Service Excellence.

Other programs, particularly those involved in the trades (Choices for Youth, BladeRunners, and the Carpenters' Union Local 27) provide youth with hard skills around which they can structure a career. For instance, several programs offer youth training in basic carpentry or construction – skills which they can use to begin an apprenticeship. Having subsidized programs to facilitate the acquisition of these skills is extremely valuable as many youth from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the financial means to pursue these opportunities on their own, or to obtain basic work materials such as hard hats, boots, and tool belts, which these programs also provide.

The cornerstone of these community programs is the amount of support provided. For instance, BladeRunners and Choices for Youth staff are available to their youth twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Brad, Project Coordinator at Choices for Youth stated: “What we’ve found in programs like this [is that] it’s less about the work and more about the support”. For youth who have experienced multiple traumas and barriers in their lives, it is arguably this support that allows them to push through and work on stabilizing their lives. Youth have dedicated staff to talk to who patiently guide them through the day-to-day activities of employment. Sheldon from Choices for Youth described this process:

You support young people around the stuff that’s going on in their lives [and] they’re much more likely to show up to work the next day. And if they show up to work the next day, they’ll show up the next day, and the next day, and then the next day. And then they start believing in themselves, and that’s as simple as it is.

**Moral and Economic.** Many agency staff were quick to point out that although there are many moral and compassionate reasons to provide services to homeless and at-risk youth, these programs are also good for the economy and communities across Canada. For instance, youth homelessness represents a significant expense to society, namely in costs incurred in emergency shelter, social services, child welfare, health care, and the criminal justice system. Moreover, by providing the support needed to maintain full-time employment, many young people are no longer forced to rely on government assistance and /or the street-economy, and instead become tax-paying citizens. They may also act as mentors and role models for other youth in their communities, inspiring them to pursue a similar path.

## The Private Sector

Thirty-one interviews were conducted with participants from the private sector, generally at their place of business. Respondents represented a diverse sample of companies, including the trades, the service sector (such as retail and restaurants) and unions. The following businesses agreed to have the name of their organization released:

- Addition Elle, Ottawa, ON
- Boon Burger, Winnipeg, MB
- Briteland, Vernon, BC
- Cobs Bread, Vernon, BC
- CUPE Local 1860, St. John’s, NL
- Eltex Enterprises, Vancouver, BC
- Highpoint Safety, Vancouver, BC
- Intact Insurance, Toronto, ON
- ITC Construction Group, Vancouver, BC
- Natural Cycle Courier, Winnipeg, MB
- Qwik Change Oil and Lube, Vernon, BC
- Shoppers Drug Mart at Richmond/Carling, Ottawa, ON
- Westbank Projects Corp., Vancouver, BC

Respondents were asked if they felt they had a role to play in solving social problems, to describe their motivation for partnering with a community agency, the kinds of jobs provided to the youth, the outcomes of the youth placements, challenges they have faced, and advice for other employers embarking on a similar partnership. The results are listed below.

### Does the Private Sector Have a Role to Play in Homelessness?

The majority of participants strongly agreed that they have a role to play in solving social concerns such as homelessness. For instance, Mark from Eltex Enterprises stated:

To just go in, and think that we're worried about the bottom line, it doesn't cut it anymore. You have to give something back... we have to do whatever we can. We have an opportunity here to do so much.

Erin from Shoppers Drug Mart in Ottawa pointed out that although not every business can afford to donate money, this does not negate their social responsibilities: "You've got to think outside the box a bit, and programs like this help me do my contribution. I just love it".

Several participants discussed the importance of all members of society working together as a community. For one employer this meant facilitating a reciprocal relationship in the community, whereby they hire employees and in turn ask customers to shop locally. Another employer argued that healthy communities require the active engagement of all of its members:

I think we are one community, one village, and it takes a village to raise a child. It takes a village to help every single person out, and that should be our responsibility. Doing a program like this then, it's not a hand-out, it's a help out.

### Private Sector Motivation

Private sector participants were asked to describe their primary motivation for partnering with their community agency. The three most frequent responses were: having an opportunity to give back to the communities; working with an agency with a positive reputation; and that it was good for business. Several employers cited all three of these factors as motivation. For instance, they felt good about giving back to their community in a way that was good for their business, with a program they felt had a positive reputation.

**Giving Back.** The most commonly reported motivation for private sector participants was altruistic – nearly half of the 31 private sector participants (14 or 45.2%) said they wanted to give back to their communities and help marginalized youth maintain employment. Many respondents described how their company continuously looks for opportunities to contribute to their communities, including making charitable donations, volunteering and making environmentally conscious decisions in their workplace. Forming a partnership with a community agency seemed to be a natural next step. One respondent described how she wanted to contribute more to her community but felt strapped for time. Working with a community agency helped her to contribute to her community while at work. Other employers explained how they held a deep affection for their communities and felt that by working

together and offering help to individuals in need, the community at large would be strengthened. This motivation was reported with particular frequency in low-income communities, such as the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. For instance, Rhiannon from Westbank Projects Corp. stated:

Really the partnership with BladeRunners is part of our commitment to be involved in the local community. It wasn't just about building a development, it was about giving people community jobs, and being an anchor for the entire community... we continue to hire from the local community, [people] that are rooted in the Downtown East Side and give back in some way. And that's something that's really important to us, you can say you did a feel-good project, but if you're not making a difference in the community, then what's it all for?

Many employers were grateful for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of youth who may have faced difficulties and have had limited opportunities. They wanted to assist youth in developing the skills necessary to begin building a career. An employer from Toronto elaborated on this point:

Yes, I believe in young people... I enjoy taking someone that really didn't have much in life, showing [them] a pathway, getting them going, earning money... I've been lucky enough to hire some people off the street. They've been promoted over the years, they've become managers, they've run restaurants, are married, have families, have homes, and I take pride in that...

**Good for Business.** The next most frequently reported motivation listed by private sector respondents (8 or 25.8%) was that their involvement was good for business. This was particularly true for companies that received wage subsidies. For example, some retailers described how helpful it is to have extra team members on staff during peak business periods, such as Christmas, without incurring extra cost. Other employers described how the availability of a subsidy allowed them to train potential employees essentially risk-free as there was no cost if the position did not work out. This was particularly important for employers who described having a high turnover of employees, and for small businesses that have to be particularly cognizant of their labour costs.

**Program Merits/Reputation.** The final motivation reported by some private sector participants was working with a community agency with a strong reputation (6 respondents, or 19.4% cited this as their primary motivation).

I believe in Community Futures, I like what they try to do, and if I had known more about [the program] when I was young I would have taken advantage of it. So I like what they try to do... they try to get youth [moving] in the right direction. And I wanted to try to be involved.

A few private sector respondents described being very receptive when they were approached by their community agency as they knew of the agency's positive reputation. This underscores how important it is for community agencies to promote their program whenever possible, particularly as many private sector companies are inundated with requests from charities or similar organizations.

## Job Responsibilities

While participating in the programs profiled in this study, youth occupy a wide variety of employment positions. In three of the agencies (Choices for Youth, the Carpenters' Union, and BladeRunners), youth are trained to work in the trades. At Choices for Youth, participants learn to conduct energy retrofits on the basements of low-income homes. This involves learning many tasks, including framing, insulating, and installing drywall. Similarly, youth in the Carpenters' Union Pre-Apprenticeship Program learn to perform retrofits in Toronto Community Housing sites. The youth at BladeRunners are employed at various construction sites, where they learn skills required for building and renovating a diversity of structures. Young people participating in the Youth Retail Employment Program are trained to work in the retail industry. At the remaining agencies, youth occupy a wide variety of employment positions. The type of placements available depends on the current private sector partners but may include positions such as:

- Restaurant sector: cooks, service staff
- Retail: sales, stock room
- Bike courier
- Ski resort staff
- Oil change shop staff
- Office work: reception, mail room
- Health and safety officer
- Fitness centre staff
- Baker

At RaY, youth begin by performing odd jobs around the agency including gardening, shovelling, working in the clothing and food banks and general clean-up. A few of their youth have even become staff at RaY, including a cook, receptionist and custodian. At TAPAJ, young people can call in for a day's work doing various jobs, including working alongside social workers to pick up needles in their local community. When youth are ready to move to more steady employment, TAPAJ staff work to find them contracts at various private sector businesses.

The duties and responsibilities of individual employment positions vary tremendously. Youth may work with customers, make deliveries, work on an assembly line, repair equipment, prepare documents to mail, stock shelves, build or repair various structures, or perform general labour. Of course these are entry-level positions, but some youth have progressed to become health and safety supervisors, foremen, and store supervisors. Others have pursued an education while working with the agency.

## Youth Outcomes

Private sector research participants were asked to describe the outcomes of the youth who have completed a placement or worked at their businesses. Many employers (13 or 42%) reported entirely positive outcomes, although these employees were likely to have hired only one or two youth. All of the employers described having at least one and often more successful placements. Some told remarkable success stories of youth who had overcome monumental barriers and daunting life circumstances to become valued employees. Many youth were described as turning their lives around from circumstances such as homelessness, criminal activities, and low levels of education to become apprentices, supervisors, foremen and, in a few cases, entrepreneurs.

The majority of respondents (18 or 58%), particularly those who worked with an agency for a long period of time, reported mixed results. In general, the longer a company worked with a community agency, the more diverse were the cumulative outcomes. One employer who has worked with BladeRunners for 14 years and has hired over 70 youth stated that in terms of experiences with the youth, he's "had them all". Many of the youth were successful, such as those described above, and others did not work out. Some employers hire multiple youth at a time for an employment placement, and in these cases, it was the norm for some to succeed while others did not. Some youth may realize a few weeks into a placement that it is not the place for them. In some cases, they were told not to come back. The reasons for this varied, but often were a result of lapses in punctuality and attendance. In a couple of rare cases, a serious incident occurred at the workplace, including a youth who came to work intoxicated and another who stole from his co-workers. Both youth were promptly dismissed from their positions.

The number of youth hired at the conclusion of employment placements also varied tremendously. Of course the prospect of permanent employment varies by each agency and private sector organization. For instance, BladeRunners places youth directly into an employment position rather than starting them off with a job placement. Choices for Youth works with the youth quite intensely for nearly a year, and then creates an individual plan with each youth at the end of the program. For the majority of their youth, this involves pursuing some form of post-secondary training in one of the trades. After their pre-apprenticeship with the Carpenters' Union, staff work to find the youth employment in construction, and perhaps an opportunity to pursue an apprenticeship. For the remaining agencies who find youth placements for a pre-determined number of hours, many youth have been hired by the employer who gave them their placement opportunity. Some employers interviewed in this study indicated that there have been many youth that they wished they could have hired, but were not able to, often due to a lack of available resources.

While none of the employers in this study described their experiences as entirely negative, this may reflect the research sample rather than an absence of employers for whom this was the case. The private sector participants in this sample were mainly recruited by agency staff, and hence had current relationships with the agency. It is likely that those who have not had a positive experience are no longer in contact with the agency program and hence could not be approached for an interview. One private sector participant in this sample described feeling very close to ending his partnership after a series of placements did not go well. His most recent placement experience, however, has worked out, and he has gone on to hire the youth on a permanent basis.

**Some [employers] told remarkable success stories of youth who had overcome monumental barriers and daunting life circumstances to become valued employees.**

## Private Sector Challenges

Participants from the private sector were asked to identify the main challenges, if any, they have faced in doing this work. General themes emerged including difficulties that arise as a result of the duties of the position, challenges with the youth and in providing extra support, and general tribulations. The specific challenges within these themes however, tended to be highly idiosyncratic, varying by business as well as by individual youth. Five participants expressed that to date they have not experienced any challenges.

**Challenges Pertaining to the Jobs.** Several employers, particularly those involved in construction (5 employers, or 16%), described challenges resulting from the nature of their field. For instance, construction is very labour intensive and is quite dependent on weather conditions. It can also be difficult to find youth work once a site development is completed, particularly during economically turbulent times. A few employers spoke about how these factors can make it difficult for some youth to stay motivated, or can confuse youth as to whether they are working on a particular day or not. In some cases, youth simply stopped showing up, or lost interest. At Choices for Youth, some challenges were experienced when scheduling tradesmen for tasks, such as electrical and plumbing work, that the youth were not certified to do. This led to periods of time when the youth had to wait to complete their work. Agency staff generally addressed this challenge by finding alternative jobs for the youth, such as building an extension at a local community centre.

One participant who employs a youth as a baker described how the nature of this work can also be challenging. For instance, bakers must begin work in the middle of the night to ensure that the products are ready for early morning. The position also involves multi-tasking, which can make an employee feel overwhelmed. Another respondent who works in the retail sector described how, during peak business hours, youth may become besieged with requests, causing some of them to become flustered. At other times, youth may have difficulty dealing with customers, particularly if the customers are irate or dissatisfied.

**Challenges Pertaining to the Youth.** A few respondents (10 or 32%) reported experiencing some challenges with the youth themselves, although again this was certainly not the case with all of the young people. For example, in one case, a youth's low literacy level was cited as a challenge by an employer. Fortunately, the partnering agency was able to refer this youth to literacy classes where he quickly improved. In other cases, difficulties occurred as a direct result of the youths' lack of employment experience. In some instances, youth may not have learned appropriate workplace conduct including dress code and suitable language to use with customers, co-workers, and management. In other cases, the issue was around learning the routine necessary to be alert and productive at work, such as getting adequate rest or not going out with friends the night before. For some youth who have never had a full-time job, it can be difficult to become accustomed to being at work every day. In fact, although responses from private sector participants varied tremendously, poor punctuality and attendance was cited with some frequency. Two respondents described how, in a few cases, youth simply vanished from their job. This was described as being difficult for the employers who had invested a lot in the youth, both personally and professionally. Mark from Eltex Enterprises expressed how this situation can be troubling:

One of the things I sometimes find challenging is that they come and they're really gung-ho to work, and you see tons of potential in them. And then for whatever reason, they just fade away. And you get frustrated because you put time into them, and you get concerned, because a lot of them are good kids... You get attached to the kids and then they disappear. Some of them, like I say, when they come in they're not quite ready, they seem to think they are, they'll say all the right things and do all the right things, but then when they get there, they're not.

Hence, despite the best efforts of agency staff and employers, some youth were not able to maintain their employment positions. This can be frustrating after time and effort has been put into a youth and employers have to start all over again. A few respondents pointed out that this is not necessarily unique to the youth they hire from the programs, and can occur with any employee.

**Providing Extra Support.** Although it is not the case with everyone, some youth may need additional support from their employers. About half of the employers in this sample (16 or 52%) stated that they had to provide more support to the youth from employment programs than their other employees. This was particularly true during training or the early stages of employment. As discussed earlier, these extra supports are most often around appropriate workplace conduct, communication skills, attendance and promptness. One employer said that he often provides support in the form of additional encouragement. As many of the youth in these programs have little work experience and often low levels of confidence in their own abilities, employers may have to be patient, and regularly encourage them in their abilities to do the job. In many cases, this extra support was only required during the initial few weeks of employment. In other cases, employers had to turn to their agency partners to assist them, particularly if a concern was ongoing or if the employer did not have the capacity or the experience to address the problem. For instance, some employers felt ill-equipped to address concerns such as depression or anxiety that may manifest in youth who have experienced trauma. This is why an effective partnership with the community agency is pivotal. Both the employer and the youth have an invaluable resource to get support when needed, dramatically increasing the youths' chances for success in employment.

Providing extra support can be difficult for employers who are trying to balance the needs of the youth from the agency with their other employees. Two employers described trying to find a balance between supporting the youth and treating them equally. One provided the example of a youth who was frequently late for work. She wanted to support the youth in correcting this, but also wanted to be fair to the other employees who probably wouldn't have been given as much leeway. Joe, an onsite supervisor at the Carpenters' Union highlighted this struggle:

They are youth at risk...you've got to be very careful how you handle them, because they're a little tender... They probably haven't had a good upbringing as far as a mother and a father figure... some of them resent authority. So you've got to be careful how you use it. It's a balancing act; you've got to be firm or they'll run rampant. But you've got to give more than you would other people.

**...employers  
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in their abilities  
to do the job.**

...despite the challenges, all of the employers interviewed ultimately felt that their efforts were very worthwhile...

**Other Challenges.** Two additional challenges outlined by the respondents included ensuring youth had transportation to get to work, and periods of fluctuation when there was no work available for the youth. Transportation was cited as a challenge in smaller communities where worksites were more scattered and public transportation was not available or regular. The capacity of employers to hire youth once their placement was complete was cited as a challenge in both the retail and the construction industries. For instance, in the retail sector, the months after Christmas are typically very slow and employers often have to cut back employees' hours. The construction industry is heavily dependent on economic prosperity, when many new developments are being created or retrofitted. Interestingly, in one case, a situation that was anticipated as being an obstacle turned out not to be so. Choices for Youth formed a partnership with Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, whose employers are unionized by CUPE Local 1860. Before they were able to proceed with the partnership, CUPE had to obtain approval from their membership. There were concerns that the membership would be worried that jobs would be taken away from them. Not only were the members supportive of the initiative but, to date, not one grievance has been filed with the union.

As a final note, despite the challenges, all of the employers interviewed ultimately felt that their efforts were very worthwhile, and indicated they would continue to work with their community agency partners. For instance, when asked why she continued to do this work despite having a negative experience, an employer from Ottawa talked about the importance of providing opportunities for youth who have had a "rough start" in life: "I truly believe that everyone needs a chance...each person is an individual and I can't just group them all as the same".

### Advice for Other Employers

Private sector participants were asked to give advice to employers who are either already engaged in a similar initiative or thinking about becoming involved. The most common counsel (suggested by 9 participants or 29%) was for undecided employers to simply take a chance and become involved. A few employers described how they regularly encourage other members of the private sector to partner with their agency. For some, this can be a very rewarding experience. One employer spoke of how she learned a great deal from working with the youth, particularly about some of the hardships many of them have endured. She noted that participating in the program really opened her eyes, and being able to see youth triumph over disadvantages was very rewarding. In general, seeing youth with tremendous barriers acquire valuable skills, gain confidence, and begin to develop a career can be very gratifying experience for employers. Kelly from Carpenters' Union Millwrights College, the training facility for Choices for Youth stated:

I think it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for youth at risk, you know, they're not given opportunities every day for starting a valuable career... the trades are certainly a viable option these days and there are so many opportunities now and in the future... we're giving them that opportunity that I'm sure it means the world to them... we take great satisfaction in playing a part in that.

