



BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

THROUGH EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

YWCA BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES COMPENDIUM

Advancing an Asset-based Approach to Skills Training Across Canada



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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the **YWCA Toronto**'s Essential Skills for Employment Project Team and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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YWCA Toronto would also like to thank our Collaborator Associations across Canada who shared their perspectives and contributed to Phase Three of the national initiative from 2019-2023.

They are:

- **YWCA Halifax**, Nova Scotia
- **YWCA Hamilton**, Ontario
- **YWCA Metro Vancouver**, British Columbia
- **YWCA Moncton**, New Brunswick
- **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal**, Quebec
- **YWCA Muskoka**, Ontario
- **YWCA Saskatoon**, Saskatchewan
- **YWCA St. John's**, Newfoundland & Labrador
- **YWCA Thompson**, Manitoba
- **YWCA Toronto**, Ontario

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We continue to be inspired in our work by the hundreds of participants and graduates who are changing their own lives and moving toward building sustainable futures for themselves and their families.

As noted within this Compendium and the accompanying Toolkit, some sections are primarily authored by our project Collaborators and may include terminology that is not currently used by **YWCA Toronto**.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Compendium - Phase Three

This Compendium shares our latest learning from the 2019-2023 phase of the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures project, a national participatory research initiative designed to explore how an asset-based approach and model can help strengthen effective practices in Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) programming. The overall aim of the project is to enhance the career advancement and build the essential skills knowledge of systemically marginalized women—especially Indigenous, immigrant, and mature women and youth—who may face particular and often intersecting challenges to building sustainable futures.

Led and facilitated by **YWCA Toronto** and funded by the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESPP), Government of Canada, the project has aimed to foster a Collaborative of YWCA Associations across Canada representing a range of program populations, organizational capacities, and regional contexts. Phase Three of the project, described here, represents a third layer of

research into our holistic model, branded through the second phase in 2014-2019 as the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) model. Phase Three has expanded our initiative to involve close to 850 diverse individual participants, ten YWCA Collaborator Associations, and well over 700 employers and other community partners.

The third phase coincided with the advent of the COVID-19 virus and unfolded during a time of exceptional global disruption and restrictions. While planning Phase Three in 2018-2019, we could not have foreseen the pandemic or how it would transform our lives, in many ways laying bare and exacerbating existing inequalities and systemic injustices. This was particularly true for women, especially for those facing intersectional barriers such as low income, racism, gender discrimination and violence, ageism, etc. There were many pandemic-related impacts to the YWCA BSF project that were important for our gender-focused Collaborative to capture, even as all levels of society were forced to shift priorities and grapple with the immediate realities and demands of the changing socio-economic picture.



The theme of COVID-19 weaves a thread throughout the 2023 Compendium, from the logistics of facilitating this national research initiative virtually to the specific difficulties faced by Collaborator Associations and their program populations. Without diminishing these pandemic-related challenges or the common and unique hardships experienced by everyone who took part in the research, our findings show that the context of the pandemic opened new opportunities in the field of ESE programming and has sparked a number of important innovations that will continue to influence future practices.

Accompanying this Compendium is a YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Toolkit, which contains Lesson Plans designed and delivered by practitioners from all ten Collaborator Associations, along with practitioner tips and resources developed and tested through the project. An abridged version of both products will be available in French.

Our Research Focus in Phase Three

Earlier phases of this research produced a clearer picture of the complex challenges, needs and interests of our project demographic as they seek to engage with a changing world of work and build sustainable futures for themselves and their families. The research also confirmed that organizations in the field of ESE programming operate in a funding environment precarious even for well-established programs with strong documented outcomes.

Some themes about effective practices emerged from Phase Two to guide our research for Phase Three. We concluded that a strengthened focus on building foundational life skills at the early pre-employment stage of ESE programming could better support participants' ability to engage in the labour market and advance toward sustainable futures.

More integrated pathways should also be offered for continuous upgrading and learning to meet the evolving labour market: from the nine essential skills as defined by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), Government of Canada, to a set of emerging experiential and digital skills necessary to succeed in today's workforce. Collaborative cross-sectoral partnerships and knowledge exchange could help to promote the importance of gender-focused and foundational essential skills programming. And finally, this project could contribute toward an evidence-based case for consistent longer-term investment, to sustain ESE programming for systemically marginalized demographic groups and build program/organizational capacity.

In Phase Three, we aimed to deepen our learning about effective ESE practices across Canada by documenting the further integration of the following key frameworks into Collaborator pilot programs and curricula.

- the YWCA BSF asset-based model and related asset mapping tools
- the nine OLES essential skills (subsequently revised as "Skills for Success")

New to Phase Three was the integration of:

- the set of emerging labour market skills areas—Motivation and Self-Direction, Emotional Intelligence, an Entrepreneurial Approach, and Flexible and Adaptable Digital Skills—identified in Phase Two research;
- the YWCA Life Skills model and YWCA Life Skills Coaching training; and
- the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model incubated through Phase Two.

We also sought to explore strategies to build knowledge exchange nationally through a virtual learning community. For details on the aforementioned YWCA BSF frameworks, see Section 1 below.

When developed and launched in 2019, this third phase was designed with a specific focus on women. Many of the Collaborator pilot programs for the project have since broadened their focus to include gender diverse individuals. Specific demographics are noted where part of YWCA BSF project requirements for serving the four demographic groups.

Phase Three Collaborator Associations and Their Programs:

YWCA Halifax, Nova Scotia – LAUNCH Atlantic is a 20-week program offered at YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's through the **LAUNCH Atlantic** Partnership designed to provide participants with hands-on employment skills training. It consists of eight paid weeks of skills development training workshops and 12 paid weeks of work placements, along with relevant job-specific certifications.

Program Demographic: Young women and gender diverse youth (aged 15–30) who face multiple barriers to employment.

YWCA Hamilton, Ontario – PowerUp Ready is a ten-week program that focuses on women entrepreneurs who are either starting or scaling up their small businesses. The program supports participants in developing strategies, tactics and connections, and in seeking expert advice to move their operations forward.

Program Demographic: Women and gender diverse individuals over 18.

YWCA Metro Vancouver, British Columbia – Focus@Work is a recognized employment program that offers three weeks of full-time workshops that equip women with the skills needed to promote themselves to employers, learn about suitable work environments and careers, and gain confidence in building their personal and professional networks.

Program Demographic: All women and gender diverse people; primarily immigrant women.

YWCA Moncton, New Brunswick – Employment My Way is a self-employment program that aims to engage local entrepreneurs in supporting participants to develop and run a small business. It also helps participants develop new skills to address life and work challenges, and to build resiliency, peer support and connections.

Program Demographic: Young women and gender diverse youth (aged 16–30); serves newcomers and Indigenous; participants primarily living on low incomes.

YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal, Quebec – Women's Work Integration Program (Femmes vers l'emploi) is a 19-week employment preparatory program offered in French and English that helps women find their pathways forward through online and in-class workshops tailored to their personal, social and professional development needs; it also supports participants in building strong peer networks.

Program Demographic: All women and gender diverse individuals; serving a high number of recent immigrants.

YWCA Muskoka, Ontario – Women Thriving is a free ten-week program that focuses on wellness and boosting participants' self-confidence, so that they can confidently tackle the wide range of life and work challenges that they may face. The program brings women of all ages together for personal growth, social connections and self-care.

Program Demographic: Any woman seeking to start a new venture and/or generally advance their personal and professional journeys.

YWCA Saskatoon, Saskatchewan – Trade Journey is a 16-week program that offers participants the ability to sample and experience a range of different trades, build confidence, and enhance the skills necessary to enter traditionally male-dominated fields. Additionally, the program offers networking contacts and opportunities for apprenticeship in local industries. The aim is to move participants toward more resilient futures for themselves and their families.

Program Demographic: Women and youth; serves immigrants and Indigenous people.

YWCA St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador – LAUNCH Atlantic is a program offered across YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's through the **LAUNCH Atlantic** Partnership (see above, **YWCA Halifax**).

Program Demographic: Young women and gender diverse youth (aged 15–30) who face multiple barriers to employment.

YWCA Thompson, Manitoba – Steps to Success is an eight-week pre-employment program followed by a two-week job-shadowing component. The program focuses on developing workplace essential and soft skills, and attitudes to prepare people for employment. It also builds peer supports and helps participants boost their self-confidence and resilience in the face of often multiple intersecting life challenges.

Program Demographic: Women and youth; predominantly Indigenous people.

YWCA Toronto, Ontario – Success Ready is an innovative program consisting of four core weeks of training and a range of optional customized modules that combine to provide participants with foundational essential skills and more specific skills training for the 21st century labour market, as well as mentoring, work-integrated and experiential learning, and job retention and advancement support to help them build successful, sustainable futures.

Program Demographic: Young women and gender diverse youth (aged 16–29), including a high proportion of newcomers.

Rollout of the Phase Three Research

For this phase, the aim was to capture the nature and scope of each program model and its specific adaptations to the ESE training needs/employment outcomes of the project demographic groups. The evaluation was also designed to capture the impact of the YWCA BSF frameworks and capacity building trainings, and other project outcomes at three interrelated levels: individual participant, program/organization and the broader community.

From the national lockdown in mid-March 2020 onwards, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions had multiple impacts on the project. The ESE team had to be extremely agile and innovative to adapt project rollout, training and events, evaluation strategies, and timelines for deliverables to work around the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Many staff across the Collaborative were juggling the challenges of working from home, childcare and schooling, and health-related issues in their families and communities. Ultimately, all Phase Three Collaborator program cohorts (2020–2022) had to be rolled out in pandemic conditions starting in Spring 2020. For various reasons, some programs were unable to recruit and roll out their cohorts as planned, with resulting gaps and delays in the collection and consistency of data. They could not conduct outreach and recruitment as anticipated pre-COVID or offer their full in-person curriculum and program supports. Nonetheless, all programs ran at least five cohorts over the course of the project.

Although we missed the face-to-face connections and informal discussions that happened through Phase Two, we were able to experiment with the virtual delivery of training and presentations. We were also able to create a digital “bank” of learning and knowledge exchange among Collaborators that can be accessed easily and disseminated as a virtual learning resource. Our Zoom regional forums, based on learning themes that emerged from the initiative, became an excellent vehicle for sharing challenges and exchanging promising practices, and for extending professional networks across our Associations from coast to coast.

Phase Three Project Findings

Overall, Phase Three data shows that a combination of the program supports to participation mentioned earlier and the use of the following key project frameworks had an identifiable impact on individual participant and program/organizational capacity outcomes:

- Asset-based approaches and reflection exercises using the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools
- An experiential Life Skills approach to facilitating learning
- A focus on the emerging labour market skills areas as a bridge to continuous learning, alongside the nine OLES essential skills

Of these emerging skills areas, Flexible and Adaptable Digital Skills assumed yet greater importance for everyone in times of COVID, as did the core personal skills of Motivation and Self-Direction, Emotional Intelligence, and even an Entrepreneurial Approach.

Collaborators were able to draw on the YWCA BSF program model and employer engagement strategies to find new ways to work with businesses, community partners and funders to provide employment training and job opportunities for participants in a uniquely unpredictable socio-economic context.

Overall Phase Three Outcomes:

Individual Participant:

An aggregate total of 846 participants were served nationally across all ten programs from 2020-2023. Collaborators expressed great pride in participants' achievements, especially given the systemic barriers they faced, many of which were compounded by the pandemic. Participants noted that their participation in programs boosted their self-confidence and motivation, and instilled in them hope for the future. It also helped them to build the personal and technical skills needed to succeed in the fast-changing labour market.

All Collaborators integrated two components of the YWCA BSF program model—Personal Development and Career Management Services, and Essential Skills and Employability Training—into their programs. Eight programs integrated the Job Readiness and Placement Services component; for the two self-employment programs, this component was directed toward small business development coaching and mentoring. All Collaborators implemented the YWCA BSF asset mapping exercise with participants (in a group or individually) to identify their existing strengths and areas for potential improvement. All integrated the nine essential skills for employment and the emerging skills into their program components, including their workshop Lesson Plans showcased in the Toolkit.

While **YWCA Hamilton** and Moncton programs focused on self-employment, the other eight programs (YWCAs Halifax, Metro Vancouver, Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal, Muskoka, Saskatoon, St. John's, Thompson and Toronto) reported a range of job outcomes for participants. **YWCA Saskatoon's Trade Journey** graduates mostly found employment in the construction industry. Among other sectors most frequently mentioned were: administrative, sales/marketing/customer service, technology and project coordination/facilitation.

Program/Organizational Capacity Building and Knowledge Exchange:

Ten Associations, including **YWCA Toronto**, delivered pilot programs that drew on the YWCA BSF model and other key Phase Three project frameworks customized to their demographic populations and regional contexts. Nine programs were offered in English, and one in both official languages.

All Collaborators implemented a program/organizational asset mapping exercise with their staff teams as a retrospective reflection. A number mentioned that they hoped to use it going forward, as a tool for their staff to explore the strengths and challenges of the program and the organization, and to identify areas for improvement. Collaborator staff reported finding the Life Skills Coaching and other pieces of training as being highly beneficial. For example, they saw the particular value of a Life Skills approach to facilitating adult learning for different styles of learners and audiences, and also to ensuring consistency in the delivery of program components. Some were already using the Life Skills model for developing workshops but now felt equipped to apply it more broadly, to make learning more accessible for their participants.

In Phase Three, the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model incubated during Phase Two grew to include community partners, as an enhancement to this holistic approach to building sustainable futures. Programs involved employers in various ways, including the expressed interest of participants, one-to-one outreach and contacts, staff referrals, community events and conferences. Many employers provided placement/job/mentorship opportunities; some offered training opportunities and others consultation services. Community partners helped with outreach, program promotion, and knowledge exchange about available services, as well as service coordination and referrals. They were also actively involved in information sessions and presentations, as guest speakers, and as collaborators in providing rental classroom space, workshops, training and certifications.

YWCA Toronto Life Skills Coaching Training and Other Trainings: sixteen trainings were offered, attended by a total of 310 Collaborator staff and other stakeholders (who included community service providers across Canada, and staff from other programs at Collaborator Associations).

Employer and Community Partner Engagement:

Across all ten programs, Collaborators reached out to a total of 497 Employer Connections and 241 Community Service Providers.

YWCA BSF Regional Learning Forums: The YWCA Toronto ESE team facilitated a total of eight forums, attended by 219 Collaborator staff.

- YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's: About the **LAUNCH Atlantic** Partnership
- **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal:** Maintaining Hope (English)/Garder l'espoir (French)
- **YWCAs Hamilton & Muskoka:** Transforming Lives
- **YWCA Metro Vancouver:** Building Community in a Virtual World
- **YWCA Saskatoon:** About the Trade Journey Program
- **YWCA Thompson:** About the Steps to Success Program
- **YWCA Toronto:** A Way to Lead

YWCA BSF National Learning Events: The YWCA Toronto ESE team facilitated three events, attended by a total of 141 Collaborators and other stakeholders.

