



## Community Agency Toolkit

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As a community agency with a youth employment program you bring together motivated youth seeking what may be their first meaningful job or training experience, and employers who are willing to give them that opportunity.

But of course it's not quite that simple.

First you have to find suitable employers. Then you have to introduce your program and encourage them to get involved. And that's just the beginning...

The information in this toolkit is based on research and many conversations with people doing work similar to yours. We hope it will be helpful.

### Building awareness of your program

**YOU know that you have a great community employment program for youth but your local business owners may not. Some ideas for getting the word out:**

1. **Invite local business professionals** (e.g. bankers, real estate agents, teachers, doctors, store managers, building contractors) to your agency to speak at workshops for the youth and learn about the program. Ask them about any potential employment opportunities at their place of work.
2. **Engage successfully employed youth in presentations** to the private sector. Their experience can help inform and motivate employers who are thinking about offering employment to youth of similar circumstances.
3. **Job fairs and community forums:** make sure you show up at events that local employers are likely to attend. Lots of opportunities arise through informal conversations at public events like these.
4. **Piggyback on existing meetings** of service/business/trades-related organizations (e.g. Rotary Clubs, Boards of Trade, BIAs, Shriners). Ask for a few minutes to talk about your agency's work and your interest in employment opportunities for youth.



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5. **Ask for testimonials** from current private sector partners about their successful experience with your program. Post them to your website, use in promotional newsletters, etc. (with permission).
6. **Engage private sector partners as champions.** Ask them to promote the program to their counterparts and help 'open doors' to others in the business sector.
7. **Who's on your board?** Having some local business members on your agency board can really help to facilitate new relationships with private organizations in your community.
8. **Be proactive.** Ask, "Who will be the future tenants of this residential or retail development? Who will clean and maintain it and who will work there?" By making early connections you may be able to secure some jobs for your program participants.



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### Developing relationships with employers

#### Make contact

For small organizations, contact the store or site owner. For large businesses, take the time to identify the decision-makers. A store manager may be enthusiastic but head office may not be interested in forming a partnership with an agency.

Ask for a meeting to present the program in person rather than over the phone or through email. Face-to-face meetings help to build relationships.

Present a **business case** to convince the employer that he should get involved. Benefits may include wage subsidies, agency screening and support services, access to well trained employees, support throughout the employment period, positive public relations, and more. Be honest about any risks or challenges that employers need to be aware of.

... it's about more than getting a person on the site to do a job, it's about changing a life... And you know having people on site that don't work out, that happens to the best of us. We have 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.

RHIANNON MABBERLEY, WESTBANK PROJECTS CORP.

#### Address fears

A common reaction from employers is that either there is 'something wrong' with the youth, or that they are dangerous. Part of your job is to help them understand the issue of homelessness, the kinds of situations the youth come from and the barriers they face. Check out "**Myths & realities**" in the Employer section of this toolkit.

...it's just important that you're honest about [the youth]... If [the employer] is not prepared to take on that risk, then there's just no relationship to be had. Otherwise you're just sabotaging your chance of success because they're going to be resentful that you weren't upfront with them.



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ADRIEN, RESOURCE ASSISTANCE FOR YOUTH

### Be honest

Honesty is critical. When employers understand any risks they are assuming they can build a realistic picture of what will be required of them and plan with the agency for any supports they may need.

Be as upfront as you can about the youth's background, skill level and any significant personal barriers that may impact their work. Obviously this must be done in a way that respects the youth's dignity and right to privacy.

### Be clear about expectations and supports

Be clear with employers about:

1. The supports they can expect from you.
  - Is someone from the agency readily available if a problem arises?
  - How much support can you provide to help the youth settle into the job?
  - What about three months or six months later?
2. Your expectations of them
  - What barriers are they willing to work through?
  - Which ones are they not willing to tackle?
  - What supports, orientation and training will they provide?
  - Will they provide regular, constructive feedback?
  - Will they consider hiring youth whose placement is satisfactory?

### Communication

- Ask employers to get in touch right away if there is a problem, so that you can help them address the matter quickly



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- Stay in regular touch – even when things are going really well
- Have formal progress meetings with the employer and youth to monitor progress, raise any concerns and set goals

### Keep it simple

Employers are generally very busy people so the more you can simplify the process the better.

1. Don't bombard them with paperwork
2. Make the interview/selection process as uncomplicated as possible
3. Schedule meetings at a time that is best for them (e.g. in retail, not during peak business hours)
4. Anticipate questions and concerns and have your answers ready

### Case Example or Lesson Learned:

*A Toronto agency found a youth a work placement in a retail store. However, the youth was terrified to work at the cash register. After four weeks, the agency, youth and employer met to talk about the situation. They agreed that the youth job shadow a cashier for two weeks. Today, the youth not only feels at ease performing this task, but has become such a valuable employee that she now manages a different store 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.*



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### Presenting a business case

Businesses need 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, 2011

Why should employers consider hiring homeless or at-risk youth? What exactly is in it for them? Even the most well-meaning business owner has to consider the ‘bottom line’.