One respondent suggested that hesitant employers ensure that they go through the same process they would when hiring any employee, including conducting a thorough job interview. If they are not comfortable hiring a specific youth, there is no pressure to do so. It is important that employers do not do anything that is outside of their comfort zone. In fact, the vast majority of private sector participants in this sample have youth undergo the same hiring process as they would any potential employee, including asking the same interview questions. A few employers stated that the only difference is that their expectations are somewhat lower regarding the employment histories of the at-risk youth, as this is often one of the reasons the youth require assistance from an agency. Instead, some look at the youth's attitude and willingness to learn, reasoning that specific skills can be developed. In contrast, a few employers described having a 'laid back' interview process, stating they trust the community agency to pre-screen candidates for them.

Another piece of advice provided by 2 participants (6.5%) was for employers to be patient with the youth and understanding of their situations, particularly in the early days of employment. The youth may present with any number of barriers including learning disabilities or anxiety from past trauma. After the initial learning phase, most youth catch up with the other employees and perform at the same level. Wendy, an employer from Ottawa who initially had a few negative experiences described how her understanding of both the circumstances of the youth and her own role grew as she continued to work with the Youth Retail Employment Program:

I think I needed to analyze okay why is this not working for me? And I realized some of it was my attitude. Why am I involved in this program you know? And initially I wanted to give back to the program, well that's great, but I'm not really doing that if these kids can't stay in the program... [I'm] trying to be a little more understanding about their concerns, and really talking about those concerns early on in the program... opening up those lines of communication.

As Wendy's statement indicates, sometimes a lack of patience and understanding on the part of the employer can impede the success of the youth. She also points out that it is important to communicate regularly with the youth. One employer suggested checking in with the youth frequently so that they can determine if the youth are having any trouble with their tasks, and provide a forum for them to ask questions. Of course being understanding does not preclude employers from having – and communicating – clear expectations about what is required of the youth.

Understanding that youth coming from a community agency may have barriers to employment does not mean that employers should treat them radically differently from other employees. Employers must find a balance between offering support and avoiding giving agency youth preferential treatment over their colleagues. One employer said it is very important to treat employees equally and not draw excessive attention to the youth hired through the community agency. This will help ensure the other employees do not feel that anyone is getting special treatment, and also respects the youth who most likely does not want to feel like he or she stands out or is not part of the team. Another respondent suggested that employers treat all youth in placement as if they were future hires, investing in and training them on a wide

**Employers must find a balance between offering support and avoiding giving agency youth preferential treatment over their colleagues.**

variety of tasks so that they develop multiple skills. Finally, Nina from ITC Construction Group recommended that employers considering embarking on this type of initiative be genuine. In other words, become involved for the right reasons, and not for the cheap labour or recognition. She stated:

You know, it's not about the glory, it's about the satisfaction of being there and helping people... it should come from an internal motivation not from motivation to want to look good.

## In Sum

In this section the results from interviews with private sector participants were reviewed. Here are the major findings from these interviews:

- Nearly all those interviewed strongly agreed that the private sector has a role to play in solving social problems such as homelessness
- While the majority of private sector participants were motivated to partner with a community agency for philanthropic reasons, several also wanted to work with an agency with a strong reputation and obtain bottom-line benefits such as receiving a wage subsidy.
- Youth work in a variety of fields while participating in employment programs including construction, basic carpentry, the service sector (such as retail and restaurants), hospitality/tourism, and administration.
- While all of the employers in this study have had at least one successful employment placement, those who partner with community agencies over an extended time frame tend to have a wide variety of experiences, both positive and negative, with their youth employees.
- The challenges experienced by private sector participants varied tremendously. Some described difficulties such as keeping youth interested in construction work during slow periods. Other employers experienced challenges with the youth, particularly around their adjustment to the work routine, or in providing the additional support that is sometimes necessary with youth employees, during the beginning of the placement.
- The most common advice employers had for others considering embarking on a similar venture was to simply take a chance and become involved. Participants also stressed the importance of employers being patient and understanding with the youth.

# The Community Agencies

Raising the Roof partnered with 8 community agencies to learn about promising practices for working with the private sector across Canada. This section includes a profile of each agency as well as information from interviews and focus groups conducted with agency staff. A total of 31 staff answered questions about their programs including how they decide which placements are appropriate for their youth, the challenges they face, and the advice they have for other agencies and employers. Participants were also asked if they felt their local context provided any opportunities or challenges for them in doing this work.

## Profiles

*(Represented geographically from west to east)*

### **BladeRunners – A.C.C.E.S.S.**

BladeRunners is an award-winning program run by the Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society (A.C.C.E.S.S) in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia. The program originated in 1994 when GM Place was being built for the Vancouver Canucks. BladeRunners was developed to respond to the need for additional manpower for such a large development and the increasing visibility of homelessness in Vancouver.

Approximately 12 youth enter the program six times per year. They begin by undergoing three weeks of pre-employment training. During the first week youth are trained in various life skills as well as in cultural awareness, as approximately 90% of the youth that use BladeRunners' services are of First Nations descent. Elders come in and discuss various cultural traditions such as smudging and the medicine wheel, and youth are offered a chance to participate in festivities such as Pow-Wows. Elders are also available for informal chats with the youth who are given an opportunity to learn about their roots and hear about the struggles of their ancestors.

The second week of training is devoted to teaching health and safety practices on a construction site. Youth are instructed in elements that include WHMIS, Fall Protection and First Aid. In the third week they are provided with experiential training with a certified carpenter. They learn basic skills in tool handling, tape measurement, demolition, and building. They also learn basic trades math and undergo TOWES testing, a test of essential skills.

Once pre-employment training is completed, BladeRunners staff work with the youth to find employment in construction. Youth are provided with all the necessary equipment such as work boots and tool belts, and are supplied transportation costs until they receive their first paycheque. Employers usually cover the entire wage (at a rate several dollars above minimum wage) but, depending on the skill level of the youth, BladeRunners staff have the option of providing a partial wage subsidy for a predetermined number of hours. According to agency statistics, approximately 77% of youth who go through the BladeRunners program find and maintain employment.

BladeRunners' main strength lies in its passionate staff who are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to provide support to their youth. This level of assistance was initiated when it became clear that youth required the most support outside of work hours. It is perhaps this readily available support that allows youth with multiple barriers to maintain employment. Youth are also able to access BladeRunners' services indefinitely.

BladeRunners is a low-barrier program, meaning there are few criteria for youth to meet in order to participate. The staffs' main considerations are the ability of youth to meet the health and safety requirements of a construction worksite. For instance, severe addictions or mental health concerns can jeopardize the safety of the youth in question as well as others on a worksite, so staff may suggest another program or service that is a better fit. In addition, as staff look for permanent employment positions for youth, they generally prefer participants to be rooted in Vancouver. This helps to maintain relationships with employers, as the likelihood of youth collecting their first paycheque and leaving is decreased. Finally, while the program is available to youth aged 15-30, preference for construction site work is given to youth aged 19 and older.

BladeRunners is also able to provide support in other areas that affect a youth's ability to maintain employment, such as housing. For instance, they have provided some youth with first month's rent and a damage deposit. There are four Coordinators at BladeRunners who are supervised by the Director. They are funded through multiple sources, including the Ministry of Regional Skills Development at the province of British Columbia. The BladeRunners model has expanded to multiple sites across Alberta and British Columbia.

### **EMPLOY – Community Futures Development Corporation of the North Okanagan**

The EMPLOY Program is run by the Community Futures Development Corporation of the North Okanagan, located in Vernon, British Columbia. The EMPLOY Program is divided into two major components. First, at-risk youth with barriers to employment undergo six weeks of paid pre-employment training where the curriculum is structured around a critical thinking model. This model is comprised of six components: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. The goal is to provide youth with tools that apply to all aspects of life including employment, relationships, and living a healthy lifestyle. Youth are provided with the tools to increase their thoughtfulness and effectiveness, and to be cognizant of how their actions affect the world. The EMPLOY program also offers various workshops for youth including yoga, meditation, communication skills, drumming, first aid, safety in the workplace, and budgeting. Workshops are conducted by various volunteers from the community.

Once youth complete the classroom component, they participate in a subsidized work placement for 14 weeks. The jobs that youth occupy vary largely, depending on their interests and which private sector partnerships are secured. Some examples include working at stores, restaurants, a local ski resort and an oil change shop. Agency staff continue to provide support to both the youth and employers during this placement.

Youth are selected for EMPLOY by first determining whether they meet the criteria as outlined by Service Canada's Skills Link program<sup>2</sup>. Once eligibility is determined, staff set up one, sometimes two, interviews with each youth to determine if they are a good fit for the program. In an attempt to gauge whether a youth will be open to the critical thinking model (or will at least benefit), staff generally pay attention to the way he or she thinks as opposed to the specific answers given in interviews. Staff observe whether the youth demonstrates a willingness to change or is at least curious to try something different. Finally, staff assess whether the youth presents with any concerns that may require treatment prior to commencing the EMPLOY program, such as a serious addiction or mental health concern. If this is the case, they will make the appropriate referral.

**2** In order for a program to receive funding from Service Canada's Skills Link Program, youth participants must meet the following criteria:  
Be between the ages of 15-30, out of school, not receiving Employment Insurance, have official status in Canada (citizen, permanent resident, approved refugee), be legally entitled to work in Canada, and require assistance in obtaining employment due to a variety of barriers. Barriers youth may present with include having a disability, being a visible minority or of Aboriginal origin, being street-involved or experiencing homelessness, being a single parent, living in a rural area, possessing language barriers, having substance use concerns, child welfare involvement, and a lack of social supports. For more information, please visit: <http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/epb/yi/yep/newprog/skillslink.shtml>

The EMPLOY program's main strength is providing a unique pre-employment program, and teaching it in a manner that has a practical application. The critical thinking instructor ensures that he uses examples in his teaching that the youth can relate to. The EMPLOY program operates in small town near Kelowna, and hence is often able to stay in touch with youth who have gone through their program. The program is staffed by a Classroom Facilitator, a Job Coach, and a Program Coordinator.

### **Growing Opportunities Program – Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY)**

Located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, The Growing Opportunities Program, run through Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY), provides a low-barrier, non-judgemental atmosphere where street-involved youth (aged 16-29) can transition through different stages of employment based on their level of readiness. In general, a youth who is utilizing one of the many services at RaY begins working with the Growing Opportunities Program by performing 'odd jobs' around the agency. These tasks include, but are not limited to, working in the clothing or food bank, removing snow, and gardening. Youth at this first stage are often very crisis-laden, facing issues such as homelessness, mental health concerns, and addictions. They typically work for three-hour increments under the supervision of Growing Opportunities staff. This allows youth to work with RaY staff to address these barriers to employment while earning an income and gaining work experience.

Once youth begin to achieve a period of relative stability, such as acquiring housing or receiving addictions treatment, Growing Opportunities staff seek an employment placement at a partnering agency. This allows youth to work outside of RaY, build new networks, and gain additional experience while remaining in a highly supportive environment. If a youth is successful at this stage and reaches a level of stability that can support formal employment, agency staff work with the youth to find a placement at a local business. Staff negotiate a contract with a business owner and provide a wage subsidy for a pre-determined amount of time.

Youth are generally selected informally for the Growing Opportunities program. In some cases a youth will approach staff to earn money for a specific item (such as a learner's license, veterinarian bill, food, etc.) and will work a few hours to reach this goal. Some youth may begin this way and then desire more stable employment and work with the staff to secure this. In other cases, staff might approach a specific youth who has been utilizing the services at RaY and ask if they are interested in joining the program. Through ongoing conversations and developing relationships, staff are able to ascertain if youth are a good fit for the program, and what level of employment they are ready for.

Growing Opportunities is individually-based, or geared to meet the needs and interests of each youth. Young people may follow any number of paths with the Growing Opportunities Program. Some will remain at stage one, while others will work through all stages and obtain full- or part-time employment. There are also multiple employment-related supports that youth may choose to utilize, including resume and job interview support, and obtaining appropriate clothing and identification. Growing Opportunities offers a variety of life skills workshops such as conflict resolution and communication skills. If youth are interested, agency staff will also work with them to secure educational or training opportunities, and assist in seeking funding for these ventures. RaY has provided permanent employment for several youth themselves, including hiring a cook and a receptionist who previously utilized their services. Growing Opportunities has also partnered with a local rooming house, where youth are hired to perform property maintenance duties in return for accommodation.

Growing Opportunities strengths are its ability to provide work for even the most crisis-laden youth, its supportive environment where youth can transition to more stable employment once they are ready to do so, and its ability to provide services within a holistic framework. RaY offers a wide variety of services, including a drop-in center, housing support, and referrals to other needed services. RaY prides itself on its extremely low-barrier and non-judgemental environment. When youth come to their drop-in, they are under no pressure to give their names or fill out any paperwork. They are simply welcome to get a hot meal, a shower, and receive sanctuary from the streets. This type of environment is useful in allowing youth to feel safe, and to develop a relationship with staff when they feel comfortable doing so.

The Growing Opportunities Program has two front-line staff and one Coordinator. It is supervised by the Program Director and Executive Director. It receives funding from a wide variety of sources including the Winnipeg Foundation and the Aboriginal Youth Strategy, as a disproportionate number of youth experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg are First Nations youth. The program serves approximately 20 youth at any one time.

### **Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC) – St. Christopher House**

Run out of St. Christopher House in Toronto's downtown west area, Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC) provides youth aged 16-29 who have multiple barriers to employment a place to transition to the workforce. TYJC provides six weeks of paid pre-employment training followed by a paid employment placement of up to 24 weeks. The program begins with a 'trial week' where youth have the opportunity to gauge whether the program is right for them and if they are ready for employment. Agency staff provide an orientation to the program and accompany the youth to a variety of places including a local college. Youth also volunteer at the local furniture or food bank.

After the trial week, youth complete five weeks of pre-employment training. They spend three days per week at a 'simulated work environment' – a paint site – at a non-profit organization, co-op or community housing. Youth spend three full work days painting under the supervision of a staff member. The remaining two days are devoted to workshops at the agency. One day focuses on employment-related topics such as writing resumes and cover letters, preparing for interviews, and conducting job searches. The remaining day is spent in life skills workshops with topics such as time management, communication skills, and anti-discrimination. Guest speakers regularly frequent these workshops and have included a lawyer, housing worker, registered nurse and a finance specialist.

Once the pre-employment period is complete, staff work to find youth an employment placement. Youth can work up to 16 weeks with a full wage subsidy or up to 24 weeks with a partial subsidy. Having the option of a full subsidy has allowed TYJC to seek placements at non-profit organizations that otherwise would not be able to afford to hire a youth. TYJC accepts 7-10 youth per cycle, six times per year. It is federally funded in part by the Skills Link program, hence youth must meet the criteria outlined by this funding source. It is also funded and run in part by the City of Toronto. Youth are selected by first coming in for an intake where staff describe the program and learn about the youths' barriers to employment. The youth also need to meet with a case manager from the Youth Employment Toronto (YET) program, or one of the Employment Ontario funded programs. Ten to 13 youth are invited to attend the Orientation week where staff observe whether they are punctual, the activities they participate in, and their overall attitude. A decision is then made as to whether the youth is ready for the program.

TYJC's greatest strength lies in its ability to provide their youth with a variety of services that are run out of St. Christopher House. For instance, several adult learning programs are available to suit various levels of ability including youth with lower literacy levels, those preparing for their GED, and one program that assists youth transitioning from high school to college. TYJC also serves a wide diversity of youth, including a high number of LGBTQ youth, new Canadians, and youth of colour. It provides a high ratio of staff to youth, employing an Employment Specialist (job developer), a Vocational Coach/Life Skills Facilitator, a Pre-Placement Supervisor (for the paint site), and a Coordinator. The program is overseen by the Program Director.

### **CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program – Carpenters' Union Local 27 Training Trust Fund Inc.**

The CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program was created by the leadership of the Carpenters' Union Local 27 and Carpenters' Local 27 Training Fund Inc. After over ten years of struggling to find willing partners and necessary funding, the Carpenters' Union joined forces with the YMCA of Greater Toronto, Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), and Housing Services Inc. (HSI) to create the CHOICE program. Several intakes of CHOICE have also been funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. This pre-apprenticeship program is hosted by the Carpenters' Local 27 Training Centre located in Vaughan, Ontario and introduces at-risk youth from priority neighbourhoods in Toronto to the basics of carpentry, drywall, plastering, painting, and floor covering.

The CHOICE program begins with classroom instruction on basic trades math, health and safety, and tool handling. Youth then work with certified carpenters to retrofit Toronto Community Housing properties. They are exposed to a variety of other trades mentioned above. The program operates for 12 weeks. Youth are selected by first attending an information session, filling out an application and attending an interview. At the interview youth answer a series of formal questions asked by a panel consisting of representatives from the Carpenters' Local 27 Training Trust, the YMCA, and HSI. Any youth with barriers to employment are welcome to apply to the program, but youth who live in TCHC housing are given priority. In this way, youth are able to achieve success in their own communities and perhaps serve as mentors to other young people. Participants must have the capacity to work at a grade 10 math level due to the nature of work performed in carpentry and for future apprenticeship requirements. The program partners are generally looking for youth who have an interest in the construction trades, especially carpentry, who are honest about their barriers but ready to turn over a new leaf, and who are open to being taught, as this is essential to being an apprentice.

A maximum of 15 youth are accepted into each annual intake. A primary goal of the CHOICE program is for the youth to work alongside mentors, so the ratio of supervisors to youth is quite small. Approximately 4-5 youth work at each site with one certified carpenter. In addition to providing youth with the basic skills necessary to begin working in a trade, supervisors teach important life skills such as attendance and punctuality (youth have to be on site at 7:00 am), taking instructions, and putting in a full day's work. The goal is to give youth a realistic idea of what everyday work is like in carpentry. Once the program is complete, Training Trust and YMCA staff assist graduates in finding employment in the field, or, depending on their needs, refer them to other resources. The hope is that the pre-apprenticeship program will prepare and inspire youth to pursue an apprenticeship in carpentry or in one of the other trades to which they have been exposed.