The virtual regional forums and other national events became the “go-to” vehicle for sharing knowledge and building connections across the Collaborative. In their informal remarks after the presentations, Collaborators emphasized how fruitful these forums were for learning. As was the case with the YWCA BSF capacity building trainings, virtual delivery saved time and resources, and enabled more staff to attend than would have been practicable in person. For Associations that chose to co-deliver regional forums, presenting together provided a great opportunity to learn more about one another's work and build collegial relationships. Virtual delivery also made it possible to create an easily accessible “bank” of digital resources that can continue to be drawn upon for further knowledge exchange.

Highlights of Project Learning

As in Phase Two, the YWCA BSF asset-based tools captured a holistic picture of strengths and challenges across Canada at the level of individual participants, programs and regional contexts. A new, serendipitous discovery in Phase Three was how remarkably effective the approach and tools were for learning about the multiple impacts of COVID-19. The context of a global health crisis reminded us all of how easily unforeseen setbacks—including in this case sickness and death—can derail our progress and result in cycling back on the path to building sustainable futures. The constraints imposed by the pandemic also aptly illustrate the finding from Phase Two that people need both external “Conditions” and internal “Capacity” to engage in programs, and in the labour market and the broader community; one without the other is not enough.

Learning About the Project Demographic

Learning from this project and our external research has shown the disproportional impacts of COVID-19 on women and other diverse and systemically marginalized populations, and has revealed a stark picture of intersectional barriers and regional disparities. It has also made clear the need for a continued proactive focus on gender, diversity and equity in employment training programming. Many participants across the demographic reported benefitting from programs’ investment in personal and foundational skills-building. However, adult learners—especially those with lived experience of intersecting, intergenerational systems of oppression—may require still more time and support to identify barriers and patterns that may be holding them back, as well as to gain, embed and build on new skills. Furthermore, learning and skills-building will not necessarily dismantle all barriers to participation. Unless the larger systems are changed, many women and gender diverse people in the project demographic will continue to face socio-economic exclusion.

Learning About a Recipe of Skills for Building Sustainable Futures

Most of the emerging labour market skills identified in Phase Two and explored in this phase—Motivation and Self-Direction, Emotional Intelligence, and an Entrepreneurial Approach—are at the same time foundational and a part of continuous learning. Programs have been working to build these skills for years without necessarily naming them as such. In the same way, without always naming it as asset-based, most effective community service agencies take a respectful, strengths-based approach to the people they work with rather than focusing on their deficits—which is why asset-based thinking resonates so well with many practitioners who are new to the concept. The Life Skills approach to adult learning, with its respect for past experiences and subjective feelings, also puts a name to what practitioners and participants may already be doing, although perhaps less intentionally. Life Skills Coaching training has enabled staff to become more strategic and consistent in their work with participants. As Collaborators have noted, Life Skills further provides an excellent framework for teaching not just the emerging skills but also other practical skills that are bound to evolve with changes in technology, the labour market and broader society.

The recipe emerging from this national project is a combination of a) a holistic asset-based approach + b) an evolving understanding of essential skills for employment + c) an experiential Life Skills approach to working with participants.

Learning About Employer and Community Partner Engagement

The strategy to integrate the YWCA BSF framework for employer and community partner engagement was an inspiration to Collaborators, encouraging them to review their existing practices and experiment with new networks and partnerships, and ways to “get the word out” about their programs. Even during COVID restrictions, without the advantage of in-person contact, Collaborators still managed to grow their connections and increase participants’ awareness of local employment opportunities. The strategy was particularly a fit for Collaborators in larger urban areas, many of whom were more established and experienced in such work; however, the framework did encourage all Collaborators to be more strategic and formalized in their engagement activities. It also helped start a conversation about new ways in which employers can engage more collaboratively with participants and programs, not just as providers of jobs/job shadowing/placements and mentoring.

Learning About Promoting Community Economic Engagement

The YWCA BSF national project and other capacity building partnerships have continued to find effective strategies to promote community economic development. As before, however, much of the “heavy lifting” was done by dedicated and professional Collaborator staff. The number of Associations and the varying organizational capacities involved also proved to be a lot of work for the ESE team, particularly in the context of COVID-19, which brought on the sudden shift to virtual programming in March 2020. Even before COVID-19, staff were already hard pressed by their dedication to serving participants’ needs and supporting successful outcomes, all while worrying about their own futures in precarious job positions as well as the sustainability of their programs. The context of COVID has shown more clearly how difficult it is to “shockproof” programs against staff turnover within the same precarious project-based funding model. These talented and passionate people leave behind a vacuum, often taking with them a “library” of accumulated knowledge, resources, referrals, connections and organizational investments in training.

Recommendations Moving Forward

Keep Advocating for Women- and Gender Diverse-Focused Programs and Systemic Change

Overall learning from both phases of the YWCA BSF national project has shown a clear and continuing need for long-term consistent investment in programs focused on women and gender diverse individuals, and for stronger action to dismantle the intersecting barriers faced by newcomers, mature workers, youth, and Indigenous people. These are challenges difficult and sometimes impossible for individuals, organizations and communities to surmount without systemic change.

Call for More Sustained and Flexible Funding

When Collaborators were asked about advocacy areas for programs/organizations, they universally included access to sustained funding with more flexibility as to how organizations could allocate the funds. They recognized the dedication of staff as a form of unpaid emotional labour frequently taken for granted by those who view the non-profit sector through a gendered “charity” lens. During the pandemic, many organizations and businesses were allowed more latitude as to how they did their work. This flexibility should continue, in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for participants. Program staff take pride in what they do and in their experience of how and where funding can be invested most productively. The irony is that their agile and effective strategies can obscure the true precarity of their organizational capacities. More stable, multi-year funding over a period of at least three to five years will support organizations both in attracting and retaining staff, and in promoting the quality and sustainability of their programs and services.

Explore More Appropriate and Flexible Evaluation Strategies

Collaborators are eager to work not just with funders but with all program stakeholders to find more appropriate and flexible ways to gather participant data and measure what success may look like in a more equitable way related to participant life experiences, challenges and goals. The wealth of

qualitative learning collected digitally in this phase of the national initiative bears witness to the advantages of a more flexible format. It also shows the potential of such participant and staff report to convey a much fuller, textured understanding of project outcomes than some of the more traditional “results-based” indicators.

Call for Widespread Access to Digital Connectivity

The pandemic shift to online program delivery in Phase Three demonstrated how rapidly connectivity is becoming a basic need for participation in the 21st century labour market and in broader society. In remote communities, the need became glaringly obvious. Governments and other stakeholders should be urged to ensure widespread access to connectivity, equipment, and the upgrading of digital skills. Programs and organizations should also be supported to offer more workshops related to digital literacy, and to further virtual learning and employment opportunities, networks, etc.

Continue to Deepen Research into How to Measure the Skills for Success

The new Skills for Success areas are an exciting step forward in exploring the more personal capacities necessary to advance in the labour market, and how these can be acquired through experiential learning along with the other skills for employment. When designing new evaluation tools to measure growth in these experiential skills, it will be important for funders of ESE programming to guard against cultural and other forms of bias in the evaluation process. Assessment tools must reflect the broader holistic picture of challenges, learning styles and preferences of the demographic who participated in this national initiative.

A further piece for advocacy across the board with private and public sectors and all levels of government will be to act on the recognition that these experiential skills are a work in progress for everyone, as part of an ongoing effort to move toward socio-economic justice. We are all in a process of continuous learning about how to create a truly diverse, equal and inclusive community.

Continue to Fund Knowledge Exchange in ESE Programming with Systemically Marginalized Populations

Evidence from this phase suggests that the YWCA Life Skills model, combined with the YWCA BSF strengths-based approach to experiential skills building, would be an excellent framework for promoting program innovations with our project demographic. But knowledge exchange and the work of updating and refining curricula cannot be done “off the side of the desk” by over-stretched staff. The potential impact of research projects such as this may be limited unless programs and organizations have adequate resources to sustain their important core work.

Nevertheless, learning from the YWCA BSF project about effective ESE training practices has come far. Phase One witnessed the original exploration of **YWCA Toronto’s** Sustainable Livelihoods-based asset mapping approach and employment and training model for women participants. In Phase Two, the project evolved to include a national demographic of participants and nine Collaborator Associations in the process of testing out the asset-based approach and model; of capacity building at program/organizational levels; and of an early model for employer engagement. In this third phase, the reach broadened to ten Associations from coast to coast; an enhanced model for employer and community engagement; and the integration of key YWCA BSF methodological frameworks to build capacity for stronger employment and livelihood outcomes.

With each phase, the perspective has grown increasingly holistic as we have begun to discover more about how these phases of knowledge exchange can build upon each other to enhance participants’ opportunities for success. Meanwhile, COVID-19 has acted as an important reminder of the larger, intersecting forces that hold people back. It has shown how urgently that bigger conversation is needed about new approaches to funding, and about a sustained collective effort to dismantle the systemic inequalities and injustices that the pandemic laid bare.

ABOUT THE YWCA BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES PHASE THREE COMPENDIUM

The Compendium shares our latest learning from the 2019-2023 phase of the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) project, a national participatory research initiative designed to explore how an asset-based approach and model can help strengthen effective practices in Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) programming. The overall aim of the initiative is to enhance the career advancement and build the essential skills knowledge of systemically marginalized women—especially Indigenous, immigrant, mature and youth—who may face particular and often intersecting challenges to building sustainable futures.

Led and facilitated by **YWCA Toronto**, and funded by the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESP), the project has fostered a Collaborative of YWCA Associations across Canada representing a range of program populations, organizational capacities, and regional contexts. Phase Three of the project, described here, represents a third layer of research into our holistic model, branded through the second phase in 2014-2019 as the YWCA BSF model. Phase Three has expanded our initiative to involve close to 850 diverse individual participants, ten YWCA Collaborator Associations, and well over 700 employers and other community partners.



A Note About Phase Three:

Gender Focus: When developed and launched in 2019, this phase was designed with a specific focus on women. Many of the Collaborator pilot programs for the project have since broadened their focus to include gender diverse individuals.

Essential Skills for Employment Focus: After the 2019 launch of Phase Three, the nine essential skills identified by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) were revised into a new model named “Skills for Success” (SFS) under the newly developed Skills for Success program. In October 2021, the YWCA Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) team hosted an “Introduction to Skills for Success” virtual session for YWCA BSF Collaborator staff. Led by a manager from the Employment Program Policy & Design Directorate (EPPDD), the session was an introduction to the new Skills for Success model, which will be the basis for new programs funded by the Department of Economic and Social Development Canada, Government of Canada. After the session, however, the ESE team and the Office of Skills for Success agreed that since the Collaborative was already halfway through Phase Three and as some of these revised skill areas were still in the process of further research, we would continue using the originally defined nine OLES essential skills areas (for more detail, see Section 1.1.3).

The third phase coincided with the advent of the COVID-19 virus and unfolded during a time of exceptional global disruption and restrictions. Without diminishing these challenges or the common and unique hardships experienced by everyone who took part in the research, our findings show that the context of the pandemic opened new opportunities in the field of ESE programming and has sparked a number of important innovations that will continue to influence future practices.

Among the products from Phase Three are this **YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Compendium** and the accompanying **Toolkit**, which contains a sampling of Collaborators’ Lesson Plans, practitioner tips, and resources that were developed through this phase of the project.

Due to limited resources, we were unable to translate the entire Compendium and Toolkit; an abridged version of both products will be available in French.

This Compendium is designed for:

- practitioners in the field of essential skills training who are seeking to find and test new ways to build the capacity of their programs;
- private sector entities seeking to learn more about how to partner with the non-profit sector to build a skilled and inclusive workforce; and
- other individuals and entities (philanthropic, government, community, etc.) seeking to support employment training initiatives, particularly for underserved populations.

The Toolkit is designed for:

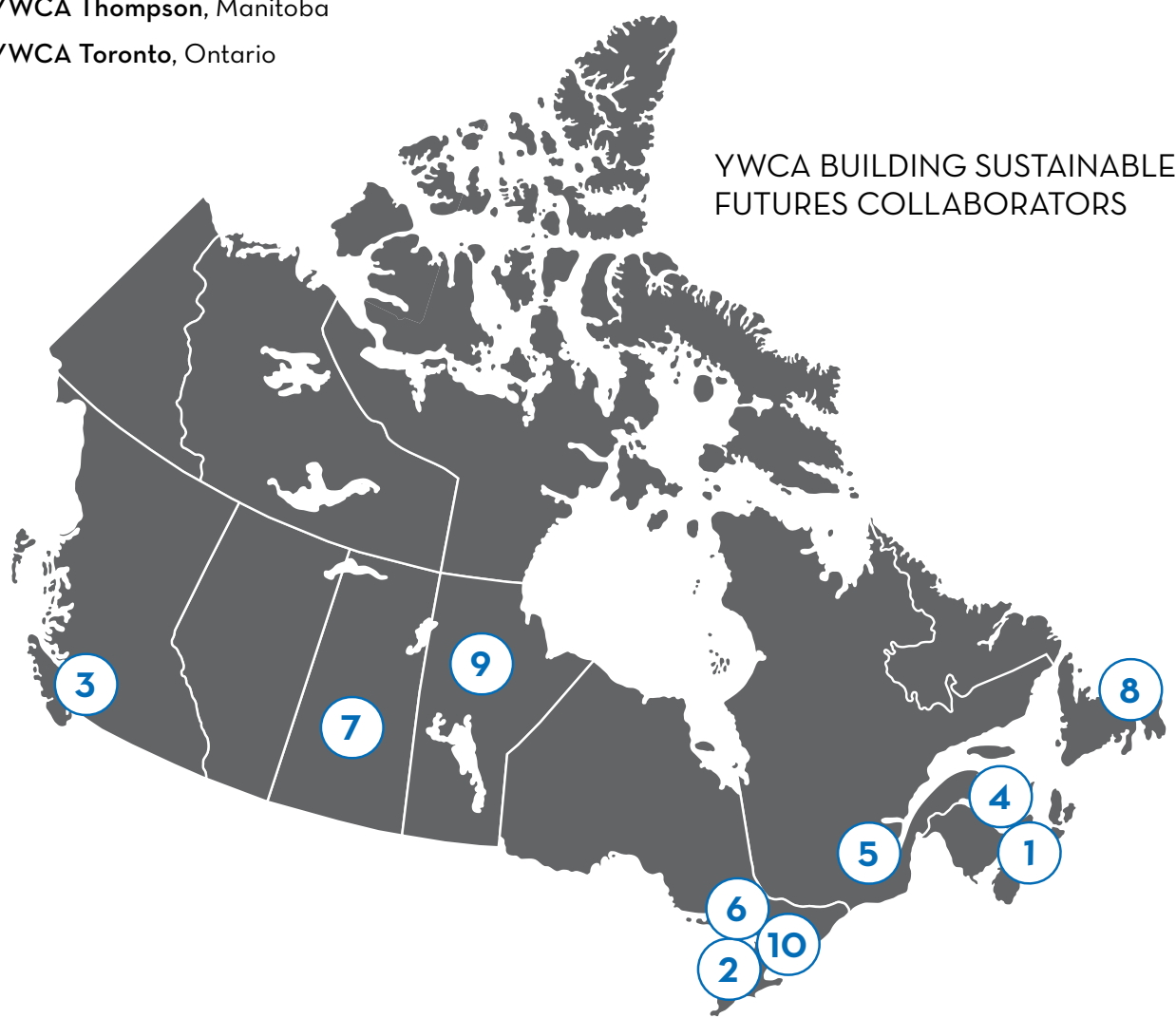
- practitioners and any others interested in learning more about the YWCA BSF model and related tools, and Collaborators’ regional adaptations of these;
- practitioners interested in learning about integrating any of the following into their programs/curricula:
 - the nine OLES essential skills/Skills for Success and emerging skills for the labour market
 - **YWCA Toronto’s** adaptation of the Life Skills model for curricula and lesson plan design; and
- practitioners and any others interested in drawing on the Collaborator Lesson Plans and resources for their own program populations.