There are many advantages associated with tapping into the relatively unplumbed potential of a young, eager, motivated – and local – workforce. Here are just a few to discuss with potential employers:

- A motivated, entry level work force and potentially long-term, loyal employees
- Youth who have had pre-employment or apprenticeship training such as the basic hands-on practical skills required in the building trades, health and safety certificate qualifications (e.g. WHMIS, Fall Protection, First Aid and Customer Service Excellence)
- Professional, experienced employee screening and recruitment assistance
- Support for the youth to resolve any personal or workplace issues that may arise
- Potential full and partial wage subsidies for periods ranging from weeks to months
- Customers, employees and investors who are attracted to the employer’s social values
- A tremendous opportunity to balance business objectives with community well-being

Beyond these immediate benefits are longer-term paybacks. When youth are successfully employed they become engaged citizens, active consumers and contributing taxpayers. As the local economy grows, so does local economic development. Local businesses share in these benefits – both financially and socially.



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### Promising practices

We interviewed staff from eight highly respected community agency employment programs and asked them to talk about what makes their programs successful. You can read about each program and its strengths in our [research report](#) (full version and summary). Here are just a few highlights:

### Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society (A.C.C.E.S.S.)

Program: BladeRunners

**Format:** Focus is construction and trades. Youth sign up for three weeks of pre-employment training, including life skills, safety training and basic demolition and construction skills.

**Program strengths/success factors:**

- Observing that youth require the most support *outside* of work hours, staff are available 24/7. Youth can also access BladeRunners' services indefinitely;
- Youth have to meet very few criteria to participate in the program. The main consideration is their ability to meet the health and safety requirements of the job;
- BladeRunners also provides support in other areas that affect a youth's ability to maintain employment, such as housing. For example, they may provide some youth with first month's rent.

### Choices for Youth

Program: Train for Trades – part of a three-way partnership with Newfoundland & Labrador Housing Corporation and the union that represents the housing employees, CUPE Local 1860.

**Format:** The program trains homeless and at-risk youth to perform energy retrofits on low-income homes. The 44-week program allows ample time for staff to help youth address their barriers and gain work experience. Youth are provided with work equipment and receive training in workplace conduct, health and safety practices, basic tool handling, and the fundamentals of retrofitting. They are paid directly from the Train for Trades program.



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### Strengths/success factors:

- An intensive model of 24/7 staff support for the youth
- One morning each week is dedicated to 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 involves pursuing post-secondary education in a specialized trade.

### Carpenters' Union Local 27 Training Trust Fund

Program: CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program. Funded by Union Local 27 Training Trust Fund Inc., and hosted by the Carpenters' Local 27 Training Centre.

**Format:** The Carpenters' Union joined with the YMCA of Greater Toronto, Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) and Housing Services Inc., to create the CHOICE program. The 12-week program introduces at-risk youth to the basics of carpentry, drywall, plastering, painting, etc., in the hope that they will pursue an apprenticeship in one of those trades. Basic instruction is followed by on-site work with certified carpenters to retrofit Toronto Community Housing properties.

### Program strengths/success:

- The ability to introduce at-risk youth to trades around which they can structure a career
- The Training Trust Fund itself partly funds the program, with the assistance of the YMCA and HSI
- A large team of partner staff is available to support the youth, including a Job Coach from the YMCA who provides emotional support as well as referrals to other services such as housing.

### Community Futures Development Corporation

Program: EMPLOY



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**Format:** a six-week paid pre-employment training program that focuses on employment, relationships and living a healthy lifestyle, followed by a subsidized 14-week work placement. Agency staff continue to provide support to both the youth and employers during this placement.

**Strengths/success factors:**

- Staff interview each youth to assess their fit for the program and its critical thinking model. They also look for other concerns, such as a serious addiction or mental health issues, that may need to be treated before starting the EMPLOY Program.
- Because EMPLOY operates in a small town near Kelowna, it is often able to stay in touch with youth who have gone through their program.

### Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY)

Program: Growing Opportunities

**Format:** A program that allows street-involved youth to move through different stages of employment based on their readiness. Most youth begin by performing “odd-jobs”, progressing to work at a partnering agency and, eventually, to a work placement at a local business.

**Program strengths/success:**

- The ability to provide work opportunities for even the most crisis-laden youth
- A supportive environment where youth can transition to more stable employment when they are ready to do so
- A wide variety of services, including a drop-in center, housing support, and referrals to other needed services.