**The Carpenters' Local 27 Training Trust's main strength lies in its ability to introduce at-risk youth to trades around which they can structure a career.**

The Carpenters' Local 27 Training Trust's main strength lies in its ability to introduce at-risk youth to trades around which they can structure a career. Incredibly, the Training Trust Fund itself partly funds the program, with the assistance of the YMCA, and HSI. A large team of partner staff are available to support the youth, including an Apprenticeship Coordinator, a Program Coordinator, and several on-site supervisors. The program is supervised by the Executive Director. A Job Coach is also available from the YMCA, providing much-needed emotional support as well as referrals to other services such as housing.

#### **The Youth Retail Employment Program (YREP) – Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre**

Run out of the Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre in Ottawa, Ontario, the Youth Retail Employment Program trains at-risk youth to work in the retail industry. The program accepts 20 youth aged 15-30, twice a year to undergo a mixture of life skills and employment-related training. Youth begin the program by completing two weeks of pre-employment training. During these two weeks they acquire a variety of competency certificates to enhance their employability, including Customer Service Excellence, WHMIS and First Aid. In addition, staff offer a variety of life skills workshops including communication skills and conflict resolution. Next, youth tour the two malls that work in partnership with the program and identify where they would like to work. Agency staff facilitate partnerships with various retailers and set up interviews for the youth. Staff attempt to secure at least two interviews for each youth so that they gain interview experience.

Once pre-employment training is complete and youth have obtained a placement at a retail location, they work 30 hours per week, including coming into Pinecrest-Queensway once a week for additional workshops. Workshops are geared towards the interests of the youth and have included learning about their rights as a tenant and employee. Once the program comes close to the end, staff shift the focus of workshops toward career exploration and accompany the youth on a tour of local colleges and universities. To graduate from the program youth must work a total of 540 hours at their placement and attend 120 hours in the classroom. If youth are not offered a permanent position at the store where they completed their placement, they are referred to an Ontario Employment Service Centre for additional assistance, with the knowledge that they can contact staff at the Retail Program in the future if desired.

The Youth Retail Employment Program is a federally funded Skills Link program. The selection process involves an initial screening to ensure the youth meet the basic criteria outlined by this federal funding source. Staff gain a sense of the kinds of barriers the youth are facing and their current level of stability (in regards to housing or addictions, for example). Youth then come into the agency and meet with staff. The motivational level of the youth or their desire for employment is considered, particularly if an employment counsellor or parent made the initial contact with the agency. One way they determine this is if the youth have attempted to secure employment on their own. In this way they not only get a sense of whether a youth is motivated, but also which specific area they may need to strengthen. For example, if a youth is successful in securing interviews but does not receive any offers, the staff know they must work with the youth to improve their interview skills. The program is run by two staff, a Community Youth Worker and a Community Youth Coordinator.

The Youth Retail Employment Program's strengths lie in its ability to work with youth at various levels of ability, and to introduce them to the retail sector which is an entry point into the workforce for many youth. What is particularly interesting about this program is that it was initiated by the private sector. The operators of a mall in Ottawa had heard about a program running in Toronto to employ at-risk youth at a mall (the program is no longer in operation) and approached Pinecrest-Queensway Health Centre to start a similar program.

### **TAPAJ – Spectre de Rue**

TAPAJ is an employment program located in Montreal, Quebec that was developed to give street-entrenched youth an alternative to working in the street economy. Run by Spectre de Rue, TAPAJ provides a three-tiered forum for youth aged 16-30 to transition through different 'stages' of employment. In stage one, youth must call TAPAJ if they would like to work for a few hours on a particular day. Jobs are provided on a first-come-first-served basis, and approximately 12 youth can work on any particular day. Those who call in on time work a full day at a number of sites such as a biological farm, or doing needle cleanup in local alleyways under the supervision of a social worker. Youth are paid at the end of each work day and are allowed to work at this stage until their income reaches a total of \$200 a month. Approximately 200 youth work at stage one jobs per year. The work is seasonal, offered from the end of May to the beginning of October.

If a youth is ready to work on a more consistent basis, TAPAJ staff will work with them to develop a resume, practice for job interviews and seek out a part-time employment placement in the community with a private company. TAPAJ staff negotiate a contract with an employer where youth work until they reach total earnings of \$200 per month. Youth remain in stage two for one year, and are required to meet with staff at TAPAJ at least once a month. Youth are paid at the end of each week in order to be congruent with the practices of the labour force. Employers pay the full wage for youth and also contribute additional funds for the operation of the program. For example, an employer may pay a wage of \$15 per hour. Ten dollars will go to the youth and the other five comes to the agency. In stage three, agency staff work with youth to accomplish specific goals (as outlined by the young person). This stage is individually focused, so a youth may follow any number of paths, including going back to school or seeking full-time employment. Staff will either work directly with youth or refer them to necessary services.

TAPAJ is a low-barrier program where step one is open to almost any youth provided they have basic respect for the program rules, such as not using or selling drugs on a worksite. Youth are also asked not to use drugs before they come to work. If one of these rules is violated, rather than being expelled from the program, the young person is asked to come back when they are in a more suitable state for work. Violence is the one exception to this rule.

TAPAJ has the capacity to provide work for the most street-entrenched youth and does so within a setting where other important needs can also be addressed. Spectre de Rue provides many services, including a drop-in centre, housing, and harm reduction services. TAPAJ offers a flexible and low-barrier forum which allows youth to transition slowly from the street to formal employment. TAPAJ is funded from a variety of sources including Service Canada and the Foundation of Greater Montreal. TAPAJ has several front-line staff, a Program Coordinator, and a Director.

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**Train for Trades utilizes an intensive support model, where staff are available to youth 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This intensive support allows youth facing many difficult life situations to get the help and encouragement they need to come to work every day.**

### **Train for Trades – Choices for Youth**

Located in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Train for Trades program simultaneously addresses several social concerns by training homeless and at-risk youth to perform energy retrofits on low-income homes. Run out of Choices for Youth, Train for Trades not only provides at-risk youth with the skills necessary to develop a career in carpentry, the program is also making low-income homes in St. John's more energy-efficient and lowering tenants' hydro costs. Modelled on the program Warm-Up Winnipeg, youth conduct energy retrofits on the basements of social housing units while receiving intensive support from agency staff. Train for Trades works in a three-way partnership with Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation as well as the union that represents the housing employees, CUPE Local 1860.

Ten youth with multiple barriers to employment, including low levels of education and/or literacy concerns, criminal justice involvement, addictions and homelessness, are selected for the Train for Trades Program. The program is 44 weeks in duration, allowing ample time for staff to work with youth to address their barriers and gain valuable career experience. Train for Trades operates a holistic model, providing interventions in any area of the youth's life that is preventing them from moving forward, or maintaining stable employment.

Youth are initially trained in a variety of soft skills, including how to conduct oneself at a workplace. This is particularly important as all of the homes that youth work on are occupied by tenants. They are provided with all the necessary work equipment and undergo TOWES testing, a test of workplace essential skills. Youth are then sent to the Carpenters' Union Millwrights College where they are given health and safety training and learn basic tool handling and the fundamentals of retrofitting. Youth then proceed to conduct the retrofits while being supervised by Train for Trades staff. In addition to working on the housing units, the youth have also worked on other projects including building an extension at a community centre and volunteering for Habitat for Humanity. Youth are paid directly from the Train for Trades program.

Train for Trades staff begin recruiting youth by putting out a referral to a Community Youth Network. They proceed to interview and assess a number of youth for 10 positions. The assessment process is very thorough and typically takes about an hour and a half to complete. Staff select youth who are facing multiple barriers at once including literacy concerns, addictions, family breakdown, and homelessness. In other words, staff are looking for youth who, due to the high number of barriers they are dealing with, would be screened out of other programs and who greatly need an opportunity. They look to see if the youth have attempted to address their concerns on their own, or are trying to move forward but have exhausted other avenues. Staff are also interested in selecting youth who wish to further their education, particularly in the trades.

Train for Trades employs three Youth Support Workers who possess a unique combination of construction experience and education in youth support work. There is also a Project Manager who provides on-site supervision, and a Program Coordinator. Train for Trades utilizes an intensive support model, where staff are available to youth 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This intensive support allows youth facing many difficult life situations to get the help and encouragement they need to come to work every day. In addition to providing valuable training and support, Train for Trades also allows youth to upgrade their education while in the program. An entire

morning is dedicated each week for either GED preparation work or other forms of literacy training. Once the youth are close to finishing the program, agency staff work with them to develop a plan for their next steps which often involve pursuing post-secondary education in a specialized trade.

At the time of this research, Train for Trades was piloting this model, and was in agreement with Newfoundland and Labrador Housing to complete 40 units. They have since renewed their contract for another 60 units, to be completed with a new cohort of youth. Train for Trades is working to eventually become a self-sufficient social enterprise that can contract its services to the general public. This would also provide an avenue for youth alumni to obtain their first-year apprenticeship hours and allow them to provide valuable mentorship to current youth in the program. Train for Trades is currently funded through the Newfoundland and Labrador provincial government's Department of Advanced Education & Skills (AES).

## Youth Employment Placements

When deciding on a location for youth's employment placements, agency staff must balance the interests of the youth with market availability. Ideally, each decision is geared to the interests of each youth. Staff typically begin by asking participants to describe their interests, or where they would like to work. For instance, do they like to work with their hands, or would they prefer a service environment such as a restaurant? Are they artistically or creatively inclined? They also consider which skills the youth have or which ones they are likely to develop easily. Job developers then work to find them employment that, whenever possible, is in line with their interests and abilities. Several staff stated that if they did not do it this way, there would be many unsuccessful placements and, ultimately, many unhappy youth and employers. Staff must also consider each youth's level of work readiness and how much support/training they will require. For instance, one staff member stated that he considers the private sector partner to whom he is sending the youth. He explained that some foremen are 'tougher' than others, hence he will send youth with higher skill levels to these employers. Similarly, another agency respondent spoke about how it is often a good strategic move to send youth with lower levels of barriers and higher skill levels to new private sector partners in order to develop the relationship, perhaps approaching them at a later date to determine their willingness to work with a youth with more barriers.

Some youth may not know what they are interested in or which type of placement they would like to pursue initially. In these cases, staff help them undergo a process of exploration. They may investigate which type of activities the youth enjoy or tend to be good at and then discuss available options. There are times when youth will try an employment placement only to realize that it is not an ideal environment for them, or that they would like to try something different. In these situations agency staff will work with youth to find an alternative, more suitable placement. This support to explore different avenues and decide what is best suited for them is a key advantage for the young people working with employment programs such as those profiled in this study. This is, of course, a process that most youth undergo at some point in their lives, often with the support and guidance of their families. As many at-risk and homeless youth are either estranged or have difficult relationships with their families, agency staff become crucial in providing this necessary guidance.

**When deciding on a location for youth's employment placements, agency staff must balance the interests of the youth with market availability.**

The majority of the programs profiled in this study do not have core funding, meaning they are continually searching for resources from multiple sources. This can be very time-consuming, diverting valuable time from service provision.

## Agency Challenges

While all of the agency staff interviewed in this study spoke about the importance of their work and how it can be quite rewarding, they also described many challenges. These mainly pertained to finances, maintaining high outcomes, agency capacity, and challenges with the youth.

**Financial.** The most commonly reported challenge faced by agency staff related to finances (reported by 16 of the 31 agency staff interviewed, or 52%). This was discussed primarily in terms of securing ongoing funding to keep the program operating. The majority of the programs profiled in this study do not have core funding, meaning they are continually searching for resources from multiple sources. This can be very time-consuming, diverting valuable time from service provision. A large amount of effort is spent writing funding proposals and progress reports. Perhaps more importantly, this process can be extremely stressful as, from one year to the next, staff are never certain that they are going to be able to keep their program running.

The nature of obtaining funding has changed over time. With large government deficits and increasing pressure to introduce austerity budgets, public funding for vital services is more difficult to attain. It is even more challenging to secure funding on a long-term basis. For instance, one agency respondent described how funders are often interested in piloting programs, or providing one-time grants. There is less interest in funding the ongoing program costs and agencies are increasingly being told to seek private dollars for this purpose.

While, in the long-term, these employment programs are cost-efficient in that they assist youth in obtaining employment (and thereby become tax-paying citizens as opposed to utilizing costly social and emergency services), there are numerous expenses that the agencies must contend with. In addition to staff wages and regular administrative costs, most of the programs are also responsible for paying the wages (or at least part of the wages) of the youth. As well, they frequently provide other resources such as transportation costs, food, and work equipment. Moreover, one agency staff described how, despite paying the youth a few dollars above minimum wage, this is not enough money for the youth to live comfortably, particularly when they must provide their own shelter and living expenses. He was concerned that this might make it difficult for youth previously involved in the street-economy to remain motivated to work in formal employment, as the income from the latter can be considerably larger.

Being in tight financial situations also impacts an agency's ability to attract and retain quality staff. Although none of the staff interviewed described financial gain as a primary motivation to work in this field, it is not unreasonable for employees who often possess post-secondary education and work long hours to expect a decent salary. Unpredictable funding sources not only make it difficult to pay a competitive wage, but often give the agency no choice but to hire staff on a contractual rather than permanent basis. Contract staff are left unsure of whether they will have a job once their contract expires. One unfortunate consequence of this is although staff may love their job, they may have to continually be on the lookout for more stable opportunities. One agency respondent further indicated that with limited funds, it is difficult for staff to become involved in training or other professional development activities.

**Outcomes.** A related difficulty agencies face is the increased pressure from funders to achieve outcomes that they deem to indicate success, such as the number of youth that are employed at the end of the program. If this outcome is not sufficiently high funders may withdraw their support, believing the program is not beneficial. While finding employment is clearly an important objective, putting a disproportionate emphasis on the numbers can be problematic. First, being employed at the end of the program does not ensure that the youth will be able to maintain employment, which is arguably more important. Second, while the goal of these programs is to prepare youth for employment, ‘success’ in this context is much more complex than the simple attainment of a job.

For youth who have tremendous barriers to employment and have often faced tough circumstances, it is simply unrealistic to expect their lives to be completely turned around after a few weeks or months. Often what is necessary is long-term support that results in gradual change. Success is much more likely to be incremental, with youth sometimes moving one step forward and then two steps backwards, particularly those who have faced especially rough circumstances or were very street-entrenched. Measuring success in these situations can be extremely difficult as many improvements, such as an increase in hope or self-esteem, are intangible. If a youth does not obtain a job but begins to believe in him/herself enough to go back to school, surely this is a great success. Much of the work done in these programs can be thought of as planting seeds in the minds of youth, working towards improving their chances for success later in life, but perhaps not instantly. Finally, placing a premium on youth being employed at the end of the program does not take into consideration what kind of job the youth is doing. If agency staff are feeling pressure to keep statistics high, they may place youth in employment positions to which they are not an ideal fit, or in positions that offer little benefit in terms of advancement. The unintended consequences of this could be setting youth up for failure, or serving to ‘pigeon-hole’ youth into menial employment. Staff might also begin to select program participants with fewer barriers to increase their likelihood of doing well in the program (a process commonly referred to as ‘creaming’). This of course, misses the entire point of the programs – to work with youth who need assistance in sorting through their barriers to employment. After all, if the very programs that are designed to help at-risk youth begin to turn their backs on them for fear they will not be able to achieve certain statistics, who will be there for those youth?

Of course it is important for agency staff to keep records and statistics not only for funders, but also to monitor their own progress and identify areas that could be strengthened. Rather than not wanting to be accountable, several staff expressed a desire to continue to measure particular outcomes, but with the understanding of the bigger picture and the complexities involved in having at-risk youth move forward in their lives. ‘Success’ in this context can mean many things, and this must be kept in mind.

**Finding Quality Employment.** Several agency participants (7 or 22.6%) expressed that it can be challenging to find private sector partners that not only provide a wide variety of employment opportunities, but also high-quality positions. As youth participants have divergent interests, it is important that they have access to jobs that, at least to some degree, cater to those interests. This can be challenging because not only do agency staff need to find a variety of employers, but they also must ensure that a supportive environment will be provided for the youth.

**Much of the work done in these programs can be thought of as planting seeds in the minds of youth, working towards improving their chances for success later in life, but perhaps not instantly.**

**Youth whose skill levels are just beginning to develop and who have little work experience are at a severe disadvantage over more seasoned workers.**

One respondent from the Carpenters' Union described a general decline in unionized workplaces able to employ youth once they are finished their pre-apprenticeship training. Youth whose skill levels are just beginning to develop and who have little work experience are at a severe disadvantage over more seasoned workers. It may thus take longer for youth to accumulate their first-year apprentice hours. The scarcity of work was particularly pronounced during the recent recession. Several respondents articulated the need for more government programs to be available to youth who have recently completed a pre-apprenticeship so that they have assistance in obtaining their first-year apprenticeship hours. This would help to ensure youth remain interested in this line of work and not lose hope in the viable career option.

Several respondents in the trade-related programs also described facing slow periods during the program where they had to find work to keep the youth busy. For instance, there were a few occasions when materials were delivered late to the worksites for the Carpenters' Union, which obviously made it difficult for the youth to continue working. Choices for Youth also faced down times when waiting for particular inspections to be conducted or work (such as electrical tasks) to be completed, that the youth were not trained to do. They filled this time by taking on additional projects, such as building an extension at a community centre, but it was sometimes difficult for agency staff to find new interim projects for the youth.

***Finding a Balance between Support and Work.*** Four respondents (13%) working in trade-related programs indicated that it can be challenging at times to balance the need to support the youth with the need to ensure the job is done to a particular standard. It is obviously crucial for work to be done safely and to code. If work is not done properly, or if the safety of the youth is compromised, these programs would quickly fail. It is vital to be patient and supportive in the learning process of the youth, some of whom have low skill levels and other barriers to employment, but it is equally imperative to produce high-quality work. Moreover, Brad from Choices for Youth described how any program that conducts work that has the potential to be dangerous must contend with liability issues. He stated that workers must "Make sure you are on top of your game, because at any given time, with the complex needs that our people are facing you could run into situations where people are at risk".