Phase Three National Collaborators

The ten Collaborator Associations were:

1. YWCA Halifax, Nova Scotia
2. YWCA Hamilton, Ontario
3. YWCA Metro Vancouver, British Columbia
4. YWCA Moncton, New Brunswick
5. YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal, Quebec
6. YWCA Muskoka, Ontario
7. YWCA Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
8. YWCA St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador
9. YWCA Thompson, Manitoba
10. YWCA Toronto, Ontario

"Pandemics underscore 'hidden' inequities that are embedded in our society and therefore made to appear normal. COVID-19 threatens to reinforce these inequities but also offers the nascent possibility of a different path. An intersectional approach to recovery efforts centred on the needs of women, girls and gender diverse communities can produce many sensible policy solutions to the benefit of all residents of Canada." (Razaei 2020)



The main focus of the YWCA BSF project has primarily been on women. As a member of a national federation of 30 YWCA Associations, **YWCA Toronto** is a frontline witness to the continuing need for a gender lens on essential skills training programs. We are dedicated to promoting opportunities to build futures for all women, girls, gender diverse individuals and their families who are marginalized through interlocking systems of oppression. Since 1875, when we started the first typing class for women in Toronto, we have worked to design and deliver timely and innovative essential skills programs that respond to women's changing socio-economic needs and goals (for more detail on **YWCA Toronto's** employment and training programs, and other services offered through the Skills Development Centre, see Appendix 2).

While planning Phase Three in 2018–2019, we could not have foreseen how the pandemic would transform life globally, laying bare and exacerbating existing inequalities and systemic injustices. As findings from the project and our external research show, this was particularly true for women, and for those facing often intersecting barriers of low income, racism, gender discrimination, ageism, etc.; and for those at risk of or currently experiencing violence.

People involved in the feminized labour sector bore the brunt of the pandemic, among them health, education and personal care providers; frontline staff of community service agencies; and face-to-face service industry employees. During lockdown, their huge contributions to society and to the economy suddenly became more vital, and as a consequence more visible to the rest of the world. The pandemic also affected the employment training and job opportunities available to program participants and graduates, and tested the resilience of already-stretched organizations in the field. (A sampling of external research on these impacts and on other issues is referenced as supporting evidence within the Compendium, but our main focus is on project findings. All external sources and other relevant literature can be found in Appendix 3 Bibliography.)



There were many pandemic-related impacts to the YWCA BSF project that were important for our gender-focused Collaborative to capture, even as all levels of society were forced to shift priorities and grapple with the immediate realities and demands of the changing socio-economic picture. Although it would be outside our scope to detail every impact and its ramifications, the theme of COVID-19 weaves a thread throughout the 2023 Compendium—from the logistics of facilitating a national research initiative virtually to the specific difficulties faced by Collaborator Associations and their program populations.

A great part of the Phase Three story is about how individuals, programs, organizations and other stakeholders worked together to address a host of issues and find new ways to deliver their services during extraordinary circumstances. Restrictions have since lifted and more “normal” routines have resumed, but the impacts of the pandemic persist in the personal lives of participants and staff, in our local labour markets and communities, and beyond. It is no surprise that the impacts of COVID-19 resonate strongly in the Collaborative's recommendations about how to promote greater career and skills building opportunities for women and gender diverse people in today's labour market. The pandemic has made a still-clearer case for more focused and sustained investment in women-serving programs and organizations if we are to build stronger futures across Canada.

How To Navigate The Compendium

Section 1 – The National YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Project Phase Three 2019-2023 provides a backgrounder to the project; a brief description of the key Phase Three methodological frameworks that were integrated into Collaborators' pilot programs; and an overview of how Collaborators were engaged, Phase Three research requirements, and project rollout in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section 2 – Our Collaborators and Their Phase Three Pilot Programs offers a short description of each of the ten Collaborator Associations and a profile of the regional programs that they delivered for this phase.

Section 3 – Project Findings explores the documented outcomes of the research at two levels: individual participant and program/organizational; and the strategy to build knowledge exchange.

Section 4 – A Sampling of Phase Three Promising Practices showcases: a regional capacity building partnership spanning three Atlantic provinces; a virtual platform to foster peer-to-peer connections and supports; two different ways of integrating YWCA Life Skills into programming; two different customizations of the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools; a strategy to combine Skills for Success with employer engagement; and a partnership with women professionals to support employment training opportunities.

Section 5 – Reflections on Learning from the Project shares some of the key learning from the project and identifies a range of promising practices during this phase.

Section 6 – Moving Forward and the **Conclusion** contain some core recommendations that have emerged about how to promote stronger socio-economic futures for systemically marginalized populations across Canada, and how to build capacity in the field of essential skills training to sustain and advocate for this important work.

Appendix 1 contains brief summaries of each of **YWCA Toronto's** nine Collaborators' previous experience in Essential Skills for Employment programming.

Appendix 2 focuses on **YWCA Toronto's** history in employment training programming, its current programs, and its offerings through the Skills Development Centre.

Appendix 3 offers a list of YWCA BSF Project Resources and a Bibliography including select sources from our external research scan, with a focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our YWCA BSF project demographic.



SECTION 1:

The National YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Project – Phase Three 2019-2023

Overview

YWCA Toronto's interest in developing the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) model goes back almost 20 years to 2004, when we first began to research the effectiveness of a holistic asset-based approach to Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) programming with systemically marginalized women at our YWCA Skills Development Centre (SDC). In 2010, we were funded by the Government of Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), to pilot a customized version of our approach and model with participants in our East Toronto programs. Both our approach and model drew upon our learning about the holistic Sustainable Livelihoods approach and framework, after participating in a 2004-2009 national research initiative funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation. We first shared our early learning about the **YWCA Toronto** model in a 2010 Compendium of Best Practices in ESE programming and an accompanying curriculum of best practices.

In 2014, encouraged by external interest in the model and to deepen our learning, we launched our first national Essential Skills for Employment project, later to be branded as the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures project. It focused on building the essential skills and career opportunities of four demographics: Indigenous, immigrant, mature and youth. A further objective was to explore how programs and organizations could find new ways of building their own capacity to sustain and demonstrate the value of their work.

Since the national project was originally titled the YWCA Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) Project, we refer to the **YWCA Toronto** staff involved in all phases of the YWCA BSF project as the ESE team.

The nine pan-Canadian Collaborators for Phase Two were:

- **YWCA Agvvik Nunavut**, Nunavut
- **YWCA Halifax**, Nova Scotia
- **YWCA Hamilton**, Ontario
- **YWCA Metro Vancouver**, British Columbia
- **YWCA Moncton**, New Brunswick
- **YM/YWCA of the National Capital Region** (Ottawa)-English/French
- **YWCA Thompson**, Manitoba
- **YWCA Saskatoon**, Saskatchewan
- **YWCA Toronto**, Ontario

Our Collaborators drew on **YWCA Toronto's** emerging asset-based employment and training model to create their own regionally adapted program models for their diverse demographic groups. A range of pilot programs were involved, from general foundational essential skills-building programs to specific trades and entrepreneurship programs, to a program for Indigenous women to train in traditional sewing skills, to a program preparing women for employment in the administrative and business sectors. Eight of these programs were offered in English, and one in both official languages. Altogether, the project involved over 550 individuals (80 percent self-identified as women), the nine Collaborator Associations, and over 50 employer and community partners.

Through the Phase Two research, we were able to refine the YWCA BSF model and related asset mapping tools at both individual participant and program/organizational levels; and we developed an Employer Engagement model from our existing **YWCA Toronto** network of employer partners. We also started to identify a set of newer emerging 21st century skills—some of them often termed “soft skills”—becoming increasingly important to the labour market, in combination with the nine OLES essential skills. Our 2019 YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Compendium and Toolkit share key learning and promising practices from this phase.

A Snapshot of Phase Two Learning About:

An Asset-Based Approach – The YWCA BSF model’s emphasis on foundational skills training integrated with individualized pathways to success appears to be an effective practice to build individual participants’ self-confidence, self-direction and resilience; and to enhance their transition to satisfying employment and more sustainable futures.

Demographic Populations – Collaborators’ regionally adapted programs and practices, tailored to the needs and goals of their respective populations, demonstrated that the asset-based model can be adapted flexibly to meet a broad diversity of needs, skills levels, and employment and life goals, as well as a wide range of local contexts.

New Ways to Build Capacity – Asset-based thinking and related strategies can provide cost-effective solutions for large and small community organizations, along with more specialized sectoral employment approaches to building strategic working relationships with employers and other stakeholders.

A Community Development Approach – The YWCA BSF asset-based approach was found to build Collaborators’ capacity to collect a broader base of data to show the impact of their programs; to advocate for partnerships that will invest in building more sustainable programs; and to keep participants at the forefront, so that they have an active voice in social change.

See Appendix 3 YWCA BSF Project Resources for links to the YWCA publications, and the Canadian Women’s Foundation Final Report on the Sustainable Livelihoods national research project.

Phase Two research produced a clearer picture of the complex, often intersectional challenges, needs and interests of our national project demographic as they sought to engage in a changing world of work, and to build sustainable futures for themselves and their families. The research also confirmed that organizations in the field of ESE programming operate in a funding environment precarious even for well-established programs with strong documented outcomes.

Some themes that emerged from Phase Two helped guide our research for Phase Three:

- A strengthened focus on building foundational life skills at the early pre-employment stage of ESE programming might prove especially effective in supporting systemically marginalized participants to engage in the labour market and advance toward sustainable futures.
- Programs might aim to offer more integrated pathways for continuous upgrading and learning, to meet the evolving labour market—from the nine OLES essential skills to a set of emerging experiential and digital skills necessary to succeed in today’s workforce.
- Collaborative cross-sectoral partnerships and knowledge exchange could be key to promoting the continued importance of gender-focused and foundational essential skills programming, especially with participants who may take longer to make their first steps toward employment.
- This project could contribute toward an evidence-based case for consistent longer-term investment, in order to sustain ESE programming for systemically marginalized communities, and to build program/organizational capacity in the field.

YWCA BSF Research Focus for Phase Three

In Phase Three, we aimed to deepen our learning about effective ESE practices with women—especially Indigenous, immigrant, mature and youth across Canada—by documenting the further integration into Collaborator pilot programs and curricula of the following key frameworks:

- the YWCA BSF asset-based model and related asset mapping tools
- the nine OLES essential skills (subsequently revised as “Skills for Success”)

New to Phase Three was the integration of:

- the emerging labour market skills areas identified in our Phase Two research;
- the YWCA Life Skills model and Coaching training; and
- the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model incubated through Phase Two.

We also sought to explore strategies to build knowledge exchange nationally through a virtual learning community.

As noted above, this phase was designed and launched in 2019 with a specific focus on women. Many of the Collaborator pilot programs for the project have since broadened their focus to include gender diverse individuals.



1.1 PHASE THREE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

1.1.1 The YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Model

The holistic YWCA BSF program model meets clients flexibly at whatever stage they may be on their movement toward their employment and livelihood goals. It supports them to build upon existing strengths, develop new skills, and create their own individual pathways to success. It nurtures self-empowerment and personal growth, and also integrates foundation-building skills training and lifelong learning opportunities throughout its programs and services.

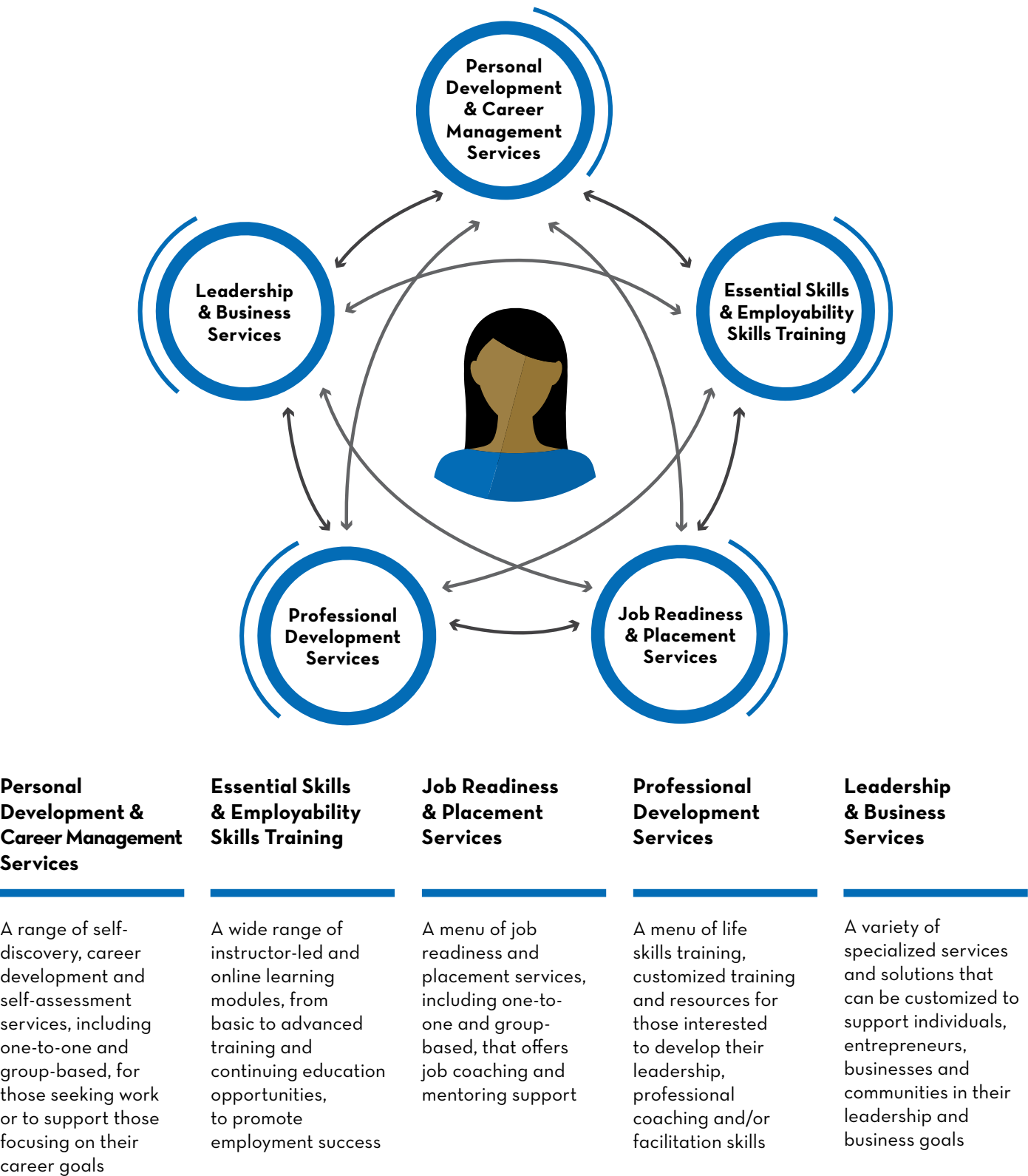
What are “Assets”?