### Spectre de Rue

Program: TAPAJ



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**Format:** 'Staged' employment opportunities help youth to transition successfully. First, they can opt to work for a few hours at a time doing odd jobs. In 'stage two' staff help youth find a part-time employment placement in the community. TAPAJ negotiates a one-year contract with the employer and the youth meet monthly with TAPAJ staff. In stage three, agency staff work with youth on specific goals, including going back to school or seeking full-time employment.

**Strengths/success factors:**

- TAPAJ has the capacity to provide work for the most street-entrenched youth within a setting where other important needs can be addressed. Youth can transition slowly from the street to formal employment
- Spectre de Rue provides many services, including a drop-in centre, housing, and harm reduction services.

### St. Christopher House

Program: Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC)

**Format:** Provides youth with multiple barriers to employment a place to transition to the workforce. Six weeks of paid pre-employment training are provided in a simulated work environment. Next, staff help the youth find a paid employment placement of 16-24 weeks (with a full or partial wage subsidy).

**Program strengths/success:**

- The ability to provide youth with a variety of services, e.g., literacy training or educational preparation, to suit various levels of ability, plus a program that assists youth transitioning from high school to college.
- Wage subsidies allows TYJC to seek placements at non-profit organizations that otherwise would not be able to afford to hire a youth.



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### Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre

Program: The Youth Retail Employment Program (YREP)

**Format:** the YREP trains at-risk youth to work in the retail industry. During two weeks of life skills and employment-related training, the youth earn certificates, such as Customer Service Excellence, that enhance their employability. Agency staff then set up interviews with current retail partners. The youth work 30 hours per week and participate in life skills and career exploration workshops. 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.

***Program strengths/success:***

- Program flexibility to work with youth at various levels of ability
- The focus on introducing youth to the retail sector – a common entry point into the workforce



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### Advice from Other Agencies

We asked people working in successful community agency employment programs to share advice that might help others setting up similar programs.

Some of their suggestions:

#### Getting started

- **Start small.** Begin with what is manageable and iron out any kinks before expanding.
- **Hire the right people** – people who are passionate, understanding, open-minded and genuinely care about the success of the young people in their program.
- **Reflect the diversity of youth** in your programs – as far as possible.
- **Learn from others** – there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Staff can learn lots from existing programs and adapt that learning to the needs of their own community.

...having a mix of younger and older staff, staff of colour, and gay staff helps make the youth feel safe about exploring or discussing certain issues.

LAMBRINA, ST. CHRISTOPHER HOUSE

#### Rules to work by

- **Stay focused on the youth** – let them identify areas they want to address. Make suggestions but don't impose your own goals on them.
- **Distinguish between *wanting* the youth to do well with *needing* them to do well.** Mike, from EMPLOY, notes that “*even failures teach lessons that can lead to success... [it's] that whole planting the seed idea...one day it will sprout*”.
- **Be accountable** — keep statistics and case examples and continually reflect on your agency's actions. Demonstrate to your funders that the work they are supporting is necessary, effective, and carried out to high standards.



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- **Make the youth accountable** – agency staff must not only develop a relationship with the youth, but also provide guidance and valuable life lessons. Be very clear about your expectations of the youth and hold them accountable for their actions.

We set clear expectations, and we're very upfront and vocal about what is expected...not showing up for work on time, and not making a call -- that's not going to get you ahead in life...the chances are when they do that in a job...that's not going to work for [the employer] and he's going to terminate someone.

BRAD, CHOICES FOR YOUTH

### Make it easy

- **Have program information on hand (print and electronic).** Respond quickly to employer requests for information. Include job descriptions and information on your training and placement programs and supports.
- **Communicate youth's interests.** Let the employer know when a youth has a special interest in working with their business. Also tell them about any relevant training/certification the youth has earned (e.g. food handling certificate, WHMIS training).
- **Ensure youth are well prepared** for interviews and have done their research on the company. Their effort will communicate that they really want the job.
- **Clearly communicate the supports you will provide the employer and youth.** It's important that the employer be able to focus on helping the young person learn the job, while the agency works with the youth to address any issues outside the workplace.
- **Work with the employer to evaluate and give regular feedback to the new employee.** Youth who are new to the job want to know how they are doing and timely feedback helps to address any uncertainties early on.
- **Get unions on board.** In a tight economy, unions may be concerned that jobs that might have been given to their union members are instead being given to inexperienced youth. Open, honest



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communication between the community agency and union is important to address concerns and gain union support.

### **Last, but definitely not least**

- **Show appreciation to your private sector partners.** Award ceremonies, plaques and presentations by youth who have benefited from the agency/business partnership are among the most common strategies but be creative!