***Agency Capacity and Burnout.*** Agency staff work tirelessly, and with minimal resources, to ensure that youth receive as much benefit as possible from their programs. Unfortunately, due to the complex needs of these youth, the agency staff may not have the capacity to address all of their needs. Three research participants (9.7%) identified this concern, particularly as it relates to mental health and addiction concerns. If these difficulties are exceptionally severe, agency staff will often refer the youth to more specialized services, as stabilization is often a necessary step before day-to-day employment is possible. There are also cases when symptoms worsen or a youth has a substance-abuse relapse during the course of the program. Without relevant training, many staff are simply unequipped to handle these circumstances. As previously mentioned, many at-risk and homeless youth have faced truly awful circumstances in their lives. Many have been exposed to abuse of every kind, suffered neglect, or have been rejected by their family. For some youth, the experiences of homelessness or extreme poverty can cause further trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. The symptoms of these mental health concerns can be episodic, sometimes materializing while a youth is in an employment program. Agency staff do the best they can to address these

concerns and ensure the youth have additional supports, but again, it is often beyond the scope of their expertise and can be extremely challenging.

Addictions were identified as a challenge that agency staff contend with regularly. Although all agencies provide referral services, addictions treatment generally does not work unless the participant desires this change in their lives. Several respondents described how addressing addictions in their program requires a delicate balance. For instance, safety is a number one priority, and if someone is intoxicated at work, they must be removed from a worksite. Yet agency staff also described the importance of not cutting the youth off completely from services, or giving up on them. Many youth have had the people they care about turn their backs on them, particularly when they do something that could be construed as wrong, and agency staff want to convey that they are reliable and will be there for them. Several participants described utilizing a harm-reduction model, where they work with the youth in stages. For instance, first they make it clear that substance use at work is unacceptable. Then they work with the youth to reduce their drug use and the associated risks. The ultimate goal may be to stop use completely. Alternatively, it may be in the best interests of both parties for the youth to attend treatment and return to the agency at a later time.

Not surprisingly, because of the nature of their work, agency staff must be careful that they do not suffer burnout. In a focus group discussion, staff at BladeRunners spoke about how they attempt to mitigate this risk, particularly as they are available 24/7 to their youth. For instance, if they find themselves being short-tempered or irritable, this alerts them that they probably need time off. They also described how their passion for their work, and the knowledge that the work is invaluable, has helped to keep them going. Finally, they described turning to one another for help when needed. Still, they admitted that their work can sometimes be tough and that they do feel run down from time to time.

**Challenges with the Youth.** Finally, a number of agency staff (15 or 48%) described experiencing periodic challenges with the youth. Some of these difficulties pertained to the circumstances faced by the youth, such as inadequate housing. One respondent gave the example of youth getting into conflicts with the people they were living with the night before they were scheduled to work. This affected the amount of sleep they got as well as their concentration and emotional state at work the next day. Similarly, another respondent described how some youth must often share their housing with one or several roommates. This can pose challenges for some young people if they are attempting to stay sober when their roommates are not. It is likewise difficult when roommates have parties at night when a youth wants to rest for work the next day.

Another common challenge identified by agency staff pertained to the communication skills of the youth, many of whom have not had the opportunity to learn how to communicate effectively with others. One recurring problem identified by staff (and the youth themselves) was youth being afraid to call their employer if they were going to be late or absent from work. Rather than phoning, the youth would simply show up late or not at all, clearly making the situation worse for themselves. Similarly, some youth find it difficult to communicate about problems that may arise in the workplace, or to keep agency staff informed about how their work placement is progressing. Consequently, there are times agency staff are completely unaware that a youth is having trouble at work and the issue remains unaddressed.

**One recurring problem identified by staff (and the youth themselves) was youth being afraid to call their employer if they were going to be late or absent from work.**

Many agency staff also spoke about the heartbreak and discouragement they experience when they see a youth with potential not make it through the program. This may happen for many reasons, but is often due to the crisis-laden nature of the youth's life. For some respondents, it was really difficult for them when a youth in whom they have invested a lot of effort simply fell off the radar and they had no idea what happened to them. In general, it can be challenging for agency staff to keep in touch with youth due to the transient nature of their lives. Agencies in smaller communities found this to be less of a problem as youth are able to drop-in more frequently, unless of course they move from the community. Some agencies, such as RaY are using social media sites in an attempt to stay in touch with youth, but it can still be difficult.

Strengthening the self-esteem and self-worth of the youth was identified as a challenge by several respondents. After experiencing what appear to be several failures in life (for example in school or in relationships), it can be difficult for youth to believe in their abilities to do something positive with their lives or to be successful. Tony from TYJC elaborates on this point:

I think that... one of the biggest things that we face is that people come in with such low self-esteem, and self-value... it's really hard to sell yourself in the market-place and sell yourself to an employer if you don't have self-worth.

Finally, two participants spoke about how some youth who join the program do not have a positive attitude. At times, these youth can be resistant to authority and very argumentative. This can be demanding for agency staff who must remain patient and not respond in an inappropriate manner. Although staff typically conduct very thorough intake interviews, one respondent stated that some youth are very good at telling them "what they want to hear", only to demonstrate later in the program that they were not ready to participate. Although experienced agency staff are often able to predict which youth are ready and which ones are not, they can be wrong sometimes, or the circumstances of the youth can change. Although it is not pleasant, in some cases the staff must tell the youth that they are not ready for the program, or due to inappropriate behaviour, they must ask them to leave.

### Advice for other Agencies

Agency respondents were asked if they had advice to give to other personnel either currently working for an employment program for at-risk or homeless youth or engaged in setting up such a program. The most frequent counsel was to hire the right people, stay focused on the needs of the youth, and to hold both the youth and agency accountable for their actions. Specific advice was also given for starting a program.

**Hire the Right People.** The most common piece of advice offered by agency staff (suggested by 10 respondents or 32.3%) was for organizations to ensure that they hire the right staff. Employees should be passionate, understanding, open-minded, and genuinely care about the success of the young people in their program. As youth may be dealing with any number of barriers or challenges, it is important for them to feel comfortable and not judged when talking to the staff. It is likely that many youth are hesitant to trust others, particularly those they see as authority figures. The role of agency staff is vital as they can either confirm these feelings or challenge them. Developing a genuine relationship with the youth can make a monumental difference in the youth's life, giving them a mentor to look up to and someone to believe in their abilities.

One respondent stated that she develops rapport with youth by sharing her experiences and relating to them whenever possible. For example, she has shared her experiences in school, particularly her struggles in reading, and how she received her high school diploma at the age of 24. She stated that many youth are surprised by this, and even inspired. For young people who have been out of school for a relatively long period of time, or who have experienced difficulties in school-related tasks such as reading, hearing that they are not alone, and that others have overcome these difficulties can be very motivating.

Another participant suggested that when hiring staff it is important to look for employees who appreciate the implications of their role, including that they are in a position of power. It is of course necessary for youth to follow the rules of any program they participate in, but staff must find a balance between ensuring the program runs smoothly and making sure they are not using their power in an oppressive or harmful way. There will be times when youth break rules or resist structure and/or authority. Staff must remain cognizant of what they are trying to accomplish and address these situations in a patient and gentle manner. For instance, Kelly from RaY stated: “The staff need to be more flexible than the youth in all things. So it’s not about them imposing power on these kids, it’s about providing opportunity and opening doors for them”.

It is also important for staff members to reflect the diversity of the youth in their programs. Lambrina from TYJC described why this is important:

Well I think it’s important to have a diverse staff team, so the youth see themselves reflected in the staff, you know. It can be a challenge...but we’ve got younger staff, older staff, we have staff of colour, gay staff, so that the youth feel safe about exploring or discussing certain issues.

Finally, several staff from Train for Trades pointed out that when running a program like theirs, where staff work alongside youth daily on a construction site, staff must possess a diverse skill set consisting of both construction and youth care abilities. While the most important component of any program for at-risk or homeless youth is the youth care component, the reality is also that there is a job to be done, and that it needs to be done well.

**Stay Focused on the Youth.** Five agency staff (16.1%) outlined the importance of remaining focused on the needs of the youth while doing this work. It is important to listen to what the youth identify as the areas they would like to address rather than having staff impose their own goals on them. Of course staff can provide suggestions, but they must also be respectful of the wishes of the youth. Staying focused on the ‘big picture’, or what the program is ultimately trying to do for the youth was identified as imperative to doing this work. There will be setbacks, challenges and disappointments, but it is essential to stay focused on the goals of the program and the needs of the youth. It is important to applaud small achievements and not focus too much on instances when youth stumble, as these are inevitable.

Mike from EMPLOY described how focusing on the needs of the youth can also mean putting them above one’s own feelings. He stated that he has learned that not only are setbacks inevitable, but that it is important for staff not to take them personally:

A big thing would be balancing wanting the youth to succeed and do really well, with not needing them to. That was for sure one of the biggest lessons I've learned working in this industry for five years. It's a tough balance, a tough trade-off because you don't want to not care, but you don't want to care so much that your week is ruined because this youth failed. Understand that even failures can lead to successes, and to lessons that will build on success....You might not see the success right away, that whole planting the seed idea. And one day it will sprout, but who knows when.

Another respondent stated that it is important to balance the desire to assist as many youth as possible with the capacity of the staff. She stated that at one point her program was taking on so many youth that it limited their ability to focus on the needs of the youth.

**Accountability.** Accountability was listed as a principal facet of any employment program by two respondents (6.5%). This means ensuring that youth are accountable for their actions and that agencies are responsible to themselves and their funders. In regards to the youth, it was suggested that staff be very clear about their expectations of the youth. Brad from Choices for Youth spoke about the importance of this:

We set clear expectations, and we're very upfront and vocal about what is expected, and what this entails... Constantly pushing people, holding them accountable for their actions... not showing up for work on time, and not making a call – that's not going to get you ahead in life. So if we're always there sugar coating it, making it easy for people, the chances are when they do that in the job where the employer is totally fixated on their finances or building their financial account, that's not going to work for him, he's going to terminate someone.

Brad's quote also demonstrates that this is a gentle, gradual learning process for the youth rather than one that relies on harsh consequences on the part of staff. As staff are often looked to as mentors, they must not only develop a relationship with youth, but also provide guidance and valuable lessons that prepare youth for life.

Several agency respondents stated that it is also vital to hold their own work to a high standard and to be accountable. This may involve keeping statistics, case examples, and continually reflecting on their actions. It is also important for funders to be aware that the work they are supporting is necessary and effective. Finally, as mentioned previously, when performing work such as energy retrofits, it is critical that staff ensure all work is done according to code, the highest safety standards, and in a time-efficient manner.

**Advice for Starting a Program.** Several respondents' (4 or 13%) advice pertained to the elements necessary for setting up a similar program. For instance, Kelly from RaY described the importance of starting small. When the Growing Opportunities program was first created, the current staff began by going out into the community, assessing the desire for the program and determining if there were partners willing to get onboard. The next steps were to hire a staff member to work exclusively on this program, and then secure funding. Today this program operates with three staff and has grown significantly in terms of current partners and the number of youth assisted each year. Similarly, Roz from Choices for Youth underscored the importance of taking the time necessary to set up a program properly from the very beginning. For

instance, staff at Train for Trades spent nine months planning their program before it was launched. This process included ensuring that health and safety standards were set very high, developing various safety plans and measures, and ensuring that several contingency plans were put into place to address various scenarios and to protect staff, tenants and the youth.

Finally, two participants suggested that staff learn as much as possible from other programs. For instance, Dave from EMPLOY spent several weeks learning from another program in Kelowna where a critical thinking model was being utilized. Similarly, Sheldon from Choices for Youth asked “Why reinvent the wheel?” His program, Train for Trades, was originally adapted from Eva’s Phoenix, a program in Toronto, and is now modelled on Warm-up Winnipeg in Manitoba. Staff can learn a great deal from existing programs while remaining sensitive to the needs of their local communities and making adjustments if necessary.

## A Note on the Local Context

As regions across Canada vary tremendously in terms of demographic factors, causes of homelessness, their local economies and whether they are urban or rural, flexibility is required when adapting program components from another location. As this study was conducted on a national level, we asked participants to reflect on whether their geographic context provided either any opportunities or challenges in doing this work. The participants reported the following about their communities:

**BladeRunners – Vancouver, BC.** BladeRunners is run in the heart of the Downtown Eastside (DES) in Vancouver, an area characterized by high levels of poverty. Staff reported that although the area can provide many temptations for youth who are attempting to move forward in their lives, for the most part, this location has some advantages. Staff described a strong connection to their community, including relationships with local businesses and agencies. These relationships are helpful as they allow staff to utilize a variety of services to meet the needs of their youth. For example, BladeRunners has developed a relationship with a local bank that provides bank accounts for youth so that they do not need to cash their cheques at Money Mart or an equivalent store. Also, since most of the youth who utilize the services of BladeRunners are connected to the DES in some way, they can act as mentors to other youth in the area. Finally, staff reported that, in general and with the exception of the recent recession period, there are many employment opportunities for the youth in Vancouver. Demographically, Aboriginal youth are disproportionately affected by homelessness in Vancouver.

**EMPLOY – Vernon, BC.** The EMPLOY program is located in a small rural community in the North Okanagan. Staff reported that this area is a busy tourist destination, and hence there are lots of entry-level positions available in this sector as well as in the retail locations where tourists shop. The area is also a popular retirement community so there is a need for young workers. The town’s small size makes it easier for youth hear about the program through word-of-mouth and to stay in touch with staff once they complete the program. Staff described how operating in a rural community has also presented many challenges. For instance, transportation issues can make it difficult for youth not located in the centre of town to utilize services. Furthermore, the overall number of employment opportunities outside of the abovementioned sectors is limited, as is the number of employers with whom the agency may form relationships. Building strong relationships with employers is therefore all the more

important as, if an employer feels 'burned' or does not wish to participate in the program any longer, there are not many other employers to approach. This situation has worsened over the years, particularly during the recession, as much of the manufacturing industry that employed hundreds of Vernon residents has moved out of town.

**Growing Opportunities – Winnipeg, MB.** Agency staff from Winnipeg described their city as having a small-town feel and Resource Assistance for Youth has been able to establish a number of relationships with other agencies and businesses in the area. Winnipeg was characterized as having a large number of seasonal employment positions, which has both benefits and drawbacks in employing youth. On the positive side, these temporary positions are available for the Growing Opportunities youth and may be good transitional jobs to acclimatize youth with little experience to the labour market. Conversely, these positions are only offered during particular seasons and youth must look for alternative work during off-seasons. Finally, agency staff identified institutional racism as a factor present in Winnipeg, as a large number of Aboriginal youth experience poverty and homelessness.

**CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program – Vaughan, ON.** The classroom component of the CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program is located just north of Toronto and the actual work sites are in Toronto. It can be difficult for youth, most of whom do not have access to a car, to travel to the training site as well as to and from the scattered work sites across the city. Of course driving can also be challenging due to the enormous volume of traffic in Toronto. Union staff also identified the pressure in Toronto – where there are large numbers of carpenters – for carpenters to specialize in specific aspects of the trade, such as form work. While it can be beneficial in this sense to specialize, union staff cautioned that it is important for carpenters to obtain a general comprehension of the overall process of building and repairing structures so that they know what they're doing and what's coming next. An analogy was provided of a general practitioner learning to specialize in cardiology without a general understanding of how the body in general works. In this case a doctor could do damage by focusing on the heart alone and ignoring other organs.

**Toronto Youth Job Corps – Toronto, ON.** As Canada's largest metropolitan area, Toronto clearly has many employment opportunities, including 'alternative' or small businesses that are typically open to hiring youth or stand to benefit from working with an agency. There are also many networks and youth services that agency staff can utilize to develop a comprehensive service plan for the young person. Conversely, Toronto's large population creates heavy competition for jobs, including with youth that have high school diplomas or college degrees. There are also a large number of employment agencies which target similar employment positions. Moreover, agency staff reported that many factories have moved to the suburbs, making them largely inaccessible for their youth. Finally, staff described the stigma and stereotypes associated with being an inner-city youth, particularly for young males of colour, which may make some employers hesitant to work with their program.

**Youth Retail Employment Program – Ottawa, ON.** Agency staff spoke about the perception that Ottawa is a very affluent city, which makes it easy to ignore the high levels of poverty that exist. They also spoke of the fear many youth have that they will not be able to obtain employment if they are not fully bilingual. One agency staff stated this fear may be misplaced, particularly if the youth speaks English exclusively, as English is the language spoken in most places of business. It may be more problematic if a youth only speaks French.

**TAPAJ – Montreal, QC.** TAPAJ staff spoke about being located in the downtown core where, similar to BladeRunners, there is a lot of temptation for youth, particularly around substance use. This area was also characterized as having high levels of homelessness and prostitution. On the positive side, staff commented on the large number of services available for youth in this area. TAPAJ works hard to coordinate their services with these other services. Unfortunately, as described above, this can sometimes lead to feelings of competition amongst agencies.

**Train for Trades – St. John’s, NL.** Agency staff stated that, because of the small size of their city, there are generally limited employment opportunities available, although this situation has been eased by a recent surge of construction projects in the area. Many of the youth program participants know one another, a situation which can pose problems if youth with old grievances join the same program cycle. Finally, as discussed in other urban areas, it can be difficult for youth to move forward with their lives if they remain in the same neighbourhood where previous temptations are present. As St. John’s is a small city, the solution is not necessarily as simple as moving to a different neighbourhood, but may require that youth move to a different location altogether. Since St. John’s is the largest urban centre in the Province, this may mean that job opportunities are limited elsewhere. Finally, the rental vacancy rate in St. John’s is very low (under 1%), making it extremely difficult for youth to find adequate housing, which is clearly a necessity to maintaining stable employment.

When utilizing a program model from another location, it is clear that the local context and needs must be taken into account. This of course does not mean that major program components cannot be adapted to other areas. Interestingly, Sheldon from Choices from Youth has argued that although it is important to consider the local context, ultimately the needs of the youth and the program components necessary for a successful program are similar regardless of location. He stated:

We took a program out of Toronto, a very different environment than St. John’s, but at the end of the day, the issues and the barriers that the youth are dealing [with] and the stuff they’re going through is the same. And the support they require to deal with that is ultimately the same. We then go to Winnipeg and take what they’re doing to St. John’s. Again, a very different cultural environment... there’s a consistency with what these programs are doing that works.

## In Sum

In this section, the 8 community agencies Raising the Roof partnered with were profiled, and the results from interviews and focus groups conducted with agency staff were revealed. The major findings for this section were:

- When deciding on a location for youth’s employment positions, agency staff must balance the interests of the youth with market availability. Ideally, each decision is geared to the interests of each young person, although staff may need to undergo a process of exploration with youth to determine their interests.
- The most common challenge identified by agency staff was securing long-term, stable funding. Continually seeking funding sources can divert attention from service delivery and make it difficult to retain quality staff.