Assets are the building blocks for a future—those we already have and want to build on, and those we may need to strategize to gain. They are vital to moving us forward with our livelihood goals. Instead of beginning with “What don’t I have?” an asset-based approach asks, “What assets do I have, and how can I strengthen them?”

When an individual first comes to any of **YWCA Toronto’s** employment training programs, staff work with them to explore the complete picture of their strengths or “assets,” and to identify potential areas of improvement using the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools (see Section 1.1.2 below).

The model also takes a holistic approach to the actual process of building skills. It integrates Essential Skills for Employment into all aspects of the model—from a participant’s first meeting with us to examine their strengths, to mapping career and life goals and discovering what they may need to achieve them. As shared in the 2019 YWCA BSF Compendium, our research has shown that the model can be adapted to respond to the training needs, preferences and goals of a diverse range of groups.

Figure 1: The YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) Model and its Five Components



The model's flexible continuum of five components offers a full range of options for socio-economic advancement: from one-day needs assessments to foundational skills training, job skills and business training, all the way to leadership training and links to professional networks. It also integrates employer and community connections into each component in order to build strong, proactive networks of support, opportunities, and learning among participants, alumnae, staff, and our employer and community partners. Each component can be customized according to individual needs, interests and goals.

For more detail on the YWCA BSF model and individual pathways through its range of services, see Section 1.2 of the 2019 YWCA BSF Compendium.

1.1.2 The YWCA Building Sustainable Asset Mapping Tools

Drawing on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

Exploring Assets

The YWCA BSF model draws on an adaptation of the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, which identifies a range of asset areas that create a holistic picture of all the capabilities, resources and entitlements that people have developed over time, as well as those they may need to build on, to make the transition toward stronger livelihoods. Program staff work with participants to explore and create a visual “map” of their assets. Mapping encourages people to think about themselves and their lives in a new, positive light. Participants can become more strategic about building to their strengths and dealing with setbacks. They can also identify life changes, both as they move through a program and after they leave to pursue their employment and livelihood goals.

The areas themselves can be flexibly adapted by practitioners to capture the specific asset-building objectives of individuals, organizations and/or communities. The YWCA BSF model explores five areas with individual participants: **Basic Needs, Identity, Skills & Employability, Support & Connections**, and **Money** (see below, Figure 3).

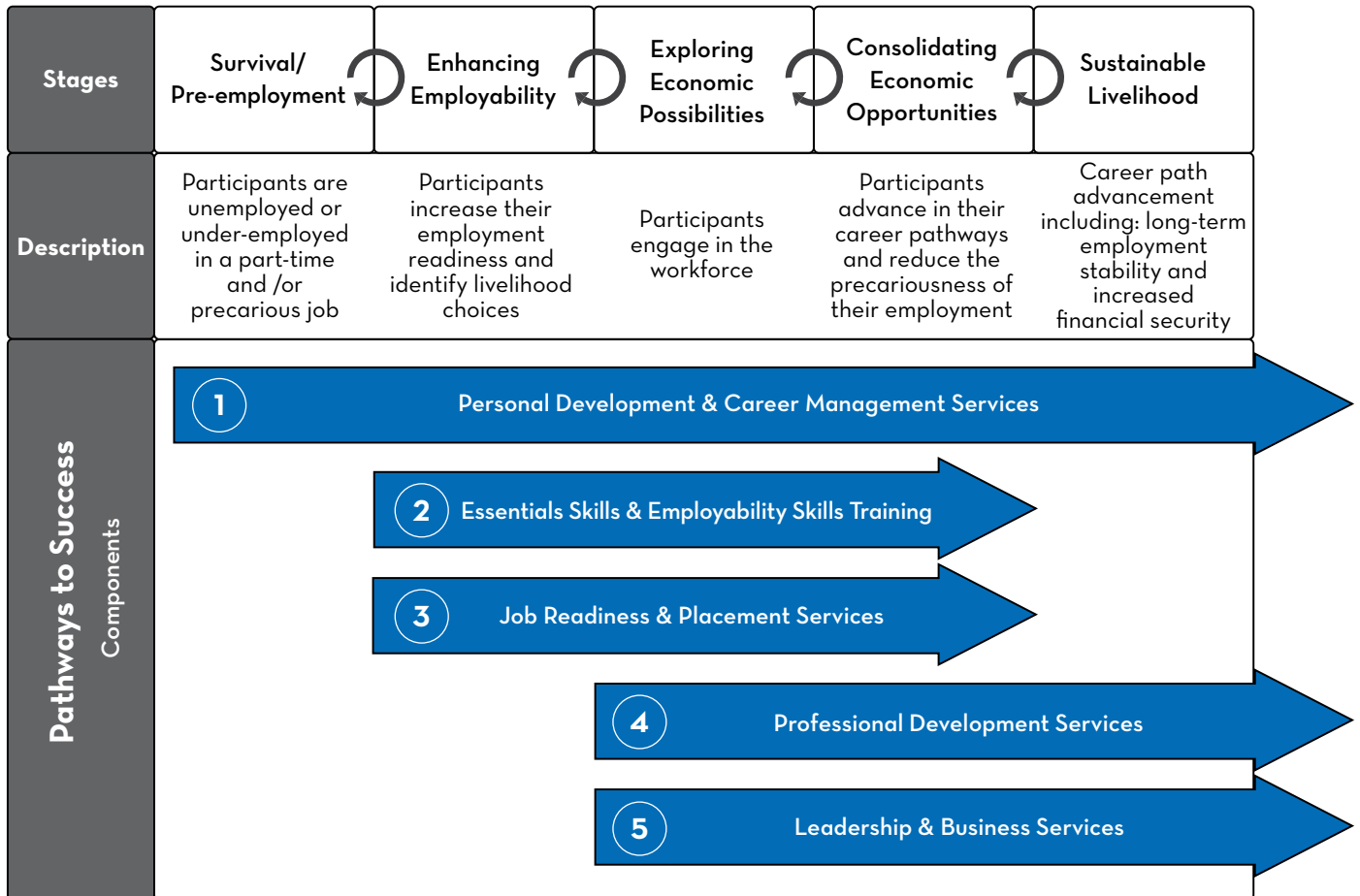
The Stages of Livelihood Development

Canadian Sustainable Livelihoods research has also identified a framework of the stages that people may go through at different points in their lives: from extreme destabilization; to starting to enhance their employability; to building a base of stability and exploring economic possibilities; to consolidating their economic opportunities; and onward, toward a more sustainable future. With an understanding of these stages, practitioners can work more strategically to provide the most appropriate and effective supports at each stage.

Change may be a slow, gradual process for people distant from the labour market, and they can face many setbacks along the way. People's livelihood transition is not linear: their lives can easily be destabilized by factors such as family crisis, job loss, health issues, etc. People may cycle back many times between stages before moving forward, toward their livelihood goals.

The ESE team adapted the stages of livelihood development framework to capture the stages of participant involvement in the five components of the YWCA BSF model, on the pathway toward a sustainable future. The arrows in the diagram reflect the non-linear pattern of many participants' movement through the stages.

Figure 2: Stages of Livelihood Development Integrating the Five Components of the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Model



Adapted with permission of Sustainable Livelihoods Canada

YWCA Collaborators have used the stages of livelihood development framework to reflect on the life/employment situations of their program participants, and identify pathways and patterns in their movement toward sustainable futures (for detail on the stages, see Section 2 of the Phase Three YWCA BSF Toolkit; and the 2019 Compendium, Section 1.2).

The “Vulnerability Context” and the “Policy and Institutional Context”

The Sustainable Livelihoods approach further recognizes that both the circumstances of people’s lives and larger external factors, termed the

“Vulnerability Context,” can affect an individual’s progress, often in ways beyond their control. Life circumstances can include patterns connected to where people are in their lives: for example, their reproductive choices, family roles, social relationships, etc. They can also include factors such as the effects of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. The “Policy and Institutional Context” refers to larger external factors that can include systemic socio-economic forces such as the institutional and governmental policy context, racism, gender discrimination, and other often intersecting barriers that limit people’s opportunities to move forward.

A Sustainable Livelihoods approach takes these factors into account when exploring and measuring changes in people's lives, acknowledging that while they are in charge of their pathways forward, they also have to operate within a context of larger forces that may not always support them in their goals and can sometimes hijack their progress.

For more detail on the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, see Appendix 3 YWCA BSF Project Resources.

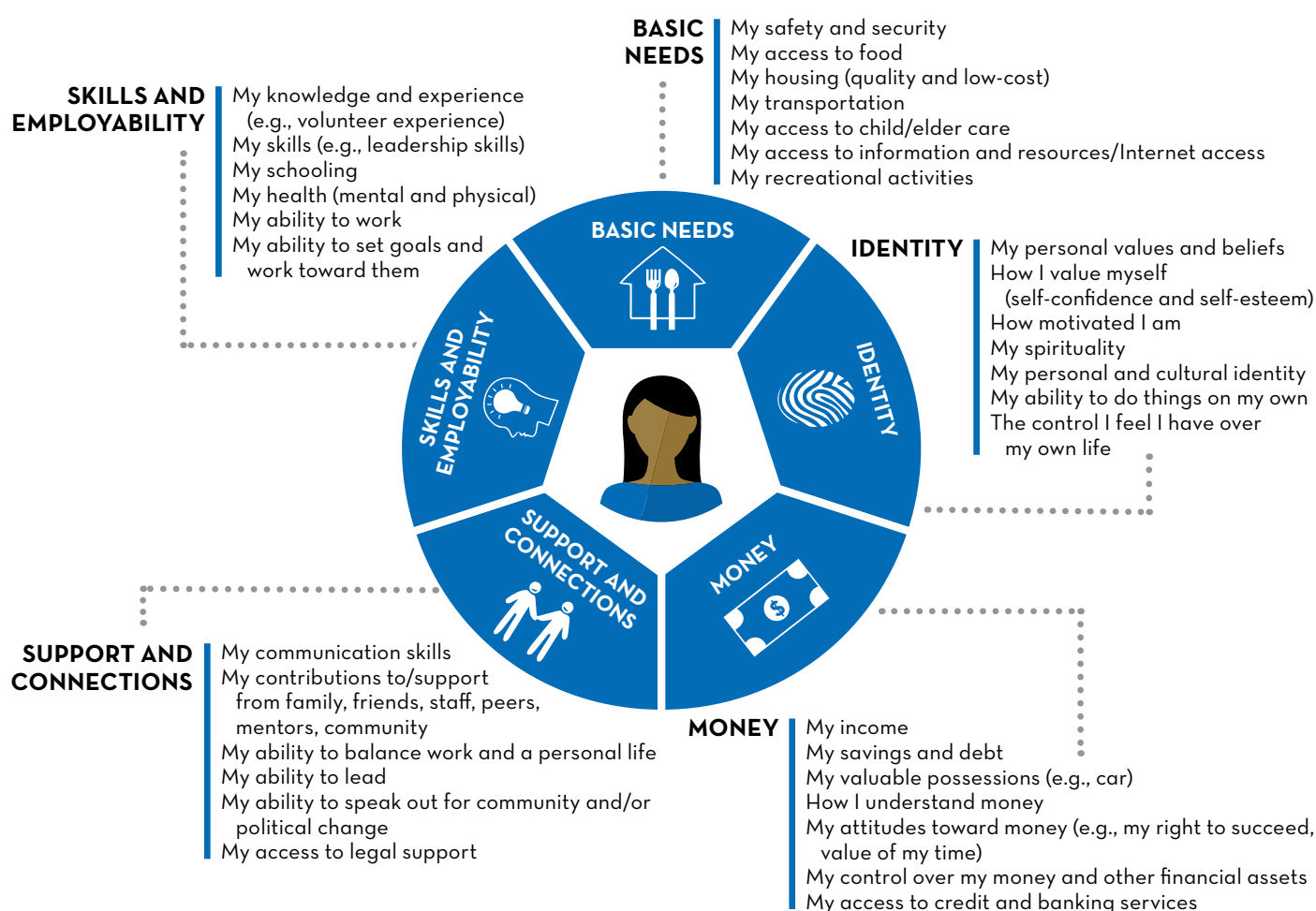
Mapping Assets at Two Levels

Through Phase Two, the ESE team worked with the YWCA BSF Collaborative to refine asset mapping tools to explore holistic changes in assets at two levels, both of which were also explored in Phase Three:

- **Individual participant:** to capture changes in individual participants' lives as a result of participating in the pilot programs.
- **Program/organizational capacity:** to capture

Collaborators' self-report on changes in their capacity to deliver their programs as a result of participating in the project.