**Providing support involves being available to the employers, responding readily to requests, addressing concerns with youth, and providing personal support to the youth.**

- Community agencies face increasing pressure from funders to demonstrate high outcomes, particularly in regards to the number of youth employed at the end of a program. While it is necessary for agencies to be accountable to their funders, placing a disproportionate focus on outcomes can lead to inappropriate placements and can miss the intangible benefits that youth obtain from participating in these programs. Attention can also be diverted from the more important goal of maintaining employment.
- Agency staff sometimes struggle to find quality employment positions for youth. This is heightened dramatically during economic recessions.
- A balance must be found between providing support to youth and ensuring work is done to a high standard.
- Due to the sometimes complex needs of the youth, agency staff might not have the capacity to address all of their needs, particularly in regards to severe mental health and addiction concerns.
- Other challenges agency staff identified pertained to the youth not having adequate housing to prepare for work each day, poor communication skills, and low self-esteem.
- The main advice provided for other personnel doing similar work was to hire the right people, to stay focused on the needs of the youth, and to hold youth and themselves accountable. When setting up a program, respondents suggested that staff start small and work out any ‘kinks’ before expanding, and to learn from other programs when possible.
- Agencies must take their local context into account when adapting components of another program.

## **Working Together: Engaging the Private Sector**

Both agency staff and private sector participants were asked to reflect on what factors are necessary for a successful partnership between the two sectors, to suggest specific strategies for engaging the private sector, and to identify challenges in doing so. The results are described below.

### **Critical Success Factors**

Both agency and private sector participants were asked to describe the factors they felt important for a successful partnership between their two sectors. The most common responses given were: adequate support from the agency, open and honest communication from both parties, keeping the process as simple as possible for employers, and having both parties be clear about their expectations of one another.

**Agency Support.** Employers vary in terms of their capacity to provide support to the youth. They must be able to offer a basic level of support to all of their employees, but most will also need the agency to assist them at times. Providing support involves being available to the employers, responding readily to requests, addressing concerns with youth, and providing personal support to the youth. Mark from Eltex Enterprises stated:

What we really find helps is their [agency staff] willingness to deal with the youth, so we don't have to. Because like I say, we're construction workers, we're not social workers. So for a lot of us, we don't know the right thing to say to this youth. So it's having that support from the agency itself...and not having to chase them around...when I have a problem with the youth and phone Garry, I know within an hour or so he will call me back. And he deals with it...It's not a 50/50 relationship, as much as you'd like to be, it's not. Our part is to help these youth out, but we're only involved with them 8 hours a day when they're at work; there's 24 hours in a day. The other 16, that's the organization's thing.

Having agency staff be available to youth outside of work hours was highlighted as important by several employers. Many of the youth experience personal difficulties including conflict with family, precarious housing circumstances and parenting concerns. Having agency staff available for support is crucial so that youth are better able to focus on their employment during work hours. Many staff, particularly those from BladeRunners who are available 24/7 to the youth, described sometimes going to great lengths to get youth to work including picking them up in the middle of the night, going to get their work equipment, listening and providing encouragement at all hours of the day.

**Communication.** Both agency staff and private sector participants emphasized the need for both parties to keep lines of communication open throughout the partnership. It is essential that both parties be open and honest with each other every step of the way. This begins with agency staff being upfront about the backgrounds, skill levels and individual barriers of the youth being sent to the companies. In this way, employers have a realistic picture of what is required from them, as well as any potential risks. Violations of this can be very damaging to the agency/business relationship and can ultimately result in employers ceasing to work with the community agencies.

On the flip side, numerous agency staff spoke about the importance of employers speaking to them in a timely manner should any concerns arise. In this way they can address the matter before it is too late. Several staff described scenarios where they were unaware that a placement was not working out until after a youth was fired. As some youth may need extra support on various issues, agency staff are available to address the employer's concerns with the youth so that hopefully it ceases to be a problem. Even in the absence of a specific concern however, participants from both sides agreed that it is important to stay in touch on a regular basis to ensure that the partnership is progressing smoothly.

Lines of communication can be kept open by having regular meetings and phone calls. Formal progress meetings between the agency staff, youth and employer can be useful as they allow all parties to sit down together and discuss the placement. This forum helps both sides monitor the progress of the youth, raise any concerns, and set goals for the future. This is particularly valuable for employers who do not know how to address a difficult issue or which skills to monitor. Both the youth and employer have the support of the agency staff who can facilitate a discussion, mediate any concerns and provide assistance in asking questions that either party may find difficult to raise. For instance, Geraldine, one of the founding members of TYJC, described a situation where a youth was placed in a store and was terrified to work at the cash register. After four weeks of the youth refusing to train on

**Having agency staff available for support [outside of work hours] is crucial so that youth are better able to focus on their employment during work hours.**

**...both agency and private sector partners [must] be very clear about their expectations of one another...**

cash, a meeting was held to discuss the youth's progress. Agency staff suggested that the youth be allowed to job shadow a cashier for two weeks, and the youth became increasingly comfortable in the role. Today, the youth not only feels at ease performing this task, she has become such a valuable employee that she now manages a different location. If this meeting had not taken place, it is possible that the youth would have been let go for refusing to learn a necessary task.

While it is clear that honest communication is necessary from both the agency staff and employers, it is equally important for any other parties involved. For instance, the energy retrofits conducted by Choices for Youth are often done in housing units that are occupied. It was hence crucial for tenants to be made aware of who was coming into their units. Staff from Choices for Youth and Newfoundland and Labrador Housing held three meetings for tenants so that they could explain the goals of the program as well as the work that would be done on their homes. The tenants were very supportive, and a few even commented that they were familiar with Choices for Youth's work. By being upfront with the tenants, it is possible that future problems were avoided.

**Keeping It Simple.** Several private sector participants emphasized the need for community agency staff to keep the process as uncomplicated as possible for them. Due to hectic schedules, many employers felt that it would be difficult to partner with a community agency if it required too much additional work such as excessive paperwork or interviewing several youth not suited for the position. They wanted agency staff to ensure the process ran as smoothly as possible. Jonathan, an employer from Ottawa, emphasized this when asked what he thought was necessary for him to work with a community agency:

The simpler the better...they brought me exactly what I needed. They had all the information laid out, they presented the program to me, they took care of any paper work and such between me and head office, or anything that needed to be handled. There was nothing I had to go searching for, there was nothing I had to go out of my way to do.

**Clear Expectations.** The final factor deemed critical for a successful partnership was that both agency and private sector partners be very clear about their expectations of one another. This meant having private sector partners articulate what they expected from the youth in terms of job responsibilities, conduct, and dress code. It also meant being transparent about what role they expect the agency to play, what barriers they are willing to work through, and which ones they are not willing to tackle. For community agencies, this meant ensuring that their private sector partners would be able to provide a supportive environment for the youth where they can be trained on an assortment of tasks and develop diverse skills. It is not enough to merely place an at-risk youth in employment; the work environment must be one where the youth feels safe and will be provided with a valuable learning experience. Although it is not always possible to control, employers and agency staff must work together to ensure the experience is as positive as possible, and that the youth does not suffer any additional hardship or trauma. This does not mean employers cannot have realistic expectations to which they hold the youth accountable, or that employers must 'walk on eggshells' around the youth. It does mean that employers must be willing to be patient, supportive and address concerns with youth in a gentle, constructive manner, with agency support if necessary. Finally, community agencies

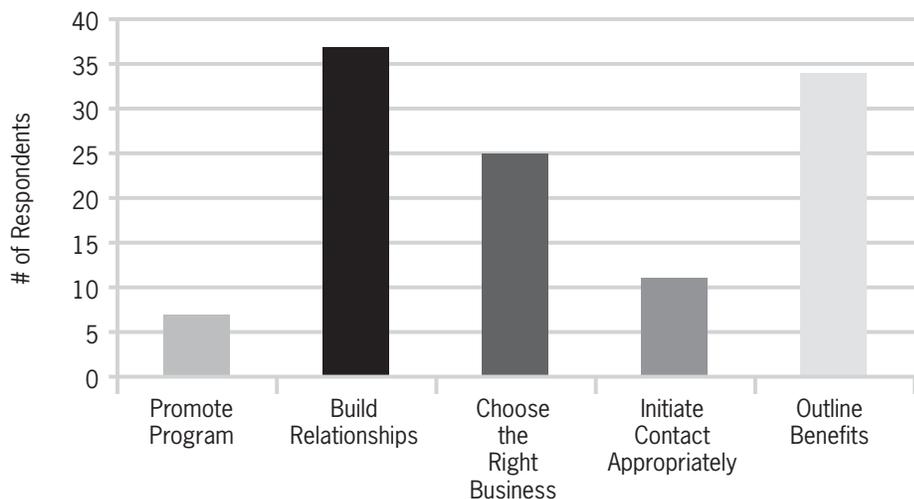
must make it very clear that they are hoping the employer will be open to hiring the youth once their placement is complete, although they are not pressured to do so if they are not satisfied with the outcome of the placement.

## Strategies for Engaging the Private Sector

Agency and private sector participants (total = 62 respondents) were asked to suggest specific strategies for engaging the private sector in providing training and employment opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth. Graph A below outlines the frequency with which particular suggestions were provided (there was some overlap amongst participants). These included promoting the program in the community so that potential partners are aware of the opportunity, being selective in what businesses are approached, and learning who the appropriate person is to contact at each company. The most commonly recommended strategies were to build relationships based on honesty and reciprocity, and to outline the benefits that the private sector can obtain by participating.

**Getting the Word Out.** Businesses might be looking for innovative ways to get involved in their community but might not know how to do so. Hence, several agency staff spoke about the importance of promoting their program in the community so that potential private sector partners can become aware of opportunities to collaborate. Various methods were outlined including having an up-to-date website and social media sites, hosting community events and placing ads in the local newspaper. Others adopted more proactive methods of engaging businesses. One agency participant suggested inviting members of the business and political communities to speak to the youth program participants. This would help to raise awareness of the program within the business community and increase the likelihood those companies would be receptive when the agency goes in search of youth employment opportunities. Other methods to raise awareness included having a ‘meet-and-greet’ night for local business to come and learn about the program, having agency staff attend job fairs, Rotary service clubs, business improvement associations, boards of trades, and monthly trade-related meetings.

**Graph A: Strategies for Engaging the Private Sector**



**By doing your research before initiating contact [with a business], you demonstrate you are interested in not only meeting your own objectives, but that you are committed to making the business more successful and are willing to invest in the relationship-building process.**

When promoting the program, several participants suggested that agency staff bring testimonials from members of the private sector who have had a positive partnering experience. In general, utilizing ‘corporate champions’ or private sector partners who are passionate about their involvement and are willing to encourage others to do the same, can provide powerful peer influence. Private sector champions can open doors to employment positions in other businesses in a way that most non-profits cannot, as they have vast networks and are better positioned to understand the needs of the business community.

Several agency staff discussed the importance of recognizing and promoting the work of their private sector partners in whichever platforms are available to them, including their website, community events, newspapers and newsletters. A few agencies have also provided awards to their long-time partners. For instance, BladeRunners has held banquets and award ceremonies to honour their loyal partners, and TYJC presented a plaque to pay tribute to a company who has partnered with them for 20 years.

**Relationship-Building.** The strategy most often articulated by the participants (37 or 59.7%) was taking the time to build a relationship with potential private sector partners. While respondents varied in how they described relationship-building, most understood it to be a personal, empathetic and long-term process with mutual, tangible benefits. It was further described as an ongoing process, one that can take time to develop (for instance long before a youth is hired) and continues throughout the employment period, and afterwards if possible. At its very core, relationship-building starts with understanding the business. This means doing your research, as Kim from EMPLOY described:

I think it’s about really learning the business...because every business is different, so really finding out what they do, how they do it, what works for them, what’s their culture...really finding out what their mission statement is, what their bottom line is, and trying to match a youth who might be best suited for that business.

The extent of research agencies engaged in depended on the characteristics of the company, such as its size, the nature of the work and the regulatory environment in which the industry operates. Most participants agreed that basic research on what the company does, who is authorized to make decisions, the general environment and philosophy of the business are essential. It is also important to understand the context in which the company operates. This includes understanding the sector, and any regulatory or political issues that they may be facing. By doing your research before initiating contact, you demonstrate you are interested in not only meeting your own objectives, but that you are committed to making the business more successful and are willing to invest in the relationship-building process.

Honesty is a crucial element in building relationships with the private sector so that potential partners are willing and prepared to face the challenges that may occur while working with at-risk youth. While most private sector partners interviewed overwhelmingly agreed that their overall experiences with the youth were positive, many did report experiencing some challenges. In some cases these issues were resolved with or without help from the agency, but in other cases, the employment position did not work out. While every effort should be made to ensure the youth and partner are a good match and are prepared to work together, long-term

involvement in the program will likely yield an occasional unsuccessful placement. This is why relationship-building is so important. Highlighting the longer-term benefits over immediate benefits, and being honest about some of the potential challenges, appeared to help partners understand the nature of what they were getting into, and prepare them to face the challenges that occurred. They were also less likely to give up on the program if a placement didn't work out, and were often quite dedicated to not only addressing issues but learning from them. Hence, having a strong relationship with the business can be a protective factor against missteps on the part of the agency or youth.

Finally, relationship-building requires patience and flexibility. Using the 'hard sell' approach to quickly 'close the deal' is not appropriate in this situation. It is important to show enthusiasm, but showing an interest in the needs of the business as well as the lives of the youth they take on, and the community as a whole, is a more effective approach. This approach, however, may take time. In most cases, commitment to participate in the program did not occur on initial contact but after several meetings, after talking with different levels of staff or after a period of deliberation. Roz from Choices for Youth stated:

Build the relationships. You know you might not get the answers you want right out the door, but leave it open.

It is important that the business takes the time to consider if they can provide the necessary environment and if they have the capacity to hire the youth should the placement work out. In addition, the amount of ongoing support needed will vary. Some businesses will have the capacity to provide extra support to the youth, whereas others may need to rely on the agencies more. A part of the relationship-building process is figuring out how much of a role the partner wants to play and adapting to that.

**Choosing a Business to Approach.** When considering which businesses to approach, it is critical that the needs of both the business and the youth are taken into consideration. Jason from RaY stated:

[We] try to make it a good fit so we're not just throwing kids wherever. They're in a place that makes sense for them to be with a business that understands what the program is and has bought into the program.

Therefore, it is also important to be selective in the types of businesses that are approached. Many of the programs offer tangible benefits such as wage subsidies and pre-screening services that may attract that wrong type of partners, including parties who fail to see the 'big picture' and whose main interest is in securing free or cheap labour. It is the responsibility of the agency to ensure that the business has the capacity to provide the type of support the youth need and to ensure partners are committed for the long term. This means providing a supportive environment where the youth receive training in the duties of the job, and, if necessary, coaching in how to conduct themselves in the workplace. While this may not be an issue for all youth, some may not be used to basic aspects of work such as getting up on time, interacting appropriately with superiors, avoiding wearing an iPod or talking on their cell phone during working hours. While it is important for employers to express their concerns over such conduct, without the right approach, youth may feel embarrassed, ashamed or in some instances may get angry or feel victimized.

**It is the responsibility of the agency to ensure that the business has the capacity to provide the type of support the youth need and to ensure partners are committed for the long term.**

By having a supportive environment, youth realize that they are not being attacked personally, but are being provided with a learning opportunity and a chance to improve themselves, so these lapses become less frequent. It is important to note that these transgressions are not exclusive to the at-risk youth, and may occur with all employees. In fact, many private sector partners expressed that they face similar challenges from both program youth and regular employees. Those who did make comparisons did not see the 'burden' as being significant, even if more support was needed than with their regular employees.

The process of finding private sector partnerships and ensuring an appropriate fit begins with choosing which type of private sector partner to approach. Organizations that operate with an explicit socially conscious mandate were a natural target for agencies. For example, Boon Burger, a partner of RaY, seems like an attractive target because they specialize in organic foods, use environmentally responsible packaging and disposal methods, and thus, appear to be a socially conscious business environment. While providing socially conscious products does not guarantee a positive reception, it does increase the likelihood that the owners are also mindful of other community issues. In most cases, however, private sector partners were not directly in the business of providing a socially conscious product or service. In these instances, agency staff suggested approaching businesses that have a well-defined human resources department with a corporate social responsibility mandate and the capacity to provide a supportive environment.

Social responsibility is a great start, but other factors contribute to providing a comfortable learning environment for youth. Three of the programs profiled in this study focus on providing training for youth in the trades (Choices for Youth, BladeRunners, and Carpenters' Union Local 27), which may be a suitable place as those employed in the trades often come from similar backgrounds or neighbourhoods and have been able to find success in this occupation. Many of the youth interviewed commented on how they felt comfortable around their mentors in the trades, and likewise many of the staff reported that they saw themselves in the youth. For instance, Alex from Choices for Youth stated:

I grew up downtown too, I even know some of the people they hung around with, so at first I think they kind of looked down upon me, but they realized this is what is going on with him, he's kind of like us and he changed, so I know I can do the same thing.

Although there is some debate on the subject (which will be addressed further in the discussion), service environments like Harvey's and Boon Burger may also be appropriate as they often hire youth that, despite coming from a less barrier-stricken background, are similar in age to the at-risk youth and may share common interests and aspirations. This type of normalization is important, as it gives youth a chance to identify with their mainstream peers. Mike from EMPLOY also noted that the service sector may be more willing to take on unskilled workers, and that smaller businesses tend to be easier to partner with than larger corporations. This may be because they have more to gain from benefits such as wage subsidies, or because there is less corporate bureaucracy in hiring processes. In terms of the construction industry, new developments were often targeted. Garry from BladeRunners described reading the newspaper regularly to see if any new developments were being built in Vancouver, and then setting up a meeting with the developers to ask how they could get their youth working on these projects. He also spoke of a councillor at City Hall

(one of the founders of BladeRunners) who created ‘community benefit agreements’ when a new site was approved. The agreements required development companies to hire a certain number of local employees, which Garry was ready to provide. New developments were described as ideal as, once businesses move in, they create new employment positions, require janitorial services, etc.