Figure 3: Level 1 – YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Individual Participant Asset Map

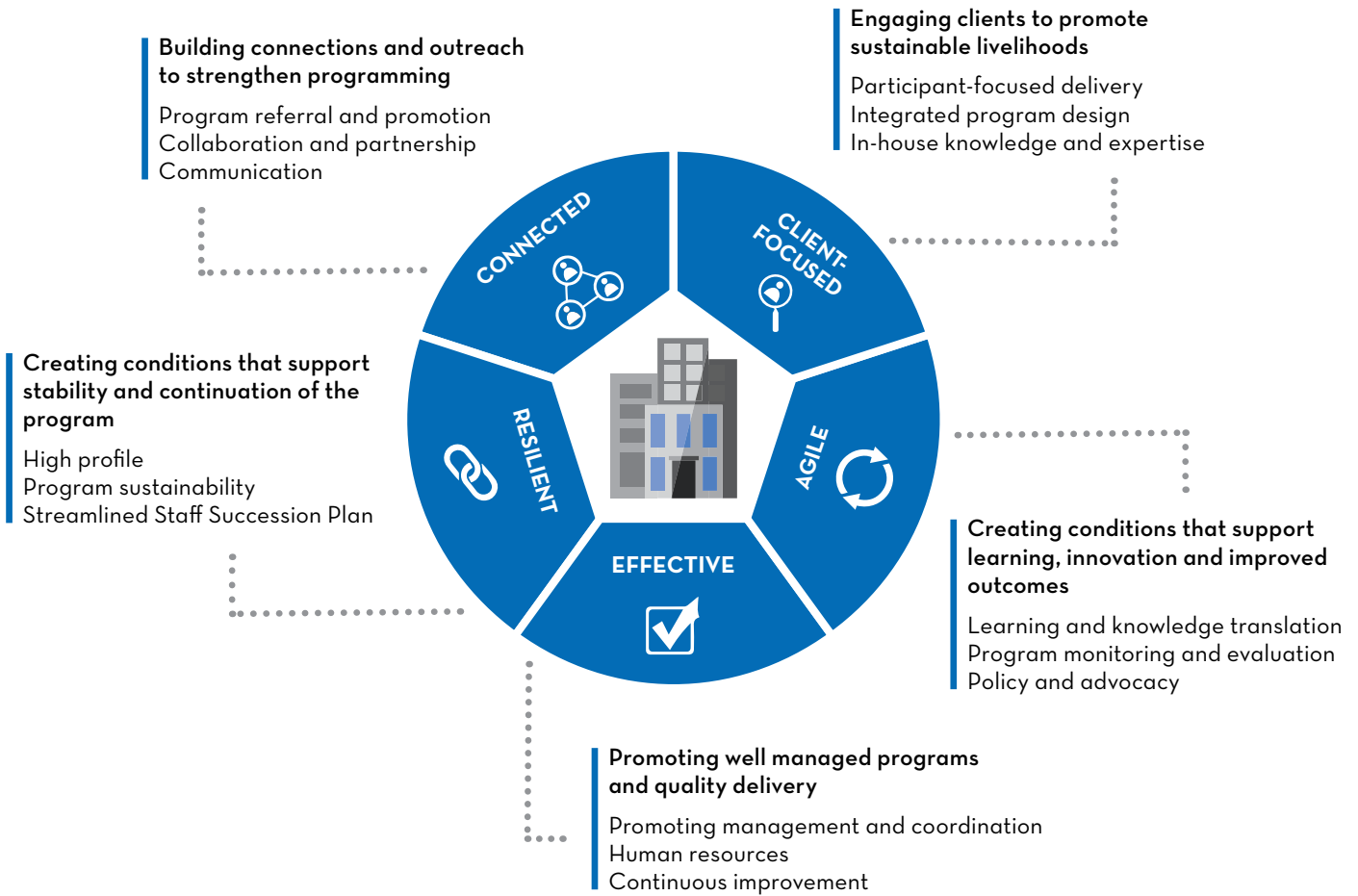


What is an Asset?

Assets are the building blocks for a future.

Assets can be: What you know, your “lived experience,” your skills and abilities, your learning and training.

Figure 4: Level 2 – YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Program/Organizational Capacity Building Asset Map



What is an Asset?

Assets are the building blocks for a future.

The five asset areas of the program/organizational asset map are:

- Participant-focused: engaging participants to work toward sustainable futures
- Connected: building connections and outreach to strengthen programming
- Effective: promoting well-managed programs and quality delivery
- Resilient: creating conditions that support stability and the continuation of the program
- Agile: creating conditions that support learning, innovation and improved outcomes

1.1.3 Essential Skills (Skills for Success) and Emerging Skills for the Labour Market

An Essential Skills Focus

In Phases One and Two of this research, the main skills focus was on integration into employment training programs of the nine essential skills identified by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), Government of Canada, represented below by the YWCA BSF icons:

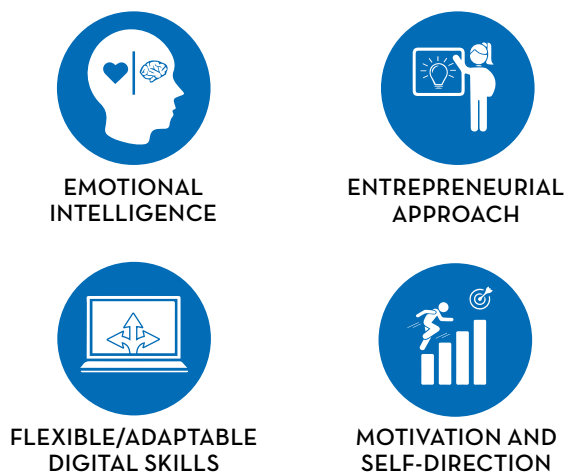


For more detail on essential skills integration during these phases, see Appendix 3 of the 2019 YWCA BSF Compendium, which is listed among the YWCA BSF Project Resources of this Compendium's Appendix 3.

Emerging Skills for the Labour Market

Phase Two research began to identify a set of emerging essential skills for the labour market. People may be expected to have many of these skills before applying for a job, and to be honing them on a continuous basis. Formerly called soft skills, they have become particularly important to the 21st century global economy. Many leaders in the field of employment development now emphasize that they can be learned, just as people learn vocational skills.

The research highlighted four broad areas of important emerging skills and how the holistic asset-based YWCA BSF model works to build them:



Emotional Intelligence: Our approach to emotional intelligence skills building includes valuing, listening and learning from diverse perspectives, and from the intersections of experience and identity. The learning process is for everyone—through feedback from the women in our programs, we are continuously learning from them about this vital skill. We also practice engaging in difficult conversations and learning from criticism and setbacks, and we encourage discussion about rights and boundaries, resolving disputes, and managing stress and life balance. We also practice storytelling and analyzing body language.

An Entrepreneurial Approach: We encourage participants to take calculated risks in a supportive environment, to embrace new challenges, to think strategically about how to reach their own goals, and to grow resilience for dealing with setbacks. In group training and at events with employers and community stakeholders, participants can practice their interpersonal skills for the workplace, discuss problem-solving techniques, build and expand their networks, and hone their self-presentation and time-management skills.

Flexible/Adaptable Digital Skills: Through programs and partnerships with education, training and business organizations, we support participants to keep pace with the new technological requirements of the workplace. Partners also provide participants with opportunities to hone their skills through mentorships, job placements, and face-to-face as well as e-learning events.

Motivation and Self-Direction: We offer hands-on opportunities for participants to grow and practice these key skills, including: self-confidence, autonomy, problem solving, self-advocacy, action planning, the ability to navigate complex systems and respond to unexpected obstacles; and strong leadership.

We aim to inspire others, and to create and strengthen understanding, mutual respect and empathy. To further these aims, we foster networks among participants, graduates, staff, and our employer and community partners, so that even after graduation participants can avoid becoming isolated and can continue to build on their communities of support.

Moving Forward to Skills for Success

After the 2019 launch of Phase Three, the nine OLES essential skills were revised into a new model named “Skills for Success” that now includes some of these more experiential skills. Launched in May 2021 by ESDC, the Skills for Success model shares the Life Skills model’s experiential understanding of adult learning: that such skills that can be acquired and enhanced through training, and that we can all hone and practice them.

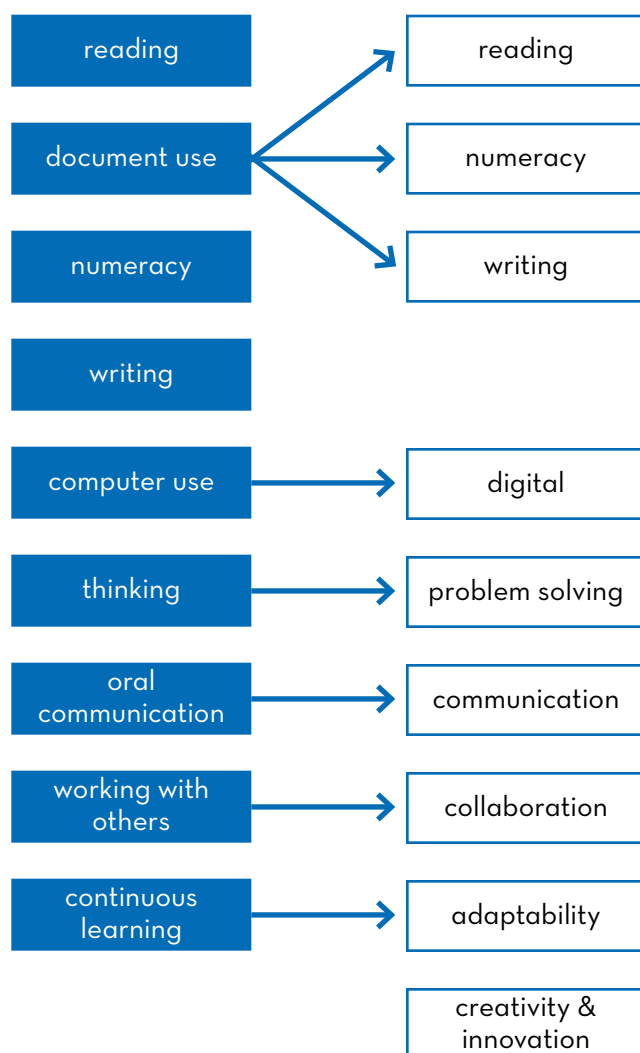
“The proposed conceptualization [of Skills for Success] involved understanding all skills—especially the soft or social-emotional skills—as repeatable processes or behaviours rather than as personality traits or pre-dispositions, iterating toward a skill-based language that is helpful for curriculum and assessment development...”

“Skills for Success are the skills needed to participate and thrive in learning, work and life. Skills for Success include skills that are foundational for building new skills and knowledge and important for effective social interaction. These skills overlap and interact with each other, and with other technical and life skills. They are inclusive and can be adapted to different contexts. Skills for Success are for everyone—employers, workers, training providers, governments, and communities.”
(Social Research and Demonstration Corporation 2022, 7 & 14)

In October 2021, the ESE team hosted an “Introduction to Skills for Success” virtual session for YWCA BSF Collaborator staff. Led by a manager from the Employment Program Policy & Design Directorate (EPPDD), the session was an introduction to the new Skills for Success model, which will be the basis for new essential skills programs funded by the Department of Economic and Social Development Canada, Government of Canada. The ESE team observed how closely these new skill areas dovetailed with our external and internal research findings about emerging skills.

After the presentation, it was agreed by the ESE team and the Project Officer that since we were already halfway through the project, it would not be feasible to introduce the revised skills areas across the national Collaborative within such a short timeframe. Also, research was still ongoing into the design of evaluation tools to measure some of these revised skills. We therefore decided that the Phase Three Collaborators would continue using the originally defined essential skills areas. Phase Three research was already designed to explore effective practices in the four broad emerging skills areas identified by our research in Phase Two.

From the Nine Essential Skills to Skills for Success



Here is what changed in the move from the Essential Skills framework to the new Skills for Success model.

- Two new skills: **Adaptability**—which integrates **continuous learning**—and **creativity and innovation**
- **Document use** integrated in **reading, writing** and **numeracy**
- The scope of computer use is now broader to cover **digital**, which includes the use of different digital devices and platforms
- Oral communication is now **communication** and includes broader concepts, such as non-verbal communication
- Working with others is now **collaboration** to reflect a broader scope, which contains inclusivity and respect for diversity
- Thinking skills, which includes critical thinking and decision-making, is now **problem solving**

(Employment and Social Development Canada 2021)

For more detail on all of these skills, see Appendix 3 YWCA BSF Practitioner Resources.

1.1.4 The YWCA Life Skills Model and Coaching Training

Life Skills is a model that takes a problem-centred, experience-based, developmentally structured approach to adult learning. It actively encourages the expression of feelings, and acknowledges that there is a subjective quality to knowledge that legitimizes each individual's past experience. The goal is to increase learners' perceptive powers, their understanding of

others, and their understanding of the impact of their behaviour on others. Learning is demonstrated by a change in behaviour.

Also fundamental to Life Skills is the idea that by breaking down a problem situation into "bite-size" pieces, learners can identify the skills in which they have competence and the skills that could be enhanced in order to solve a given situation better.

This idea, which informs the structure of the Life Skills Lesson Plan, dovetails with the YWCA BSF asset-based approach to the process of self-exploration and mapping changes in assets.

“So many participants come with very low self-esteem and self-worth and have not been guided to look into this area of ‘Self’ and ask what am I good at, what have I learned, what did I do to get here, what are those skills?” (Life Skills Coach Trainer–YWCA BSF Phase Three)

YWCA Toronto was first introduced to the Life Skills model in 1973, and has since become a national training centre for Life Skills coaches and a publisher of Life Skills resources. In 1976, we produced the first in our now nine-volume series of Discovering Life Skills manuals, all of which include lessons developed and field-tested by **YWCA Toronto** Life Skills coaches in their community groups. In 2023, **YWCA Toronto** celebrated 50 years of delivering Life Skills Coaching trainings to community leaders, coaches, facilitators, and other interested parties across Canada.

Life Skills: A Backgrounder

The Life Skills model emerged in the 1960s in New York, and was drawn upon at the same time in Canada as part of an anti-poverty strategy to promote skills building with systemically marginalized adult populations through the Canada NewStart Program. Of the new approaches and program models introduced nationally by this initiative, only one program continued, in Saskatchewan. Focused primarily on Indigenous learners, Life Skills was administered and delivered by the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT). This model was the basis for **YWCA Toronto’s** approach:

“[YWCA Toronto’s] Life Skills Coach Certificate training programs are rooted in the principles and philosophy of the Saskatchewan NewStart model of adult education and utilize the lesson plan as a template for designing experiential workshops that engage learners cognitively, physically and effectively.” (Life Skills Coach Certificate Phase 1: Foundation of Life Skills Coaching 2023)

Life Skills is grounded in the assumption that adult learning (andragogy) is fundamentally different from childhood learning (pedagogy). Andragogy involves: self-direction; recognizing life experience as a resource; considering what people are ready to learn when they experience the need to manage real-life issues in a more satisfying way; and situations in which learners want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skills they may gain, in order to function more effectively in the future. Life skills can be applied in all areas of life: self, family, leisure, community and job.

Learning is defined as having two meanings: the acquisition of knowledge, and change in behaviour. It comes about through a dynamic interaction of three domains:

- Cognitive, or Thinking—the understanding and theoretical knowledge that a learner acquires
- Affective, or Feeling—the understanding and integration of feelings in the learning process
- Psychomotor, or Acting—the behavioural manifestation of the learning

The NewStart model added a fourth domain that was found to be particularly relevant to Indigenous learning styles: that of Watching, or learning visually through observation of someone else’s actions. Among other adaptations, it also added a Warm-Up component to the Life Skills Lesson Plan.



Key to the Life Skills model is the concept of **Balanced Self-Determined Behaviour (BSD)**, defined as behaviour that “enables people to act in their own best interest, to stand up for themselves without undue anxiety, to exercise their rights without denying the rights of others.” (*The New Dynamics of Life Skills Coaching*, p. 39). The focus of Life Skills training and coaching is to support people to build their senses of self-esteem and self-worth; to start to realize that they have a broader range of choices about their behaviour in given situations, and in the decisions that they make for themselves; and to identify and act on their choices and decisions while respecting others as self-determining individuals.

“Many individuals come with a very small toolkit of responses to situations. Learned negative responses are the ways they have coped and might not have been the best, but we honour the fact that these ways got them there, and that they are here. What we are doing is adding more ways that they could look at responding, or alternatives to situations in life.”
(Life Skills Coach Trainer)

Life Skills are “problem-solving behaviours appropriately and responsibly used in the management of personal affairs.” The Life Skills model is “a multi-dimensional learning system that facilitates the life-long acquisition of generic skills (personal

management, problem-solving, communication and critical thinking) which enable people to function effectively in their personal and professional lives.” (Ibid., pp. 15 & 59). The model can be drawn upon flexibly to apply to individuals of any gender, age, culture, etc., and at any stage of life. Part of the learning is that generic skills learned or built upon in the four areas identified above can be transferrable to other situations in their lives.

Life Skills coaches address these areas by drawing on past experience; creating opportunities for participants to assess their own needs; nurturing self-direction; designing programs around real-life applications; and organizing learning opportunities outside the group class, for people to put the knowledge and skills they have learned toward practical applications.

“Whether moving into employment or moving into post-secondary education, it’s about making sure they have the skills to be able to be successful—looking at critical thinking skills, doing lessons where they have the ability to stop and analyze, and evaluate situations before responding, and then also having those tools to be able to problem-solve on a daily basis.” (Life Skills Coach Trainer)

Learning is group-based, since part of the process is for students to interact with others on their learning journey, as a part of putting into practice their life skills. Another, related focus of Life Skills is to move the individual from a “me mentality” to a “we mentality” and to a feeling of belonging.

The Life Skills Lesson Plan Components

The focus of Life Skills lessons is to develop participants’ self-assessment, reflective and analytical skills. The approach is democratic: each lesson should pertain to the identified needs of the group. The coach must also have a clear and open rationale for the lesson, to share with the group at the beginning of each session. The lesson begins with the coach introducing the problem, topic or skill. **Goals** for the lesson should be behavioural and achievable.

SECTION 1

There are slight variations in Life Skills lesson plan formats; YWCA Toronto draws on the NewStart model, which adds a **Warm-Up** as an extra step before **Stimulus**. For the **Stimulus** component, a range of visual and auditory media can be used to stimulate feelings and thoughts in participants during the **Warm-Up**. **Evocation** follows, during which the coach will invite participants to share their reactions to the stimulus and then their subjective thoughts.

Objective Enquiry forms the cognitive part of the lesson in which coach and participants share outside/external information and identify possible solutions. As they consider this information, the group is being asked to move from their subjective responses to a broader or more objective approach to the topic at hand, which is then viewed in a larger context, both within and outside the group's experience. In **Skills Practice**, the coach provides an opportunity—often through a structured exercise or roleplay—for participants to practice their skill(s). The group is encouraged to give feedback on and process their experience. All of these aspects support the integration and assimilation of learning.

In **Skills Application**, participants try out the skill(s) in a real-life situation. They may set goals for themselves regarding changes they would like to make in their lives. A vital part of the lesson is for them to understand the skills(s) as being transferable. Finally, in **Evaluation**, participants and the coach evaluate their experiences of the lesson. The group will be asked to identify their personal learning, with support to enhance their increased self-awareness. Participants will also evaluate whether the lesson goals set out at the beginning of the lesson have been achieved.

At the end, the course is a success “if learners demonstrate both the ability to practise the skills in group, use the skills in their personal lives and teach these skills to others in their life situation. This method of skills acquisition abbreviated as PUT (Practise; Use; Teach) is the measure by which Life Skills integration can be evaluated as being successful.” Through group feedback, they further refine their responses to the content and can apply an increasing array of problem-solving skills to the situations presented (Ibid., p. 68).

For a detailed layout of the Lesson Plan Components and the ten Collaborator Lesson Plans showcased for Phase Three, see Sections 1-2 of the **Toolkit**. For resources about the Life Skills model, see Appendix 3 YWCA BSF Project Resources.



1.1.5 Leadership Training

Among the Phase Three events facilitated on Zoom was the last of the YWCA BSF Collaborator capacity building trainings in June 2023, *Leadership from the Inside Out*.

This train-the-trainer workshop presented an introduction to the Co-Active Leadership Model with a complementary exploration of listening skills and mindfulness techniques. The content aligns with a holistic asset-based approach, the Life Skills model, and with the more experiential emerging skills for success explored in Phase Three. The trainer, who is a Wellness Coach and Program Facilitator at **YWCA Muskoka**, noted that this leadership model is especially empowering for women. In her experience, many women may not initially see themselves as leaders, but they often leave the workshop with a new understanding of what it means to lead, and how many leadership qualities they might already possess.

What is the Co-Active Leadership Model?

“Leadership is a choice, and it begins with one’s willingness to be responsible for what is happening in one’s world.” Karen & Henry Kimsey-House

The Co-Active Leadership model identifies the “Leader Within” as being at the core of five intersecting dimensions of leader:

“In the Co-Active Leadership model, everything begins with your ‘Leader Within’, which is your place of self-acceptance and self-authority. Leading from the dimension of Co-Active ‘Leader Within’ reminds us that we are all naturally creative, resourceful and whole, and can love all parts of ourselves—even the parts that are tough to look at and acknowledge. It helps us understand that life’s joys and traumas are part of the human experience, the sum of which allows us to grow into the fullest expression of our unique selves. Purpose-led leaders take responsibility for their world by accepting themselves fully and living their lives with integrity in accordance with their personal values. By living in purpose, you model way for others to do the same.” (Co-Active Training Institute)

Five core qualities lie at the heart of the model:

Listening; Intuition; Curiosity; Forward + Deepening; Self-Management

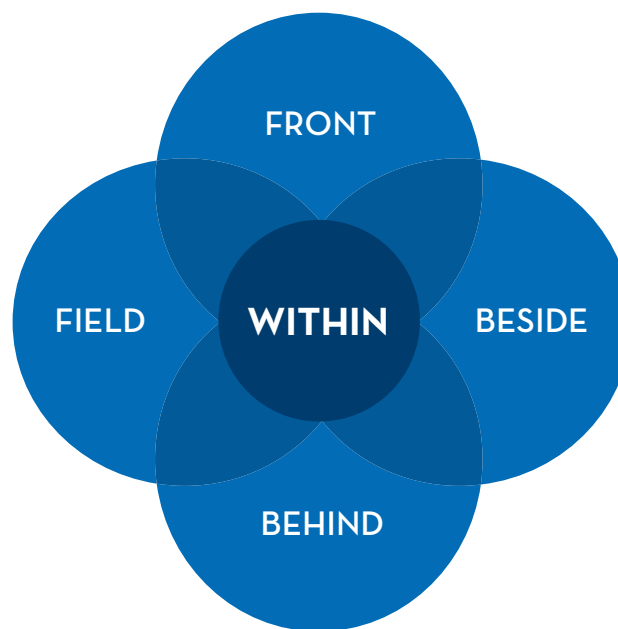
The Co-Active model conceptualizes leadership as multi-dimensional, rather than hierarchical. Leaders are not of one fixed “type” but draw upon a broad range of traits. Authentic purpose-led leadership is inclusive of different personalities, lived experiences, and comfort levels. The multi-dimensional element involves a dance of leadership that is: Flexible; Inclusive; Agile; Empowering; Respectful; Creative; Collaborative; Moment-to-moment.

Leadership from the Inside Out

“Leadership begins within each of us and then we shift from various other leadership roles within our lives and within each day. The other leadership roles include, leader in front, leader behind, leader beside and leader in the field. It is a wonderful way to show that everyone is a leader in their own lives and gives each participant the reminder that there are more leadership opportunities within employment and life than we realize. Our leadership session is one that focuses on the leader within and how pertinent it is for us to lead our lives from a place of knowing what we stand for, so that we can step into any role and be a leader in some way whether collaboratively, or encouraging from behind or stepping up as a leader in the front. It is most important that women learn to be the leader in their own lives, to support them to make the best decisions for themselves and their futures.” (Leadership Trainer)

The workshop explored the five dimensions of leadership identified by the model, as shown below:

Figure 5: Five Dimensions of Leadership



From: Co-Active Leadership; five ways to lead, Karen and Henry Kimsey-House, 2015

The five dimensions of leader each encompass leadership qualities that can come into play at different moments of the “dance” and can be nurtured to enhance our personal well-being and inform our choices:

- The Leader from Within—brings self-acceptance and self-authority
- The Leader in Front—brings connection and direction
- The Leader Behind—brings serving and coaching
- The Leader Beside—brings partnership and synergy
- The Leader in the Field—brings intuition and innovation

“We are all leaders in our own lives, and the more we think about leadership and understand the ‘dance’ that it is, the more it can help us grow, and our families, and the community around us. Leadership is not static, whatever your position may be—it is always a flexible dance.” (Leadership trainer)

For a list of the resources used in this workshop by the Leadership trainer to explore the Co-Active model and mindfulness practices, see Appendix 3 YWCA BSF Project Resources.

1.1.6 The YWCA BSF Employer and Community Partner Engagement Model

Since 2004, YWCA Toronto has been cultivating a network of employer partners in both private and public sectors in areas such as: Health, Administration and Finance, Retail and Hospitality, Information Technology, Service, and Skilled Trades. With Phase Two of the national project, this network became the YWCA BSF Employers Network. Over the course of Phase Three, our evolving holistic engagement model grew to include community partners, as part of building program/organizational capacity to meet participants’ employment and life goals. For more detail on this evolution, see Sections 3 and 5 below.

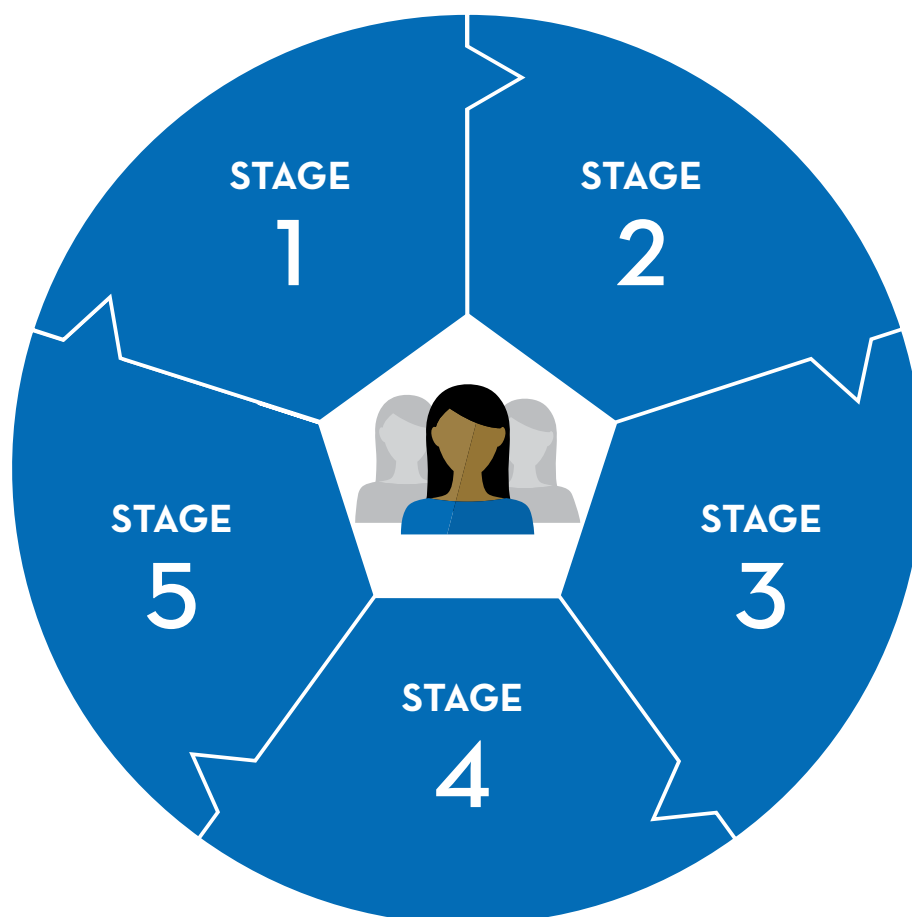
Our employer and community partners not only support our participants and program graduates in finding and advancing in employment but also provide input into program and curricula design, and offer advice and consultation to keep our content and approaches current with the changing labour market. Job retention and career enhancement supports include a range of strategies, such as on-the-job training, mentoring, placements, hiring, networking and training.

From our side of the equation, we collaborate with employers and community partners to identify their business and organizational needs as these relate to our current employment training programs and to placement opportunities for our participants. We also strive to promote a process of mutual continuous learning with respect to employment and livelihood needs, challenges, and the goals of the diverse communities with which we work, and to advocate for inclusivity and social justice in the labour market.

The Five Stages of Employer Engagement

We drew on our past experience and learning from the YWCA Toronto Skills Development Centre to develop a model for employer engagement strategies that would reflect our holistic asset-based approach to working with individuals, programs/organizations and communities to build sustainable futures. The five-stage model that emerged from our research was in the process of refinement when first published in our 2019 YWCA BSF Compendium. Each stage of the Employer Engagement model corresponds to one or more components of the YWCA BSF model described above in Section 1.1.1.

Figure 6: The YWCA BSF Employer Engagement Model



STAGE 1 **Building a** **Candidate Pool**

- Internal candidates
- External candidates

STAGE 2 **Candidate** **Pre-Assessment**

- Pre-assessment tools based on employer expectations

STAGE 3 **Employer** **Connection**

- Sector-specific employer recruitment events
- Job placements
- Mentoring & networking events

STAGE 4 **Follow-Up**

- Participant follow-up
- Wrap-around services
- Job retention & maintenance

STAGE 5 **Advancement** **& Leadership**

- Lifelong learning & upskilling
- Career advancement

YWCA Toronto maintains a database of both internal and external job seekers who may be at various stages along the spectrum of engagement:

STAGE 1: BUILDING A CANDIDATE POOL—

primarily for participants who are job ready and have identified their individual employment goals.

- Internal Candidates are participants who are currently enrolled in one or more program(s) and/or accessing one or more support(s) within the YWCA BSF model, while External Candidates are all other job seekers in the community. They are invited to participate in one or more programs at **YWCA Toronto** or in the community, and may also receive support through an Employment Specialist/Career Advisor.

STAGE 2: CANDIDATE PRE-ASSESSMENT—

to support potential job-ready participants with opportunities for placements, mentoring, and networking and/or employment opportunities.

- In collaboration with employer partners, we have created a series of interview templates for the various sectors in which we specialize, to help staff gain a better understanding of an individual participant's skills, experience and overall job readiness. They also help build a participant's knowledge base about what employers are looking for in the industry of their choice, and gain confidence as they assess their own readiness for opportunities.

STAGE 3: EMPLOYER CONNECTIONS—to connect participants and alumnae to opportunities through our relationships with employers in a range of sectors, including: Finance, Human and Social Services, Hospitality, Retail, Healthcare, IT, and the trades sector.

- These connections provide participants with work experience in the form of a paid job placement, or direct hire. Our employers are also involved in mentoring events, workshops and other activities.

STAGE 4: FOLLOW-UP—to maintain customized supportive connections with participants after the end of the training as they move into employment, and to address the challenges they may face.

- We offer a range of wraparound services and follow-up to ensure participant success, including: financial literacy workshops and training; access to other community resources, such as violence prevention counselling, legal advice, affordable housing and childcare (huge systemic barriers for many); and links to personal and community networks to support them to build on their strengths and connections.

STAGE 5: ADVANCEMENT AND LEADERSHIP—

to provide opportunities for lifelong learning.