**Initiating Contact.** A diversity of strategies was reported for finding private sector partners. The most common strategy was simply employing networking techniques. For example, Lambrina at Toronto Youth Job Corps mentioned she utilizes contacts from “One Step”, a network of non-profit organizations that deliver training and employment programs in Ontario. She also suggested forming relationships with local Business Improvement Associations (BIAs). Presenting at BIA meetings and networking within these organizations may be a good approach, as members are often sensitive to the needs of their community. Another participant suggested asking the board members of an agency if they have connections in the business community, or even asking business associates to join their board in order to make contacts.

In most cases, networks were informal in structure but based on the professional experience of agency staff. This included building a network with other community agencies and organizations as well as utilizing existing private sector partners for leads. One participant suggested approaching businesses currently involved with the agency, such as funders. Businesses currently donating funds to an agency might not be aware of other ways that they can contribute to their communities, so it is important that they are aware of all opportunities to do so. Even personal networking played a role. For instance, Dave from EMPLOY described making contacts in activities such as skiing and golfing, and Shawn from TYJC discussed meeting people on public transit and talking to them about the program.

When approaching a potential employer for the first time, it is important to choose the appropriate person to contact. This is where research becomes important. For smaller organizations, it may be as simple as contacting the store or site owner. When navigating a complicated corporate structure however, most respondents recommended taking the time to identify the decision-makers, or the people authorized to give the go-ahead on forming a partnership. For some, this meant reaching senior executive staff or human resources personnel. Where trades were involved, there was some disagreement on whether the initial contact should be with the developer or if it was more efficient to contact the sub trades directly. For those utilizing existing contacts, most used their contact to set up a meeting with the appropriate decision-maker. While having a contact provided a clear advantage, the same concepts of research, relationship building and genuine interest in youth remained important.

In terms of method of contact, the most effective method described was presenting the program in person rather than over the phone or through email. While one successful partnership did form through an email presentation, this type of pitch was usually done face-to-face. Many cited this as important to the relationship-building process, but also highlighted the fact that email communications in particular are too impersonal and are often ignored as most businesses are already inundated with various business offers and spam. Some noted that face-to-face communication is also a better way to tap into the moral/emotional benefits of the program. Favoured locations for the meetings were at the business site, or in the case of corporate clients, in a relaxed setting like a restaurant.

**When making their pitch to potential private sector partners, agency staff highlighted the importance of being honest and up-front about both the advantages and disadvantages of hiring at-risk youth.**

**The Pitch – Highlighting the Benefits of Participating.** When making their pitch to potential private sector partners, agency staff highlighted the importance of being honest and up-front about both the advantages and disadvantages of hiring at-risk youth. As previously mentioned, all agreed that nothing is to be gained by ‘sugar-coating’ the process, as missteps are to be expected and a long-term appreciation for the big picture is needed. Several participants articulated the importance of tailoring the pitch to the company. For instance, does the agency provide a particular type of training, such as WHMIS, that may appeal to the employer? How does this fit into corporate culture, company philosophy or community image?

When participants were asked to identify the most important message to convey to prospective partners in their pitch, the majority emphasized highlighting the benefits that employers receive by taking part in the program. After all, even the most altruistic business person needs to consider the bottom line in order to ensure the success of their business. The benefits highlighted included wage subsidies, agency screening and support, gaining access to trained, quality employees, positive public relations, and strengthening their communities. With the exception of Choices for Youth and the Carpenters’ Union who pay their youth directly, and TAPAJ who has employers pay the full wage, all of the programs profiled in this study have the option of offering full or partial wage subsidies to employers for a predetermined period. The subsidy is provided with the expectation that youth will either get hired directly by the company or acquire the skills necessary to enter the competitive job market. This was a very important motivation for many private sector partners, as it removes the economic risk of taking on the youth. One employer stated that it usually takes 2-3 weeks for a new employee to become productive, and in some cases, given their inexperience and barriers to learning, it could take longer. By alleviating the financial risk, both agencies and employers agreed that participation in the program became more likely. Interestingly, Heather from Intact Financial Corporation reported that the wage subsidy was not a factor for her company when they were considering partnering with TYJC. She stated:

We really wouldn’t feel comfortable taking that. I mean our messaging is that we’re trying to give back to the community, but at the same time, how could we take money from a city program... to subsidize what we would have spent anyways.

Hence, wage subsidies may not be as much of a motivator for large corporations, particularly if they are not creating a new position for the youth, but filling one that would require an employee regardless of their partnership with an agency.

Another benefit these programs provide is valuable pre-screening and support services that can save employers time. After spending a minimum of several weeks with the youth, agency staff are usually in a great position to select those they feel are ready to maintain employment and are most capable of doing the job. Adrien from RaY articulated this point:

We’re making the placement or the decision about who will be placed [with an employer] as the result of a sort of selective decision-making process. We’re not just some employment agency that’s just throwing someone their way and hoping it will stick. We’re selecting someone whose personality, whose skills, whose interests seem to be a really good fit for your organization. ... there’s some serious thought put into the decision-making process.

This selection process was more important for private sector partners that were small businesses or operated independent of their corporate entity, and who often do not have the resources to operate a human resources department. While employers still wanted to interview the youth themselves, this is far less burdensome than creating job posts, interviewing a large volume of applicants, and potentially hiring applicants that do not work out.

In addition to providing valuable HR services, agency staff are also available to support both the youth and the employer throughout the employment period. If the youth require support for any personal or employment-related problem, agency staff are there to assist them. Similarly, employers are not left alone to resolve any concerns that might arise in the workplace, as they have the agency staff to work with them. Simon, an employer from Natural Cycle Courier highlighted this point:

RaY does a lot of the supporting as well. Like if any issues came up, RaY was pretty responsive in dealing with it right away. So [it's important] for the workplace to know that you're not on your own hiring someone that has come from a more difficult background. There is support for the workplace in a situation like that.

In addition, because many programs offer pre-employment training and certifications, program youth often became attractive employee candidates as they carry more credentials than some of the other applicants. All of the programs profiled in this study provide a variety of training opportunities, such as WHMIS, Fall Protection, Customer Service Excellence, and First Aid. They also offer valuable life skills and employment-readiness workshops. This added training is an asset to employers who would otherwise have to provide it themselves. Every private sector participant interviewed described gaining access to at least one, but often more, high-quality employees through working with their agency partners. One participant highlighted the importance of tapping into every available resource for skilled workers, particularly as many workers in the baby-boom generation prepare to retire. Several employers discussed their ongoing challenge of finding high-quality employees who would remain loyal to their organization. Rhiannon from Westbank Projects Corp. spoke about how her work with BladeRunners helped in this regard:

Well I think when it works, it really works. You get these incredible employees that are very loyal. And you can't buy that, you can't always find that. A lot of times there is huge turnover on a construction site, and there's not a huge turnover for BladeRunners kids.

In all cases, the benefits to the employee recruitment, training and retention aspects were highlighted during the initial pitch. Some agencies offered additional services to their private sector partners, which can be particularly useful for smaller businesses. For example, one agency utilized a staff member who also teaches human resources courses to educate private sector partners on conducting orientations, providing training, developing human resource guidebooks and tools to effectively evaluate employee performance. While not all agencies have the capacity to offer employers these additional services, this is a great way to demonstrate not only an additional benefit, but that the agency understands and is dedicated to their business. It is also a great way to maintain ongoing contact and communication.

**...because many programs offer pre-employment training and certifications, program youth often became attractive employee candidates as they carry more credentials than some of the other applicants.**

Finally, several participants, both agency staff and members of the private sector spoke of how businesses can benefit both directly and indirectly by giving back to their communities. Directly, businesses are able to build a positive reputation as an organization that cares about their community. This is beneficial in attracting customers and employees with social values and allows the business to highlight their work in marketing and public relations materials. Indirectly, businesses benefit from having healthy communities of people who can utilize their products and services. Garry, a Coordinator from BladeRunners calls this opportunity “an economic windfall” as youth who were previously utilizing social services become tax-paying employees, and more skilled workers are added to the workforce.

It should be noted that several participants from the private sector spoke about the importance of giving back to their communities regardless of whether they personally obtained any benefit. For instance, Thomas from Boon Burger in Winnipeg stated:

Right now, the benefit to me is the gratification of being able to help someone like Bill<sup>3</sup> out... just to think that he has gone through like such hell in his life and to know that he enjoys coming to work here, and you can see how he is making friends here, you know what I mean? It's really nice to see. I know it sounds kind of corny, but you can't really put a monetary value on it.

### Challenges in Engaging the Private Sector

While all agency staff appeared very passionate about their work and the need for the private sector to become involved in their programs, many challenges were reported. The main challenges described were a lack of resources, strong competition with other employment-seeking youth and agencies, a scarcity of quality jobs with adequate pay, the recent economic crisis, difficulty in making contact with decision makers, employer fears about hiring at-risk youth, and challenges maintaining relationships with employers if a placement did not work out.

**Availability of Resources.** The most frequently reported challenge that the agencies in this sample face in engaging the private sector pertains to funding. The availability (or lack of) ongoing funding impacts the agency's ability to seek and maintain partnerships. Without secure, long-term funding, it may be hard to develop a long-term plan or relationship with employers. Dave from EMPLOY described this difficulty: “[Funding has] been a real issue with the partnering and the ability to develop long-term relationships. I mean you never know if the program is going to be here next year”.

Ongoing support is a key component in all of the programs examined and a necessary condition for potential private sector partners to feel comfortable participating in the program. While all agencies received positive reviews from their private sector partners, some respondents pointed out that it can be a challenge to deliver such support in the resource-limited environment in which the non-profit sector operates. While the agency staff work diligently, success in youth's job placements, their longer-term success in employment, and their lives as a whole, may require additional training that the agencies simply do not have the capacity to provide. For example, some private sector partners suggested additional training in social skills, literacy, numeracy and support for substance abuse issues would make the experience less challenging, though they also recognized that this was not possible.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym provided to protect the confidentiality of the youth participant.

In addition to being short on resources, agency staff are increasingly being evaluated by funders based on the number of youth who are employed at the end of the program. If statistics are not sufficiently high, agencies run the risk of losing that funding source. While, at first glance, it makes sense to ensure that agencies are accountable to their funders in this way, this type of pressure can put agency staff in the difficult position of recommending youth for positions for which they are not an ideal fit so that the agency can demonstrate high statistics. Funders very rarely require long-term statistics, so, while a youth may be employed at the end of the program, this does not ensure that this will be the case in several months time, or that they are gaining the skills and experience needed to build a career. This may also jeopardize relationships with private sector partners who are counting on agency staff to find appropriate candidates for their organizations. Moreover, while attaining employment is obviously a successful outcome, for many of the youth who have faced tremendous barriers in their lives, some of the benefits they receive during participation in these programs are more intangible in nature, such as gaining access to social support, or an increase in self-esteem. While these benefits will ultimately help youth move forward in their lives, they cannot be captured by statistics and therefore go unrecognized.

**Availability of Jobs/Competition.** Finding employment can be challenging for youth in general, including those who have high school or post-secondary education. Many of the youth in community agency employment programs do not have a high school diploma or a GED, and often have little work experience. It can be difficult for agency staff to interest employers in taking a chance on these youth, particularly if they have more qualified applicants. Moreover, competition does not only come from the labour market, but in some cases comes from other agencies running employment programs. This appears to be particularly true for those working in large cities such as Toronto and Montreal. Lambrina from TYJC recalls hearing from potential employers “You’re like the ninth agency that’s called us”, particularly during the recession. Two respondents from TAPAJ also noted that agency competition has been a significant challenge, particularly when the program was first established.

A related difficulty that agency staff have faced is finding quality jobs with reasonable pay for the youth. While the definition of a ‘quality job’ may vary from person to person, it should include interesting, challenging work that is within the youth’s ability. The types of jobs offered to youth, excluding those modeled on a specific trade, are often low-skill customer service roles in restaurants and fast food outlets, various retail positions, general labour, and in one case, a bicycle courier position. Of course, this is to be expected given the limited education and work experience the great majority of the youth possess. There was disagreement amongst participants as to whether any employment position is seen as a positive step forward for youth as they are able to get ‘a foot in the door’ and can develop transferable skills and habits, such as social and job maintenance skills, punctuality and attendance. Other participants stood firm on the need to place youth in employment positions around which they can structure a career. For instance, Garry from BladeRunners stated:

I think the message that we want to get through to potential funders or private industry is... that we’re not just trying to get them a job, it’s long-term attachment to the workplace, building careers. It’s not just getting them a job, getting them out the door, getting rid of them. We want to see these kids in careers in this industry.

**While it is to be expected that the employment positions available to at-risk youth are entry level, the problem is that many do not provide a living wage on which the youth can support themselves.**

This may be easier for agencies utilizing a training model for a specific trade such as BladeRunners, The Carpenters' Union and Choices for Youth, who all provide on-site training to prepare youth for a career in the trades or the construction industry. Unfortunately, challenges also exist in this model. Youth are often relegated to specific, repetitive tasks and options for employment outside the program environment may be limited.

While it is to be expected that the employment positions available to at-risk youth are entry level, the problem is that many do not provide a living wage on which the youth can support themselves. This is important as poverty itself affects readiness for work. Without adequate income, it can be difficult to sustain stable housing so that youth can rest and prepare for work the next day. Food security may also be an issue and hunger can affect performance. Travel costs to and from work can become difficult, and the stress of chronic poverty can also impact concentration, attitude and energy levels. Being poor can also make the 'quick money' available through the underground economy more luring. While small businesses are a good target for agencies due to generally higher community involvement and less 'red tape', they may lack opportunities for advancement. Even within retail stores and restaurants, opportunities for advancement in their administrative offices are few as these positions are often given to those with post-secondary education. In fact, like most occupations, the retail and hospitality sectors have become academic disciplines in many colleges across Canada, and most advanced positions within these large companies require some type of post-secondary education, relegating at-risk youth to the lowest positions in the organization.

To be sure, many agency staff noted that there are entry level positions that their youth are capable of performing well that do provide opportunities for career advancement. Office work, for example, can be a great starting point as general administrative skills are highly marketable, can be utilized in any sector, and can be built on progressively. Moreover, several of the programs assist youth in furthering their education. For example Choices for Youth dedicates one morning per week during their program for GED preparation or other literacy training. Hence, while employment opportunities are vital to allow at-risk and homeless youth to move forward in their lives, it is critical that educational opportunities also be made available to ensure long-term success.

**Economic Context.** If the availability of quality jobs is a significant challenge for agencies trying to engage the private sector, it is not hard to imagine that the recent global economic crisis created additional challenges for private sector engagement in youth homelessness. Economic downturns are often associated with personnel reductions, increased focus on the bottom line and less emphasis on social responsibility. Employers are also less willing to take what they perceive to be risks. Many agency staff reported that the recent economic downturn created additional challenges for them in their work, particularly in terms of finding employment for the youth in their programs. As many Canadians lost their jobs in the recession, competition for available jobs became strong. Many Canadians employed in skilled, well-paying jobs found themselves working in service or general labour positions that are also targeted by employment programs. This created additional competition through numbers, but also put the youth in direct competition with adults possessing many years of experience, and in many cases, post-secondary education. Lambrina from TYJC said:

There may be a woman who is working in an office where there have been cutbacks [who] ends up getting a job at Tim Horton's or Harvey's because that is all that that person can get at the time, and they have bills to pay... I think the recession has created a little bit of competition in a lot of those jobs.

Similarly, Dave from EMPLOY explained how his small town of Vernon, BC was affected by the recession:

Our forest industry has taken a hard hit. Our Grasslands closed, our RV manufacturing – they shut, Capital Foods shut... Front Line Global, a big call centre... moved out too, I think they took their business off shore, and that employed 300 people. So lots of our industries left.

Even programs with established partners, like the trades preparation programs, faced tremendous challenges during the recession. For example, BladeRunners and the Carpenters' Union both faced a shortage of work due to the recession. Very few new developments were created, and current sites were shut down. Staff from both organizations described this as being particularly hard for their youth who face harsh economic realities and need to be working. It was difficult for the youth to remain positive and motivated during these hard times. Conversely, one agency respondent reported increased interest in his program during the recession due to the wage subsidies. However, these 'partners' may not be appropriate as they are only looking for short-term gains and may not provide long-term support. An additional challenge for agencies is deciphering the motives of potential partners during periods of economic turmoil.

**Making Contact.** Making contact with potential partners in the private sector, particularly with the right person, can be challenging for agency staff. While it was recommended in the previous section that face-to-face meetings be arranged with potential partners, these meetings can be difficult to secure, particularly if businesses are inundated with other requests from non-profits or charities. Several participants, such as Tony from TYJC, stated that it is especially difficult to get the attention of key decision makers in private sector organizations: "You're continually calling the HR departments, being transferred and transferred...waiting and waiting. There are just so many challenges you have to go through". Ensuring that you speak to those in authority is important as a few participants described speaking to employees who were very keen on participating in the program, only to find that those in a higher position were not interested. For instance, one respondent spoke about the enthusiastic response he often receives from store managers at various locations only to be told later that head office does not wish to form a partnership with the agency.

**Employer Fears/Stigma of Youth Homelessness.** Several participants described the challenges they face, often as a result of stereotyping and misinformation, when disclosing to employers that they work with an agency for at-risk or homeless youth. A common reaction is that either there is 'something wrong' with the youth, or that they are dangerous. It can be a tough 'sell' for agency staff who not only have to convince employers of the importance of the program, but also educate them about the youth they work with. One participant discussed how he regularly has to give employers background on who the youth are, the kinds of situations they may come from, and the kinds of barriers they face to employment. Another respondent spoke about how many employers are uninformed about homelessness in general, and how

Several participants described the challenges they face, often as a result of stereotyping and misinformation, when disclosing to employers that they work with an agency for at-risk or homeless youth.

**Of course, the problems that might arise in these placements are not unique to at-risk youth; they are risks that employers must take with any employee.**

he works to increase their understanding of this issue and the circumstances youth experiencing homelessness face.

This challenge manifests itself not only in employer willingness to hire at-risk youth, but also in the types of positions they may offer. For instance, some employers will relegate youth to the back of their stores where they don't have any interaction with the public, or will refuse to train them on certain tasks, such as cash. This can be problematic in terms of youth learning valuable skills and increasing their confidence. Finally, due to the perceived risk of working with at-risk youth (or any population with barriers), some organizations have policies against working with employment agencies such as the ones profiled in this study.

**Burning Bridges.** Unfortunately, sometimes the fear expressed by employers can be grounded in reality. Although every private sector participant in this study indicated a willingness to continue working with their community agency partners in the future, several agency staff spoke about the difficulties they've experienced in forming long-term relationships with some employers after a placement does not work out. The reality is that due to the tremendous barriers and often troubled pasts the youth have experienced, it is likely that some placements will not be successful. One agency respondent stated that some youth may even sabotage themselves once they reach a position of success, perhaps because they feel overwhelmed or fearful. In these scenarios, agency staff reported working to control the damage however they could with these employers, but some employers still chose to withdraw their participation.

One agency staff member described how he attempts to prevent this from occurring by being up-front with employers of this possibility. He stated that in general, if employers do not understand this risk, it is probably best that a partnership does not form. Agency staff also try to provide support to employers when a position is not working out by speaking to the youth themselves, and in some cases firing the youth. Of course, the problems that might arise in these placements are not unique to at-risk youth; they are risks that employers must take with any employee. Some employers explained that they mitigate this risk by understanding that by taking a chance they have the potential to help a youth with few other options move forward in their lives. For example, Rhiannon from Westbank Projects Corp. stated:

You need partners that really understand that it's about more than getting a person on the site to do a job, it's about changing a life. When you think about it in those terms, you're more willing to roll with the punches... And you know having people on site that don't work out, that happens to the best of us. We have you know, graduates with their MBAs, Master's in Development that don't work out. It's no different than any employee. Not everyone is going to work out.

## In Sum

In this section the factors deemed necessary for a successful partnership between community agencies and the private sector were identified. In addition, strategies for engaging the private sector were outlined, as were the challenges in doing so. The major findings from this section were:

- The factors identified as being necessary for a partnership were ensuring the agency provides adequate support to both the youth and employer, having both sides maintain open lines of communication, keeping the process as simple as possible for the employer, and having both parties set clear expectations of one another.
- Whenever possible, community agencies should promote their programs in the community so that potential partners are aware of the opportunity. Agencies should utilize corporate champions whenever possible to assist in this process.
- Relationship-building based on honesty and reciprocity was identified as the most important aspect of engaging the private sector.
- It is important for agencies to choose the right business to approach when seeking private sector partners. Companies with an explicit social mandate or corporate social responsibility policy are a good place to start. Agencies should learn who the appropriate person is to contact at a place of business, or who has the authority to make partnership decisions. Face-to-face meetings should be scheduled whenever possible.
- Various benefits to companies should be highlighted when making a pitch to a potential partners. These include wage subsidies, agency screening and support, gaining access to trained employees, positive public relations, and strengthening their communities. Community agencies should also be honest about any possible risks in participating.
- Many agencies struggle to secure long-term funding, which can make it difficult to maintain long-term partnerships with the private sector. Other challenges in engaging the private sector identified included competition from other agencies, finding quality employment positions for youth, making initial contact with decision-makers (particularly in large corporations), employer fears in hiring at-risk youth, and maintaining relationships if a placement does not work out.

**While the vast majority of youth said they had some past work experience, in many cases it was unstable employment characterized by irregular hours, menial tasks, or seasonal work.**

## **Youth Participants**

The final group of participants interviewed for this study were youth who were either current participants (but close to finishing) or recent graduates of the 8 community programs profiled in this study. A total of 63 youth respondents were interviewed. They were asked to describe their reasons for joining the program, the benefits and challenges they faced, and any next steps they had planned. They were also asked to provide advice to both agency staff and employers working in a similar program. The results are each discussed in turn.

### **Reasons for Joining Program**

Youth participants were asked to describe the reasons they joined their employment programs. Over half of the respondents said the main reason was they were unable to secure employment. The reasons they gave for their lack of success included poor job search or interview skills, limited employment experience, and barriers such as a criminal record and low levels of education. While the vast majority of youth (53, or 84.1%) said they had some past work experience, in many cases (30 youth or 47.6%) it was unstable employment characterized by irregular hours, menial tasks, or seasonal work. Michael, a youth participant in St. John's elaborated on this point: "Being a young person, it's difficult. The only thing [employers] will offer you, unless you know somebody, is fast-food jobs, or crappy, minimum wage jobs". Thirteen of the youth (20.6%) expressed that they had trouble maintaining previous employment and hence had little or no suitable past positions to put on their resume, and 10 (15.9%) had no previous work experience at all. Three participants explained that although they had employment experience in their home countries, they needed to gain experience in Canada. Graeme, a youth participant from Ottawa described his difficulties:

I was looking for employment and I was having troubles. Every place I went to either didn't call me for an interview or if they did it didn't go anywhere past that. So I came here... and just told them what was going on... and next thing I know I was accepted into the program, and I was just like great, I was set up with an opportunity for employment, along with special training that would make it easier for me to get other jobs later on in my life.

Several youth stated they joined their particular program because they had an interest in a specific field, namely in the trades, but were not able to obtain an entry-level position on their own. For instance, Gregory from Toronto had an interest in carpentry and had unsuccessfully tried for months to secure an employment position. He felt like the Choice program was his only option to get his foot in the door. He stated:

I joined the Choice program because I wanted to get a career in construction, and there was no other way for me to do it. I was looking around everywhere for someone to hire me to become an apprentice, but nobody was willing to do it. Then I saw the program through the YMCA.

Some youth stated that they had utilized other employment agencies in the past (agencies without pre-employment training). In some cases youth presented with too many barriers and were not accepted. In other cases they were admitted, but the agency was unsuccessful in finding them employment. One youth described agencies where they would just photocopy his citizenship papers and then he would never hear

from them again, or he would be sent job postings that were inappropriate as they required him to speak both English and French when he was just learning English. Troy, another youth from Toronto, articulated his frustrating experience with some employment agencies:

Like they didn't help me find a job, right. Instead they were very bureaucratic, they wanted me to fill out these forms and go through these stages, and do useless things... stuff that I've written out over and over again...

Many of the youth portrayed the period in their lives prior to joining their employment programs as filled with tremendous adversity. For example, some youth had to rely on public assistance, and they described this experience as one of great economic hardship. Other youth were homeless, either couch-surfing or living on the street. One youth, Henry from Winnipeg, described how he almost inadvertently joined the Growing Opportunities Program at RaY after seeking assistance in obtaining food:

Well I didn't really join it [the program], I just actually asked my friends where to go [for food]... And after awhile, I noticed that people were getting jobs left and right at RaY's, well odd jobs I should say. I asked them if I could do something like that so I wouldn't have to be one the streets no more. I was kind of sick of being on the streets.

Many youth expressed a strong desire to improve their current circumstances, including seeking an end to working in menial jobs, finding support to pursue an education, staying away from substance use, or generally searching for meaningful activities to fill their time, such as pursuing a career. A few youth described wanting to improve their lives for the sake of their children, so that they could give them a better life.

### Benefits of Participating

**Necessities and Experience.** Youth identified many benefits to participating in these employment programs. First and foremost, youth were able to have their basic needs met, as many of the programs are funded to provide food and assistance with other necessities such as housing and work equipment. Youth also appreciated having the opportunity to gain much-needed employment experience, either to strengthen their resumes or to learn skills in a particular field, such as construction.

**Learning New Skills.** The benefit conveyed most frequently by youth was the opportunity to learn new skills and acquire knowledge. In fact, this was listed by 42 out of the 63 (66.6%) respondents. Many youth spoke about developing 'hard' skills such as those used in construction, and proudly described how they learned to use particular tools or perform retrofits on homes. This gave many youth a sense of self worth. Edberg a participant from Toronto stated:

I can go anywhere now and say I know how to do this. And the correct way; the safe way. I'm just very proud to say that I can do it. So it's been a really good program for me.

Many youth also described learning skills such as developing a resume, job-hunting, and interview skills. This latter skill was identified by several youth as an area where they improved greatly. In contrast to their earlier, anxiety-provoking interview experiences, after learning and practicing how to prepare for and conduct themselves

**Many youth spoke about developing 'hard' skills such as those used in construction, and proudly described how they learned to use particular tools or perform retrofits on homes.**

at interviews, they felt much more confident. Ashley, a participant in Ottawa elaborated on this point:

We did a lot of interviewing skills, because that was my biggest worry, I feel very nervous going into an interview. I'm just not sure what to say, or what to avoid saying. I fidget a lot so if I'm nervous I'll like play with my rings a lot, so they were like don't wear them, if need be put your hands under your legs or whatever so you don't fidget.

Many youth also appreciated the opportunity to earn various certificates during the program. For instance, they spoke about becoming certified in WHMIS, Customer Service Excellence, and First Aid. The respondents found this to be helpful not only because they learned new skills, but also because the certifications strengthened their resumes.

In addition to learning many new hard skills, youth also described learning 'soft' skills while in their employment programs. For instance, several youth from the EMPLOY program were very enthusiastic about learning the critical thinking model. They described using their newfound knowledge in both their work and personal lives. One youth stated that she has used her critical thinking skills to challenge negative thoughts she has about herself as well as to think through potential consequences of her actions.

Other youth spoke about learning the skills necessary to communicate more effectively. This was particularly true when corresponding with their employers. Both youth and staff participants described communication with employers as a major challenge for youth. For instance, it can be difficult for some youth to call their employer when they are sick or running late, so sometimes they avoid making the call altogether, creating worse consequences for themselves. It can also be difficult for some youth to communicate with their employers if they are feeling uncomfortable with a situation that arises at work. With the support of agency staff, youth can learn how to be more assertive. Melissa, a youth participant from Vernon talked about how she has improved in this regard:

I would say I'm not as afraid [anymore] to say what's on my mind to employers... I learned... you can go up to them and say this is bugging me, or I can't do this anymore... instead of keeping it in.

Similarly, several youth illustrated how their social skills have improved after participating in their programs. Christopher, a participant from the EMPLOY program said that he would watch the staff interact with others, and this motivated him to improve his own social skills. He stated:

When Mike [or Dave] dropped me off for my interview they seem like they introduce themselves to more people and are more open... now I'm starting to do it. I think it opens your mind towards networking. If you don't like talking to people you aren't going to meet who you need to meet.

Other youth described learning appropriate ways to conduct themselves when others (such as customers) were rude to them. While this can still be challenging for some (as will be elaborated on below), they described beginning to think about their actions before reacting to situations, and attempting to control their anger.

**Guidance and Support.** Another benefit listed by a few youth was that by joining their employment program they were inspired to pursue a particular path in life, or their lives had a newfound direction. For example, Sean, a participant in the CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program stated, “Just everything about the program is really good, it opens your eyes to what direction you want to head to”, and Jake from Choices for Youth said, “It [the program] basically set me on my way for life, you know what I mean? Without it who knows where I’d be”. Many youth who enter an employment program are unsure of which career they would like to pursue. Although this takes time to work out (and many, as will be seen below, do not reach this point during the program), staff are available to explore potential avenues and guide the youth towards education or training that will prepare them for their career of choice. Some programs offer youth the opportunity to tour different employment sites and educational institutions. In many cases, staff accompany them on individual visits to potential schools to gather information and to meet with educators and counsellors.

A couple of respondents described benefiting immensely from the emotional support provided by the agency staff. Jesse from Vernon emphasized that he would not have been able to get through the difficult time he was facing and successfully maintain employment if it wasn’t for the support he received from one particular staff member at the EMPLOY program:

I probably wouldn’t be where I am today if Dave didn’t help me out. Like I’ve come in here for personal matters and for advice and he always gave me a hand and guided me and told me what he thinks about it. He’s always been here for me 100%.

**Improved Self-Esteem.** As previously mentioned, many homeless and at-risk youth have very low self-esteem and hold bleak visions for their future. This may result from several factors such as a lack of support and encouragement at home, trauma or abuse, or few successes in school or past employment. Although there is no quick fix, a few youth described beginning to see themselves differently after completing their employment program. For example, one young man talked about how he can now list several positive traits about himself, whereas before he felt that he had nothing to contribute to a workplace. He stated that he now believes in himself and his ability to maintain employment. Similarly, Krista, a youth from Vernon began to see herself and her future differently after completing the EMPLOY program:

I think this course just really motivated me and brought up my self-esteem a lot... I really looked down on myself. I didn’t feel motivated. I didn’t think I could do anything, right? And this class just made me realize that I could do whatever I wanted.

**Reducing Social Exclusion.** Finally, several youth stated that by joining their program, they were able to meet new people including staff, other participants, and work colleagues. This is important as many youth who have experienced homelessness have not only left their homes, but often have also had to leave their communities to access services. This can mean leaving behind friends, family members, and other supportive figures such as teachers, counsellors or religious leaders. Many youth become isolated and, particularly if past trauma is involved, afraid to seek out support from others. Having access to a new network of support cannot be underestimated. Peter, a young man from Montreal furthered this point:

...one young man talked about how he can now list several positive traits about himself, whereas before he felt that he had nothing to contribute to a workplace.

You get to be part of a social network, not necessarily friends, but they could become friends, and this social network is very important. It breaks isolation. Like someone might have a problem and thinks he is the only one that has this problem. Then you meet someone who actually has the same problems so you can actually talk together.

Peter’s quote illustrates how social isolation can be lessened, and how youth in similar situations can support and validate one another.

### Youth Challenges

Youth participants were asked to reflect on any challenges they experienced while in their employment program (during both pre-employment training and actual employment). The results are listed below in Table 1. Several of the youth involved in the trades or construction work commented on the difficulties of learning to use particular tools or perfecting their measuring skills. Others remarked on the gruelling or physically demanding nature of this work. Cody from BladeRunners, however, enjoyed the physical challenge of the work: “It felt like I accomplished something; I felt good at the end of the day because I did a hard day’s work”.

Several youth from the EMPLOY program stated they experienced some difficulties learning the critical thinking model, or applying it after the program was completed. One young man commented that he catches himself “not being open-minded” and he thinks of his training at EMPLOY and begins to reflect on why this is so. Another youth stated that he generally has difficulties in a classroom setting as he “learns with his hands” so he found the classroom component of the EMPLOY program to be quite challenging.

<b># of Youth</b>	<b>Challenge</b>
<b>18 (28.6%)</b>	Components of the work itself (job duties)
<b>12 (19%)</b>	No challenge/only learning
<b>11 (17.5%)</b>	Acting appropriately at work
<b>8 (12.6%)</b>	Getting into a routine
<b>5 (8%)</b>	Finding a work/life balance
<b>4 (6.3%)</b>	Difficulties interacting with people
<b>3 (4.8%)</b>	Transportation to/from work
<b>2 (3.2%)</b>	Language barriers

Several youth (17.5%) found it difficult to consistently act in an appropriate manner at the workplace or in pre-employment training, for example “biting their tongue” or controlling angry outbursts. For some youth it was difficult not to retort when co-workers made comments that upset them, or when they encountered a challenging customer. When asked how they have attempted to monitor these reactions, one

youth stated that he “walks away”, another said he “ignores them” or “goes and gets a manager”. Randy, a youth from Vancouver stated that he “controls his temper” because he is grateful to the staff at BladeRunners and does not want to disrespect them:

I mean there are people helping me out now. I don't know, if someone paid your first month's rent and damage deposit, like that's a lot to lose, and it's disrespectful if I lose my job and stuff.

In general, the youth commented that the agency staff have helped them in this regard, or have worked with them to develop new coping skills or ways to address particular situations.

Balancing work with everyday life was identified as a challenge for five (8%) of the participants. This was particularly true for youth with children and for those who were dealing with a personal crisis. One young woman described struggling to find employment where the hours were flexible enough that she could spend some time with her children as well as find child care. Another youth spoke about having to go to court regularly as a result of his involvement with the criminal justice system, and one youth was going through a difficult custody battle. Finally, two youth spoke about having trouble maintaining employment because they were struggling with depression.

For four youth (6.3%), the beginning stages of the program were very challenging as they felt too shy and nervous to interact with the staff, other youth and employers. One young woman felt really uncomfortable sharing her ideas in the pre-employment program and was constantly worried the instructor would ask her a question. In all cases the youth stated that these feelings improved as the program continued, and the staff were very supportive in working with them.

Other challenges reported included transportation concerns (3 youth or 4.8%), particularly for youth living in Toronto who had to commute to Vaughan for their classroom training in the CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program. Language barriers were identified by 2 youth who were new to Canada and were learning to speak English. It should also be noted that 12 youth (19%) reported that they did not find anything challenging, or if they did, felt challenged in a good way. For example, Edberg from Toronto stated “It's just a learning process. So everything is challenging in a way, in a good way”.

Finally, although not clearly articulated as a challenge, two youth described feeling worried about what they would do once their programs were complete as they did not have a job lined up. One youth wanted to go back to school but worried about how he would secure the funding to do so. Maggie, a young woman from Toronto, was concerned about occupying her days as she had really appreciated getting into a routine and having something to do every day:

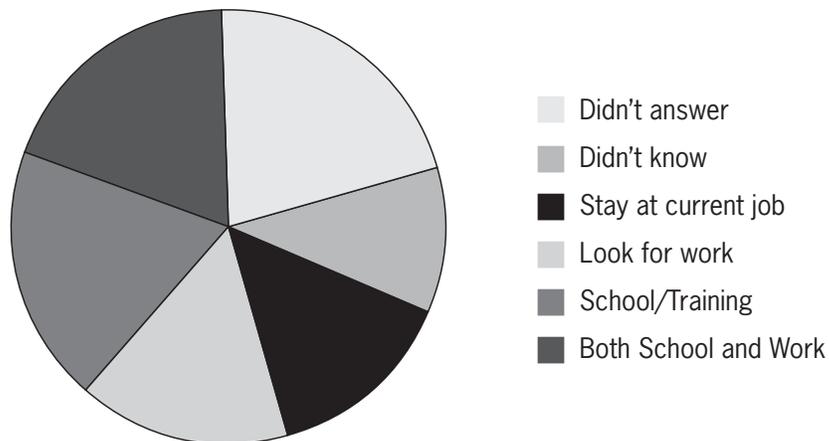
I'm ready to work. It's going to be hard, I'm pretty sure I'm going to wake up at the same time, but it's going to suck doing nothing. But I'm still going to continue job searching.

## Next Steps

The youth in this study were asked if they had any next steps planned or visions for the future (see Graph B below). Responses varied tremendously. Thirteen youth chose not to answer (perhaps because the question provoked anxiety). Some youth were unsure, some were content to work on their present goals such as maintaining their current employment (9 youth or 14.3%), and some participants had a larger picture of their future in mind. Many answers were predicated with 'maybe' or 'probably', indicating that many youth were unsure.