- Following the groundwork laid in Phase Two, we included the Employer Engagement model as one of the key project frameworks for Phase Three. As we explore later in this Compendium, some Collaborators drew selectively on the various stages, depending on factors such as the typology of their programs, participant demographics, and their regional labour market context.

1.1.7 Building Knowledge Exchange

As a community Association and lead in the YWCA BSF project, **YWCA Toronto** works to bring an asset-based approach to strategies for more coordinated partnerships among non-profit, public and business sectors. In today's knowledge-based economy, we need the investment of all stakeholders to provide sustained employment and learning opportunities, especially for the demographics focused on in this national project. The context of COVID-19 and the accompanying shift to virtual modes of communication have only highlighted the importance of knowledge exchange about the intersectional challenges faced by systemically marginalized members of our communities and what can be done at all levels—individual, program/organizational, community and national—to address them.

Throughout the project, starting with Phase One's research into YWCA Toronto's ESE training programs, we have continued to test new approaches to stimulating this learning exchange. Phase Two supported us to expand our connections across Canada through our Collaborators and their respective stakeholders, and to broaden our learning about ESE challenges and effective practices with a wider range of demographic groups in diverse regional contexts.

In Phase Three, Collaborators have continued this process, drawing on the key YWCA BSF methodological frameworks to enhance and document the learning from their pilot programs. Even before the advent of COVID-19, one of the Phase Three

frameworks included an intentional strategy to bring the learning community online. The idea was to implement Slack as a platform for Collaborators and community partners to post and receive updates about project activities, launches, trainings, invitations, employment/volunteer opportunities, changes to government websites, etc. They could also exchange information about changes/challenges in the delivery of their programs, and practitioner tips about effective practices in the field.

Figure 7 below is a sample of our publicity flyers about the Community, and Figure 8 shows a slide from the YWCA BSF PowerPoint presentation about how to join and participate in the project's virtual Learning Community.

Figure 7: Publicity Flyer About the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Online Learning Community



Figure 8: Slide from the YWCA BSF PowerPoint Presentation



1.2 PHASE THREE OF THE NATIONAL PROJECT - 2019-2023

1.2.1 Engaging Our Collaborators

In late 2018, **YWCA Toronto** began consulting with the Funder (Government of Canada's Department of Employment and Social Development, and Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program) about the potential for a third phase of the YWCA BSF national project, to deepen learning nationally about promising practices in the field. During the dissemination of Phase Two findings in Spring 2019, the ESE team reached out to Collaborators to implement the launch of the next phase. Whereas Phase Two had included three gender-inclusive pilot programs, the overall demographic focus of Phase Three would be on women. As noted above, many programs have subsequently broadened their demographics to include gender diverse individuals.

Although initially involved in Phase Three, YWCA Agvvik was unable to continue with the project after March 2020. The crisis presented by COVID-19 and its resulting restrictions made participation impracticable for a largely Indigenous-serving Association working in an already challenging regional context with uneven connectivity. Three Associations were new in coming on board: **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal**, **YWCA Muskoka**, and **YWCA St. John's** (Newfoundland & Labrador).

In November 2019, after the publication of the Phase Two Compendium and Toolkit, the ESE team held its first Phase Three Collaborator meeting on Zoom to outline the main objectives of this phase:

- **To continue to promote the overall project goal:** to enhance career advancement and essential skills knowledge of systemically marginalized women, especially Indigenous, immigrant, mature and youth.

- **To produce two new publications for dissemination:** a Compendium and an accompanying Toolkit to share about the 2019-2023 project, including: an overview of pilot program activities, outcomes, and learning; promising practices in essential skills for employment and Life Skills training; curricula and sample Lesson Plans; capacity building strategies; employer and community engagement strategies; evaluation and assessment tools; and reflections and recommendations from the national Collaborative.
- **To continue to build knowledge exchange capacity in the field,** with a focus on using virtual technology to share information among Collaborators, and with partners and stakeholders both regionally and nationally.

Newly integrated into this phase were:

- the **YWCA Toronto** Life Skills model;
- a focus on emerging labour market skills, to enhance upon the originally defined nine OLES essential skills;
- customized strategies from the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model; and
- strategies to build virtual knowledge exchange.

The aim was to finalize selection of the pilot programs by December 2019. Capacity building trainings would then be facilitated by the ESE team starting in December, covering: the YWCA BSF model and asset mapping; the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model; the YWCA Life Skills model and Coaching; and Leadership. A system for Collaborators' quarterly narrative reporting to the ESE team was also designed, to start in January 2020. Final check-ins with each site were completed in Spring 2023.

YWCA Toronto's Role in Phase Three

- Lead Collaborator and project coordinator
- Trainer/facilitator in: the YWCA BSF model and asset mapping; the Life Skills model and Coaching training; Leadership training; and the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model
- Co-Collaborator in the pilot program research, documenting **YWCA Toronto Skills Development Centre (SDC) Success Ready**, an innovative pre-employment youth program for women and gender diverse individuals

Some Changes at YWCA Toronto:

Prior to 2019, we worked as more of a hub, with shared staff across multiple programs at the **YWCA Toronto SDC**. In 2019, with the end of Phase Two and the start of Phase Three, we began a restructuring/reorganizing process of our departments and programs. As part of our Employment and Training Department, a new ESE program was created which is now the umbrella of the YWCA BSF initiative, with its own team and Program Manager who joined us later that year. These changes, approved by our funder, the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, have supported the growth of the initiative and enhanced our capacity to meet the changing needs of the project.

For our **Success Ready** program, we engaged in activities and outcomes documentation for this phase of the project much as did the other Collaborators. The key Phase Three frameworks were already integrated into the program through the SDC.

Our ten Phase Three Collaborator Associations were:

- **YWCA Halifax**, Nova Scotia
- **YWCA Hamilton**, Ontario
- **YWCA Metro Vancouver**, British Columbia
- **YWCA Moncton**, New Brunswick
- **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal**, Quebec
- **YWCA Muskoka**, Ontario
- **YWCA Saskatoon**, Saskatchewan
- **YWCA St. John's**, Newfoundland & Labrador
- **YWCA Thompson**, Manitoba
- **YWCA Toronto**, Ontario

1.2.2 Project Requirements and Evaluation Strategy 2019-2023

Over Phase Three, the YWCA BSF Collaborative was required to:

- engage a minimum of 500 women as participants in the ten Collaborator employment training pilot programs;
- include a minimum of 50 YMCA/YWCA Associations in knowledge exchange about the YWCA BSF model and Employment Engagement model;
- involve a minimum of 100 additional employers and other community partners in virtual learning events and other knowledge exchange activities;
- train a minimum of 12 Collaborators and 15 other partners to deliver Life Skills Coaching training to support their own programs and communities; and
- disseminate project learning to a minimum of 50 national Indigenous/immigrant/mature worker/youth-serving organizations nationally.

All Collaborators were also required to submit a Lesson Plan for the Phase Three Toolkit, drawing on the YWCA Life Skills model and Lesson Plan, and on one or more of four emerging skills areas.

Phase Three Evaluation Strategy

For this phase, internal evaluation strategies and activities were built into the work of each Collaborator, along with timelines for reporting and

check-ins with the ESE team. The aim was to capture the nature and scope of each program model and its specific adaptations to the ESE training needs/employment outcomes of the project demographic groups. The evaluation was also designed to capture the impact of the YWCA BSF frameworks and capacity building trainings, and other project outcomes at three interrelated levels:

Individual Participant Level

Key areas of focus: demographics; asset development; essential and emerging skills development; and employment training outcomes.

Key frameworks:

- The YWCA BSF model and participant asset mapping
- The nine OLES essential skills, and emerging skills for the labour market

Documentation tools:

- An Excel tracking tool implemented by each Collaborator staff team to capture participant data at program start Intake and Consent (Weeks 1/2); program end; and at up to six months post-program for follow-up, to learn about employment, training, volunteering, job search activities and outcomes. Data included: demographics, cohort numbers, and overall feedback on learning from the asset mapping activity
- Two asset mapping exercises facilitated by staff with participants (group/individually), one at the beginning (or shortly after, according to the comfort level of the participant/group) and one at program end using the YWCA BSF Individual Participant asset mapping tools
- A participant outcomes survey (facilitated by program staff at the end of each program cohort).
- Qualitative data solicited by staff from participants, including comments and individual stories (ongoing and post-program)
- Regular quarterly staff narrative reports, and check-ins with the ESE team (ongoing)

Program/Organizational Level

Key areas of focus: program changes/adaptations; challenges and successes in capacity building; promising practices; and learning from the program delivery. Collaborators were not required to assess the overall capacity of their Association, only those organizational capacities related to the delivery of their pilot programs.

Key frameworks:

- The YWCA BSF model and program/organizational asset mapping
- YWCA Life Skills Model and Coaching training; and Leadership Training
- The YWCA BSF Employer and Community Partner Engagement Model

Documentation tools:

- A retrospective group Collaborator staff exercise using the YWCA BSF Program/Organizational Capacity Building asset map (facilitated among staff in Spring 2023)
- An Excel stakeholder tracking tool implemented by Collaborator staff to collect data about employer/community connections and partnerships, participant supports, and outreach activities (ongoing through Phase Three)
- Quarterly staff narrative reports and regular check-ins (ongoing)

Building Knowledge Exchange:

Documentation tools:

- Quarterly staff narrative reporting, check-ins and other feedback (ongoing)

All quantitative and qualitative data was to be processed by the ESE team.

1.2.3 Project Rollout in the Context of COVID-19

From the national lockdown in mid-March 2020 and onwards, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions had multiple impacts on the project, starting with changes in the everyday personal and professional lives of Collaborators, program participants and community partners. It is impossible to imagine how Phase Three would have unfolded or what different outcomes might have emerged in the absence of this massive external shock.

“We had our first Collaborative meeting to really kickstart the Phase Three activities in November 2019 and by March 2020, we were in complete lockdown. As a result of the pandemic, we had to roll back our plans to make space for programs and staff to pivot to online learning, provide care services (more than before), manage programs amid unprecedented levels of fear and uncertainty, all the while maintaining somewhat of a balance between personal and professional duties. Our Collaborative had to take a step back and re-evaluate our approach to the initiative. We decided to focus more on capacity building of staff so they could support participants better, and less on collecting employability data from participants. Even though we never actually got to meet with each other in person at all in this Phase, having regular check-ins and trainings provided everyone with a sense of familiarity as we all struggled to wrap our heads around a global collective trauma that was impacting our basic need of relating to other humans.” (Manager, YWCA Toronto Essential Skills for Employment program and Digital Skills for the Workplace program)

The ESE team had to be extremely agile and innovative to adapt the project rollout, trainings and events, evaluation strategies, and timelines for deliverables to work around the disruptions caused by the pandemic. The team was further stretched to respond flexibly to each Collaborator's situation while facilitating the overall rollout process. Many staff across the Collaborative were juggling challenges including working from home, childcare and schooling, and health-related issues in their families and communities.

Ultimately, all Phase Three Collaborator program cohorts (2020-2022) had to be rolled out in pandemic conditions starting in Spring 2020. For various reasons, some programs were unable to recruit and roll out their cohorts as planned, with resulting gaps and delays in the collection and consistency of data. Programs could not conduct outreach and recruitment as anticipated, pre-COVID, or offer their full in-person curriculum and program supports. Nonetheless, all programs were able to run at least five cohorts over the course of the project.

A number of related challenges have persisted that have affected the wrap-up of research in Spring 2023, even after the end of social distancing, such as the difficulty of keeping in touch with some participants and stakeholder contacts. This, combined with staff turnover, has made it harder for Collaborators to collect project data. We did, however, receive an extension of a year from the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program in order to complete the work of gathering all project outcomes.

Another issue explored in this Compendium relates to the pandemic. Because the ESE team had the opportunity to facilitate only one in-person meeting pre-pandemic, in May 2019—the first for Phase Three Collaborators—the rest of the YWCA BSF trainings, regional forums, and other interactions had to take place virtually.

Rollout of the YWCA BSF Capacity Building Trainings

Trainings were rolled out to Collaborators first, with additional sessions delivered to include stakeholders (e.g., staff from other programs at Collaborator Associations and other community service providers) as part of the project strategy to build the YWCA BSF Learning Community. Trainings on the YWCA BSF model, and individual participant and program/organizational asset mapping frameworks were delivered as a “refresher” to Phase Two Collaborators, and to accommodate the three new Collaborators who were not familiar with the content.

Life Skills Coaching trainings were delivered many times, since the model was one of the key frameworks in Phase Three, and **YWCA Toronto** was eager to share it more widely in the community. We were able to sponsor seats for a number for service providers to receive this training. Additional sessions were also helpful to accommodate staff turnover. Sessions were recorded so they could be reviewed or shared with new staff. After each session, feedback was collected to support continuous improvement.

Although the Collaborative missed the face-to-face connections and informal discussions that happened throughout Phase Two, we were able to experiment with online delivery of trainings and presentations. We were also able to “bank,” in digital form, a rich amount of learning and knowledge exchange among Collaborators—too much to include in the Phase Three publications—that can be accessed easily and disseminated virtually as a learning resource.

Our Zoom regional forums, based on learning themes emerging from the initiative, became an excellent vehicle for sharing challenges, exchanging promising practices, and for extending professional networks across our Associations from coast to coast. Quarterly narrative reporting, a series of Zoom COVID-19 focus groups facilitated by the ESE team in August 2021, and staff check-ins proved to be important sources of information about how each program dealt with the logistics of rollout and other challenges.

Highlights of Project Rollout:

- Between December 2019 and February 2021, the ESE team had already delivered trainings for Collaborators and their staff in the key project framework of the YWCA BSF model and approach to asset mapping. Collaborator staff who had been involved in the Phase Two research reported that they appreciated the refresher.
- In-person YWCA Life Skills Coaching trainings as well as an Employer Engagement event planned for March 2020 had to be cancelled, as did other scheduled in-person forums planned to bring Collaborators together regionally and across the country. The YWCA Life Skills Coach trainer began to deliver her first-ever trainings on Zoom, a major adjustment given the particular importance of in-person group dynamics to this model; however, these trainings offered a unique opportunity for everyone to connect and support each other during the early months of lockdown, when people were experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety.
- In early September 2020, the ESE team shared the project evaluation strategy with Collaborators, working with each site to adapt the tools to their specific programs and participant groups, and to the challenges of collecting data in pandemic conditions.
- In June 2020, the team shared the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model with Collaborators and continued to offer more trainings in the YWCA BSF model and asset mapping approach, as well as in Life Skills Coaching. These were attended by both Collaborator staff and other stakeholders.
- In November 2021, a series of regional Collaborator forums began with the **LAUNCH Atlantic** presentation by YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's.
- By Fall 2022, Collaborators had wrapped up their tracking and evaluation data collection, with the exception of **YWCA Thompson**, which had a COVID-related extension to Spring 2023.

For more detail on the delivery of Phase Three capacity building trainings, forums and other events, see Section 3.