Ten youth (15.9%) said that they would have to look for employment once their program was complete, largely because the business where they were doing their placement did not have the resources to hire them, or because the program they were participating in did not have a formal placement component. On a positive note, 12 youth (19%) indicated they had plans to pursue some form of education or further training such as obtaining a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), pursuing an apprenticeship, or joining a bridging program that assists individuals without adequate credits or grades to go to college or university. An additional 12 youth (19%) expressed a desire to pursue some form of education, but said they were doing this in conjunction with working or looking for work. Hence, a total of 36% youth indicated a desire to further their education, which for many youth was previously undesirable or seemed unattainable. Three youth also described hopes of one day opening their own business, and one youth was already in the process of starting a T-shirt business.

**Graph B: Next Steps**



As previously mentioned, it is not always realistic to expect a youth's life to change completely after finishing one employment program. A large component of the work done by agency staff is starting a process of learning, and the fruits of this labour may not be realized immediately. In many cases joining an employment program is a first step for at-risk youth, or the beginning of a path where the direction is still largely uncertain. Of course career exploration is a normal process that most youth undergo during this period of life and staff are there to provide support in this regard. It is not possible to deduce the true impact of these employment programs, particularly while they are still in the program or immediately afterwards (this research was conducted either near the end or very recently after program completion). To this end, longitudinal research, which follows youth over an extended time frame, would

be useful to observe the life path youth choose in the years following an employment program, even if a causal link cannot be established.

## Advice for Employers

Youth participants were asked to reflect on their experiences at their employment placement, and to provide any advice for employers hiring a youth from a similar program. The most frequent suggestions were to provide the necessary training and support (particularly at the beginning of a position), and to give the youth a genuine chance. There was some disagreement among youth as to whether they felt they should receive the same treatment as other employees, or if there should be extra considerations for youth coming from an employment program.

**Provide Sufficient Training.** Several participants conveyed the importance of employers providing sufficient training and general support for youth new to their positions. This included providing guidance on all tasks, ensuring that youth felt comfortable asking questions, and being very clear about what their expectations are for their employee. Providing adequate training allows youth to gain a sense of confidence in their ability to do the job, and to acquire new skills. Several youth expressed frustration that they were not provided with what they saw to be proper training and consequently felt like they were “thrown” on the job and expected to know what to do. This created great anxiety, and one youth expressed how he felt like he slowed down the workplace because he always had to stop and ask questions. Another youth stated that she had to ask another employee to explain the tasks required of her because the manager did not do so.

Another way youth identified needing support was in ‘staying on track’. For one young man this was necessary when he started joking around with the other employees or became distracted in some way. Another youth stated he sometimes needed support from employers to remain focused after he made a mistake as he could sometimes become overwhelmed or discouraged. For this youth it was helpful to know that it was okay to make some mistakes, and that it was part of the learning process.

**Treatment from Employers.** There was some disagreement among youth as to whether they wanted to be treated equally to other employees or whether they felt they needed unique considerations at times. For instance, several youth stated they did not want to be treated any differently from the other employees because this did not prepare them for the ‘real’ world of work, or what would be expected of them once they were finished their employment program. Two youth explained that their skills were on par with other employees, or even superior after receiving pre-employment training. For instance, Graeme, a youth from Ottawa recommended that employers not underestimate the youth because they might be surprised by their current skills levels:

While we are not on your payroll exactly, treat us the same as you would any employee, challenge us, and you will be surprised at how well we will respond. Just challenge us, and we'll push back.

Three youth felt that their employers treated them as if they were ‘co-op’ students rather than employees. When asked to elaborate, they described being given simple tasks and not being trained on others. They also noted that the employer did not really speak to them. They expressed the desire to be treated the same as other

**Providing adequate training allows youth to gain a sense of confidence in their ability to do the job, and to acquire new skills.**

**...employers should give participants from employment programs a genuine chance... not only providing [them] with an employment opportunity, but also allowing them to prove themselves once hired.**

employers in the workplace, and did not want to feel singled out because of their affiliation with an employment program.

In contrast, several youth felt that employers should take the youth's lack of employment experience and other barriers into consideration when employing a youth from an employment program. For instance, David, a young man from Toronto suggested that employers: "Be good teachers and don't be too hard on us because most of the people that come in here don't have any experience". Several youth agreed that they didn't learn well in situations where their employers got angry or frustrated with them, even if this was the boss's demeanour with all of their employees. This made several youth associate work with negative feelings and struggle to stay motivated to maintain their employment. Matt from Vernon emphasized this point:

Like when you yell at them [the youth], get angry with them, or just change that tone in your voice to a negative tone, they instantly either feel bad about themselves, or they get frustrated and angry... It's a big vicious circle and eventually when they hear work they're going to think negative thoughts, and when they come to work they're going to be negative. It should be more positive. Kind of what's called the sandwich effect, good thing, bad thing, good thing.

Similarly, some youth disagreed on the importance of employers utilizing the agency staff or their case workers on a regular basis. For instance, one youth described having trouble at previous employment because he felt that he was confronted inappropriately by his employer when a situation arose at work. This raised his defenses and closed him down to receiving criticism. He felt that it would have been more constructive if his employer spoke to his case worker at the employment agency rather than confront him directly. In contrast, another youth felt that his employer involved the agency unnecessarily at times rather than speaking to him directly. He stated that there were times when his employer could have taken five minutes to speak to him, but instead called the agency and had a worker come to the worksite, and he had to wait 45 minutes. This youth felt frustrated that the employer did not take the time to speak with him directly.

**Give Youth a Chance.** The final piece of advice given by many youth (13 or 20.1%) was that employers should give participants from employment programs a genuine chance. This included not only providing youth with an employment opportunity, but also allowing them to prove themselves once hired. Several youth conveyed frustration at trying to get their 'foot in the door', or having someone hire them for the first time. Cindy, a young woman from Vernon, articulated this 'catch-22' when asked to provide advice to potential employers:

I think giving them [the youth] a chance and understanding that they're just trying to get out there and start something new. Like for me, I had no experience so for an employer looking at my resume, it's probably a bit short, and they're looking for experience, but how are you supposed to get experience if you've never done anything? I can't get any experience if they're not willing to give it to me, and I'm finding that difficult right now.

Other youth suggested that employers withhold judgement about the type of worker the youth will be and give them the opportunity to prove themselves. For instance, one participant spoke about how he felt that employers look at him like he's going to "screw up their store". He felt this to be unfair as he believes he is a hard worker and has brought tremendous value to his previous employment positions, including working long hours and learning to do a variety of tasks. Similarly, another youth stated that he felt that some employers categorize all youth from employment programs as "the same". He suggested that even if employers have had a negative experience in the past they should not assume this will happen with all other youth. Finally, a few respondents said that giving them a chance also meant providing training on a variety of tasks, and allowing them time to adjust and even make a few mistakes. There has to be some form of a learning curve for youth participants, particularly if they do not have previous employment experience.

### Advice for Agency Staff

Interestingly, when youth were asked if they had any advice to give to staff working in a program similar to the one in which they participated, only one theme emerged. Twenty-one youth (33.3%) articulated the importance of staff providing a supportive and non-judgemental environment. This included being available to have conversations with youth about both 'light' and 'heavy' topics, and ensuring that they listened in a supportive and understanding manner. Several youth suggested that staff keep an open and friendly demeanour so that youth feel comfortable approaching and talking to them. It was recommended by two respondents that staff view each youth as an individual, and work with them based on their individual needs and/or barriers. Moreover, it is important for staff to be accepting of who the youth are, and remain non-judgemental and empathetic. Finally, one youth suggested that agency staff provide guidance to youth who may not have had parents or guardians to direct them and give them advice about life. This guidance extends to many realms in life including employment, health, relationships and overall well-being.

The remaining answers were tremendously idiosyncratic, with only one, or, in a few cases, two youth recommending each one. These suggestions included:

- Be more strict with youth
- Take the responsibility of finding work for youth seriously, and never give up
- Ensure all youth in a classroom setting participate regularly
- Help youth build teamwork skills to prepare them for the workplace
- Make classroom material relatable by providing personal examples
- Have youth in the classroom interact with one another rather than lecturing exclusively
- Thoroughly prepare youth for job interviews
- Ensure the program has female staff, particularly in construction settings
- Remain in contact with participants once the program is complete

## In Sum

In this section, the results from interviews with the youth participants were reviewed. The main findings were:

- The majority of youth joined their employment program because they were unable to secure employment on their own. While 84.1% had some previous employment experience, it was typically unstable employment characterized by irregular hours, menial tasks, or seasonal work. Nearly 16% had no work experience at all.
- Many of the youth portrayed the period in their lives prior to joining their employment program as filled with tremendous adversity, including experiencing poverty and homelessness.
- Youth identified many benefits to participating in these programs, including having their basic needs met and learning a variety of 'hard' skills such as tool handling, and 'soft' skills such as communication. Many also described learning employment-related skills such as resume preparation, job searching, and interviewing.
- Guidance and support from agency staff was identified as a crucial benefit to the youth, and a few youth described gaining higher self-esteem and reducing feelings of isolation.
- The most frequently reported challenges the youth faced related to the duties of their job, such as the grueling nature of physical labour or the early morning starts. Other youth reported experiencing no challenges, or felt that any difficulties were part of the learning process. The remaining challenges youth reported included getting into a routine, acting appropriately at work, finding a balance between life and work, and interacting with other people.
- When asked if they had any next steps planned, the answers provided by the youth varied tremendously. Some chose not to answer, some were content to work on their present goals such as maintaining their employment, and others had a larger picture in mind. Thirty-six per cent of youth had plans to further their education.
- The most frequent advice youth had for employers was to provide sufficient training, and to give youth a genuine chance by both providing employment opportunities and allowing them to prove themselves once hired. There was some disagreement among youth as to whether they felt they should receive the same treatment as other employees or if they should be afforded special considerations.
- The only reoccurring response from youth in regards to advice for agency staff was to provide a supportive and non-judgemental environment. This included being available to talk to, maintaining a friendly demeanour, and being accepting of the youth.

## Conclusion

Many community agencies, including those profiled in this research, work diligently to ensure at-risk and homeless youth have their basic needs met and acquire the skills necessary to maintain employment. This work, however, depends on the existence of employers who are willing to take a chance on a youth whose life opportunities may have been limited, and to provide a job or apprenticeship where the youth's new skills can be put into practice. Private sector engagement, therefore, is crucial in providing at-risk youth with pathways into the labour market.

Increased employment opportunities will not single-handedly solve youth homelessness, and it is not the intention of this report to contribute to the misguided notion that 'getting a job' is the only barrier preventing young people from moving forward in their lives. Solutions to youth homelessness require a holistic approach that addresses both individual concerns and broader structural barriers. A well-coordinated strategy must include emergency services (shelters, drop-ins), mental health and addiction supports, and structural changes such as an increase in affordable housing, universal access to post-secondary education, and the availability of quality jobs that pay a living wage. Homeless and at-risk youth face multiple barriers to employment (most notably, finding housing), which must be addressed before they can realistically be expected to hold a job. This report has focused on one important – and thus far overlooked – component in that overall strategy: engaging the private sector.

While the private sector has been largely marginalized from discussions on social concerns, other sectors can and must work together to provide the tools and the resources to support private sector participation. This report has outlined several strategies for doing so. The findings of this research also demonstrate that while the private sector may benefit greatly from hiring at-risk youth, businesses and corporations that do so must be cognizant of the associated challenges. Many youth are working to stabilize their lives, so it is inevitable that some placements will not work out. Like all young people, at-risk youth – even those with great potential – will make mistakes. Conversely, this research has also demonstrated that many youth hired through employment programs become highly skilled and loyal employees.

Increased private sector engagement in itself will not solve youth homelessness. In fact, our message at Raising the Roof is quite the opposite. We believe that homelessness is an issue that affects everyone in society, and thus requires action across society. This includes government, community agencies, and the private sector. Homelessness affects everybody in Canada; all segments of society must work together towards a solution. Engaging the private sector in no way lessens the responsibility of the government to address homelessness. In an era of fiscal restraint there has been increased pressure on governments to withdraw spending on social programs such as employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth. Agencies are increasingly being asked to seek private dollars to fund their programs, or are granted short-term funding with the expectation that they will obtain an alternative source for the long-term. This, of course, will only make the problem worse, as the agencies profiled in this study require long-term, stable funding from public sources as well as solid partnerships with the private sector. Our call for increased private sector engagement assumes that there will be continued, if not increased, public funding.

**The findings of this research also demonstrate that while the private sector may benefit greatly from hiring at-risk youth, businesses and corporations that do so must be cognizant of the associated challenges.**

**By ensuring that all of our citizens have access to housing and employment, not only are the costs of services drastically reduced, but there are more people to contribute to our tax base and stimulate the economy through increased spending.**

By bringing various segments of society together, we can begin to develop a more comprehensive strategy to address youth homelessness. This research suggests there are many benefits of private sector engagement, including but not limited to:

- 1) Homeless and at-risk youth have the opportunity to participate in meaningful job placements and potentially long-term, permanent positions. Increasing the opportunities for youth with few options allows them to develop the skills needed to structure a career, and perhaps instils hope in them for a brighter future when previously there was none.
- 2) Private sector engagement allows businesses and the non-profit sector to pool their expertise and resources to collaborate on important issues that impact their local communities.
- 3) Businesses and their staff have the opportunity to directly contribute to solutions to youth homelessness by changing the lives of the youth they work with.
- 4) Engagement of local employers, their employees, and community agencies in a common goal encourages a collaborative, community-based response to homelessness.
- 5) As more people have direct contact with youth whose lives have been affected by homelessness, a greater awareness will evolve regarding the barriers they face and the potential they possess.

Homelessness affects Canadians morally, socially, and economically. If we wish to live in a peaceful, productive and relatively crime-free society, we need to address the exclusion and deprivation of some, including homeless and at-risk youth, which leaves them with few options but to turn to alternative, sometimes criminal, means to survive.

Homelessness is also extremely costly to society. The costs of emergency shelter, social services, additional health care, and the use of the criminal justice system to 'address' homelessness are extremely high, much more so than putting money into preventive measures such as affordable housing and income security (The Wellesley Institute, 2010; Gaetz, S., 2012). By ensuring that all of our citizens have access to housing and employment, not only are the costs of services drastically reduced, but there are more people to contribute to our tax base and stimulate the economy through increased spending. Furthermore, the costs incurred in terms of the lost potential of these youth are incalculable. With demographic shifts occurring, such as the mass retirement of the baby-boomer generation, society needs a skilled and knowledgeable population of youth to take their place. On a moral level, the way in which a country takes care of its vulnerable citizens reflects its priorities and values; it is a statement of the kind of country we want to live in.

For all these reasons, we hope that through our work the most important message of all can be heard – homelessness is everybody's business. Our work has demonstrated that there are ways to increase the engagement of the private sector in solutions to youth homelessness. We have also learned that, in many cases, members of the private sector would like to contribute but do not necessarily know how. Although there are challenges in engaging the private sector, it is ultimately a worthwhile initiative, one that can help tens of thousands of youth reach their true potential.

# Report recommendations

The recommendations below are discussed and supported throughout this report. Underscoring our conviction that youth unemployment is “everybody’s business”, we have organized the recommendations by major stakeholder groups. We recognize that many of the initiatives/actions will require cooperation/coordination between all of the groups; these groupings simply indicate the recommended logical or primary leadership for each recommendation.

## Government

### i) Institutional Obligation

That government-issued public tenders include a stipulation that bidders commit to hire or provide apprenticeship opportunities for at-risk youth, including a suggested goal regarding the number of opportunities.

### ii) National and Local Coordination

- Development of a Canada-wide supportive network, with points of contact at the local community level, to strengthen the coordination of services nationally and locally. Replicable model examples:
  - Toronto Youth Employment Program  
[www.toronto.ca/yep/index.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/yep/index.htm)
  - First Work  
[www.firstwork.org](http://www.firstwork.org)
  - Halton Industry Education Council  
[www.apprenticesearch.com](http://www.apprenticesearch.com)
  - London Economic Development Corp (and others)  
[www.hireonelondon.ca](http://www.hireonelondon.ca)
- In collaboration with community agency employment programs, develop agency service standards to ensure a consistent approach when engaging with the private sector around employment/apprenticeship opportunities.

### iii) Funding

- Secure long-term, stable and flexible funding that:
  - provides community employment programs with reliable resources that enable continuity of services and retention of program staff
  - supports collaboration/reduces competition between community employment agencies
  - supports certification of job developers – a pivotal role in developing private sector/community agency partnerships
  - supports community agencies to provide comprehensive youth training in employment preparedness and maintenance to increase the probability of a successful employment experience
  - provides for a wide variety of employment programs so that youth at various levels of readiness are able to access appropriate services

- provides sufficient resources for long-term follow-up support for youth, helping to ensure both immediate and long-term employment success
- Improve government wage subsidies to community agencies so that they can enable/encourage more private sector employment and apprenticeship opportunities.

#### **iv) Education**

- Increase awareness and educational opportunities for high school students about emerging labour market needs, thereby helping them make informed choices and plan for the post secondary education they will need to secure employment.
- Increase private sector awareness of the need for their involvement in addressing social concerns such as youth unemployment/homelessness.
- Encourage/facilitate partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector that focus on skills development and mentorship of youth.

#### Private Sector

- Encourage employers to develop policies that address community hiring of at-risk/ formerly street-involved youth and set out minimum workforce percentage.
- Invest in workforce development training services/facilities for at-risk youth to complement the work of community agencies, provide a valuable source of appropriately prepared employees and to promote more, successful, employment experiences for the youth and their employers.
- Commit to providing a supportive workplace environment that encourages the youth's further skills training and education.

#### Community Agencies

- Establish more formal collaboration/networks with other community agencies to share best practices for approaching and developing partnerships with the private sector.
- Develop a compelling business case for potential private sector partners.
- Support the longer-term education and training of at-risk youth to facilitate their sustained success in employment.
- Ensure that employment-related programs are evaluated to demonstrate outcomes (to private sector partners and funders/supporters).
- Commit to agency service standards that are made available to private sector partners before engagement around any employment or apprenticeship opportunities.

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