SECTION 2:

Our Collaborators and Their Phase Three Pilot Programs

Overview

For Phase Three, the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) project broadened its national reach, now spanning ten Collaborator Associations from British Columbia to Newfoundland & Labrador. As in Phase Two, pilot program participants from the project demographic represented a diverse range of backgrounds, essential and other skills levels, livelihood stages, and career and life goals. Programs were as diverse, drawing on a wide variety of regional contexts, from large metropolitan areas such as Metro Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto; to growing cities such as Halifax, Hamilton, Moncton and Saskatoon; to smaller or more rural/remote locations such as Muskoka, St. John's and Thompson.

All of our Collaborators expressed strong interest in being part of the national research, to benefit from training in and implementing the key project frameworks, and to share their experiences and learning with each other. Of the three Associations new to Phase Three, **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal** and **YWCA Muskoka** had previous experience in Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) programming, while **YWCA St. John's** was new to this specialization but had previously worked with participants on self-employment development. For detail on Collaborators' previous experience in ESE programming, see Appendix 1.

Why We Joined the National Collaborative

YWCA Halifax

"We wanted to learn more about integrated essential skills delivery and a strength-based approach to programming in order to enhance our program delivery."

YWCA Hamilton

"We wanted to continue participating in this collaborative research initiative to promote safe, inclusive and equitable communities; to build capacity to provide information, resources and support to 'like-minded' organizations in a variety of communities; and to enhance services and supports within our community."



YWCA Metro Vancouver

"We saw from Phase Two how we could contribute our internal learning and input from our clients to add insight to Phase Three research into what best supports clients in their career search journeys. We could also benefit from this ongoing opportunity to raise the standard of our program delivery, through incorporating best practices and learning from across the country."

YWCA Moncton

"Women face a multitude of roadblocks when it comes to entering or re-entering the workforce. Being a part of a nation-wide initiative helps to ensure our Association is providing programming that is accessible to all women, and is supported through the project's methodology training to target a range of different learning styles."

YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal

"Our reason behind joining the BSF initiative was to break away from traditional job search methods. For some time, our programs were focused on techniques for finding work, without touching on personal growth."

YWCA Muskoka

"We joined the YWCA BSF initiative to support women in building confidence, and to strengthen their skills in order to attain work and financial resiliency, and personal well-being in challenging circumstances."

YWCA Saskatoon

"Having been part of Phase Two, we saw the national collaborative as a great opportunity to enhance our employment training programs and build our organizational capacity to support our clients holistically with their needs and goals."

YWCA St. John's

"Collaboration has always been so important to our small agency – so many great things can happen when we collaborate with others to ensure we are approaching programs and services with as much insight as possible. While every community is unique, there are always similar issues being encountered in other communities."

YWCA Thompson

"The BSF project fits in with our holistic approach and with the life skills and pre-employment training programs and services that we have been providing to our community since 2006. We were among the Associations involved in the Phase Two collaborative research for this initiative, and were pleased to come on board as part of Phase Three."

YWCA Toronto

"Phase Two of the BSF initiative was an incredible opportunity for us to learn from fellow staff and colleagues from YWCA's across Canada. We wanted to extend this collaborative to a Phase Three and continue to build individual, program and organizational capacity by delivering regional and national trainings. We were happy to have seven past and three new Associations sign on to the initiative in 2019."

Four of the Collaborators' pilot programs focus on youth (approx. 15–30 years of age): those of YWCA Toronto, and the LAUNCH Atlantic regional partnership's pilot programs at YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's. Three focus on self-employment/small business development/trades training: YWCAs Hamilton, Moncton, and Saskatoon. Other programs focus more generally on skills building to prepare and/or support participants in their employment and life journeys, such as those of YWCAs Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal and Muskoka. YWCA Thompson's pre-employment program has a strong focus on serving Indigenous participants.

One of the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was the need to pivot to online delivery. This switch presented both challenges and opportunities depending on a range of factors, including each program's participant demographic, regional context, curriculum and organizational capacity; and above all, on people's access to digital connectivity. As explored later in this Compendium, moving to virtual involved restructuring program content, and a host of practical challenges related to supplying equipment to participants and ensuring that everyone had the digital skills and connections required to participate.

Although some programs, such as **YWCA Hamilton's PowerUp Ready** small business development program, already had experience with virtual delivery, the shift online was new to many other Collaborator staff and participants. Programs with a hands-on training/work experience component, such as **YWCA Saskatoon's Trade Journey**, had to negotiate the complex and constantly changing health regulations around COVID-19 with participants, training partners and employer partners. Hybrid delivery was often the best option for a number of programs, where possible facilitating in-person introductory and closing sessions for each cohort with careful adherence to health regulations, and holding workshops and peer breakout groups over Zoom.

In the case of the **Steps to Success** program offered by **YWCA Thompson**, participants could not easily access virtual technology, which was in any case generally less suited to their learning styles. Changing restrictions, including a Code Red for the YWCA facility itself, resulted in a temporary suspension of planned cohorts and program activities. The ESE team responded by extending the data collection period for this program.

YWCA Saskatoon had originally planned to pilot an enhanced version of the Essential Skills for Employment in Hospitality program researched in Phase Two. Due to pandemic restrictions, staff had to pivot to their trades-focused program, **Trades Journey**. In the case of **YWCA Muskoka**, the program experienced a challenge of low intake numbers. In 2021, after feedback from the community regarding the name of their program, which had become less suited to the circumstances of a pandemic, staff re-branded it from the Women Transforming program to **Women Thriving**. They also restructured the format in mid-2022 to begin offering single-day workshops, which would be easier for participants to attend in the context of COVID-19 restrictions and related life circumstances.

A separate challenge for YWCAs Halifax and St. John's was posed by the end date of funding for their **LAUNCH Atlantic** programs, which meant a gap in programming for most of 2021 until a new round of

funding was received at the end of that year. **YWCA Moncton** experienced a disruption in 2022 and could only begin offering that year's cohort in the Fall. Staff ended up switching program hours from daytime to evenings, to boost enrolment and accommodate participants' schedules during the pandemic.

The Collaborator profiles below provide a brief description of regional context, program demographic, a pilot program, and a participant testimonial from each (some names have been withheld, out of respect for participant anonymity). All profiles were authored by their respective Associations and have been edited only for consistency and typographical errors, or to include content and quotes provided elsewhere by staff and program participants. The profiles capture the programs as they were offered during the research period. Language used in some of the profiles reflects the initial Phase Three demographic focus, which was on women.

A profile of the **LAUNCH Atlantic** capacity building partnership spanning YWCAs Halifax, Moncton, and St. John's is featured below in Section 4.1, which showcases a sampling of promising practices from Phase Three.

2.1 YWCA HALIFAX, LAUNCH ATLANTIC

About the Association:

YWCA Halifax is Halifax Regional Municipality's only organization that builds economic security, promotes wellness, and creates opportunities for women, girls, and their families by providing a strong voice and integrated services. We are for, by, and about women and girls. We transform lives by providing a continuum of critical services and programs that build capacity for lasting positive change. We strive to change the underlying causes and issues that are at the root of inequality, violence, poverty, and homelessness.

Our mission is to build economic security, promote wellness, and create opportunities for women, girls, Two-Spirit and gender diverse people and their families by providing a strong voice and integrated services. We work mainly in four areas of focus: to promote the leadership, health and wellness of women and girls; to advance women's economic and housing security; to deliver quality, accessible, developmental early learning and childcare; and to work to end violence against women and girls.

YWCA Halifax currently offers four separate employment programs for women, girls and gender diverse individuals. These include a pre-employment program for individuals currently receiving social assistance benefits (Step Ahead), an entrepreneurial program for newcomer women (Business Builders), and two employment readiness programs; one for individuals over 30 years old (ReLaunch), and another for youth aged 15–30, **LAUNCH Atlantic**, which is now offered in partnership with YWCAs Moncton and St. John's.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

LAUNCH Atlantic is focused on women and gender diverse individuals aged 15–30; currently out of school, unemployed or underemployed; and able to attend programming 30 hours a week. Priority is given though not limited to youth with experience of the following: high school non-completion; disability; Indigenous; residence in a rural or remote location; lone (single) parent; visible or ethnic minority; recent immigrant.

“To give an example, for our most recent cohort at YWCA Halifax, 60% were self-reporting as visible minorities, 48% as newcomers, 32% as having a disability.” (YWCA Halifax staff)

Our Local Context:

Our YWCA is centrally located in the community of Spryfield, which has an extremely high percentage of residents living on income assistance, one of the highest rates of single/lone mothers in the country, and a low rate of high school graduates. Employability programming is currently being held at this location, at which space and resources available are accessible to the surrounding communities.

Program Outline

Purpose:

The **LAUNCH** program is designed to provide young women and gender diverse youth with hands-on employment skills training. The program serves young women and gender diverse youth who are out of school, unemployed or underemployed, and face multiple barriers to employment.

Description:

The **LAUNCH Atlantic** program is a 20-week program that now spans three provinces: **YWCA Halifax**, Nova Scotia; **YWCA Moncton**, New Brunswick; and **YWCA St. John's**, Newfoundland & Labrador.

The program consists of eight paid weeks of skills development training (delivered virtually) that help participants to recognize personal and professional values, identify character and personality dimensions, and learn strategies for finding employment opportunities. These workshops have been adapted to **YWCA Toronto's** Life Skills model and YWCA BSF's asset mapping approach.

“I’ve become more adept at speaking freely and openly, by sharing my thoughts and opinions without fear of being wrong or being judged. My confidence level has gone up by an immense amount, albeit I still have a lot of work to do.” (YWCA Halifax participant)

Equipped with greater self-awareness, participants then embark on their paid 12-week work placements with employers across the city. This allows them to gain real world experience and assess work values based on direct experience instead of assumed work expectations.

Along with engaging participants in work-specific trainings, **LAUNCH** also offers certifications in valuable work placement areas including Emergency First Aid, Microsoft Word and Excel, and Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS); and it provides funding for participants to engage in work-specific training (such as Mental Health First Aid, Food Handlers, and other continuing education programming).

The online training phase of the program supports participants in building digital skills related to remote working and Microsoft Office. Staff have also implemented **YWCA Toronto's** BSF Employer Engagement Framework to ensure a collaborative approach when engaging with employers and participants during the job-search process, and for tracking program outcomes. Currently, more than 50 percent of program participants from **YWCA Halifax's** cohort are employed and earning more than minimum wage, while a few others have returned to school to further develop their knowledge and skills.

A sampling of our outcomes: In 2020, despite pandemic conditions, more than one third of clients employed (35 percent), as a result of the program, were retained by their work placement host employers. The remaining employed clients were able to utilize the job search skills acquired through the program to secure employment for themselves elsewhere upon the completion of their 12-week work placements. Sixty-five percent of post-survey responses felt strongly about their leadership skills in comparison to 39 percent pre-survey. There was a 37 percent increase in participants reporting that they felt confident in their communication skills (85 percent in post-surveys in comparison with 48 percent in pre-surveys).

YWCA Halifax LAUNCH Participant Testimonial:

*"I first heard of the **LAUNCH** program from a roommate who was in one of the cohorts. I had been unemployed before COVID due to mental health reasons and needed help to get back on my feet. I tried doing it on my own but only lasted two days on the job. COVID made it difficult to find a job that I liked so I looked to the YWCA for help.*

*When first arriving into the program, I identified as female with **LAUNCH** and the YWCA: I felt comfortable to explore my gender and any feelings I had about it, and I felt supported. I was excited to receive my First Aid certificate again, [and] I also enjoyed learning about people's personalities through the personality test we completed. My first impression was that I was going to get a lot out of the program*

and work on skills that I had not been using during the year that I was not working.

*Due to COVID restrictions at the time, **LAUNCH** was online. I wasn't sure how well I would do with this but the facilitator kept us engaged in conversations, and encouraged and always had a smile on her face... The other participants in my cohort were all amazing humans as well. I received funding for interview clothes and I know others received bus passes and childcare and were thankful that they had this offered to them. I could not have asked for a better work placement—with housing at **YWCA Moncton**. The first two weeks were a little nerve racking but when I got to know the team it was an amazing placement. I realized my passion for helping people. **LAUNCH** helped me realize where I want to go in life and I have found a passion that I didn't know I had.*

*When I finished **LAUNCH**, I got a grant to stay on at **YWCA Moncton** and worked with the housing team until September 2021, a year since I completed. In February 2021 I also applied to Oulton College to be a Human Service Counsellor. I started in September of this last year and my average is currently standing at 95 percent. I wouldn't be as confident, passionate, or caring a person [as] I am today. I wouldn't even be where I am today. I owe everything to the program and I am grateful for the opportunity that I had to speak today on behalf of **LAUNCH**. Thank you."*
(YWCA Halifax participant)



2.2 YWCA HAMILTON, POWERUP READY

About the Association:

YWCA Hamilton is a community-based Association with a mission to assist economically disadvantaged, marginalized, and diverse groups and individuals. Our services facilitate participation, access and equal opportunities, including support, training, assistance and advocacy. Our core services are: transitional housing; employment programs and supports; licensed childcare centres; special programs for women and girls; leadership development for women and youth; developmental services; group homes; active living centres; newcomer settlement; and health and wellness.

YWCA Hamilton's workforce skills and development programs work to connect women to good jobs, innovation training and entrepreneurial opportunities. We invest in women's skills, passion and leadership potential, and actively promote a "she-covery" for women in the workforce.

Our Local Context:

Our **PowerUp Ready** small business program focuses on women entrepreneurs who are either starting or scaling up their businesses; only a small percentage are in receipt of government benefits, or need the housing supports that we offer as an Association. Many of our participants are struggling to deal with challenges in their lives, and with low self-esteem and motivation. Many are single parents working full-time while looking after their children and working on their small businesses. Many are also highly educated, although we have noticed a serious gap in digital skills among some of the women who come to our programs.

"Most of the clients are single parents. Some of them have three kids, four kids—whether you have one or four, there are a lot of things involved in raising a child and they are really doing all the work; and some of them are part-time, full-time; and if it's a full-time job and then they're doing this program as well, it's hard."
(YWCA Hamilton Business Advisory Manager)

Demographic Focus of the Program:

Participants in our program range in age mostly from 28–40 and 50–60. Since our webinars and consulting moved to virtual delivery in Spring 2020, we have been able to broaden our reach to offer the program to women and gender diverse participants from across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

Entrepreneurship is the ultimate goal of the ten-week business planning **PowerUp Ready** program (we also offer a four-week PowerUp Explore program for those wanting to know if self-employment is the right choice for them). Whether this is for a start-up or for scaling up, moving the business forward is the ultimate goal. For most of our clients, the hardest part of running a business can be the day-to-day operations and learning the required financial literacy. But self-direction and motivation are also key, as entrepreneurs wear many hats and have to navigate their business activities largely on their own. Staying focused and positive is vital to making one's business work.

We have identified a profound area of need around digital skills—it was surprising to see the number of women who could not navigate a computer and did not have online skills. To respond, we created Digital Force and received funding for six months to help women navigate these skills, which aided them immensely, not only in their businesses but also in their personal lives. Finally, entrepreneurship is what we teach very well, so that all women who come to our program have a chance to be self-sustainable and thrive in all areas of their lives.

Program Description:

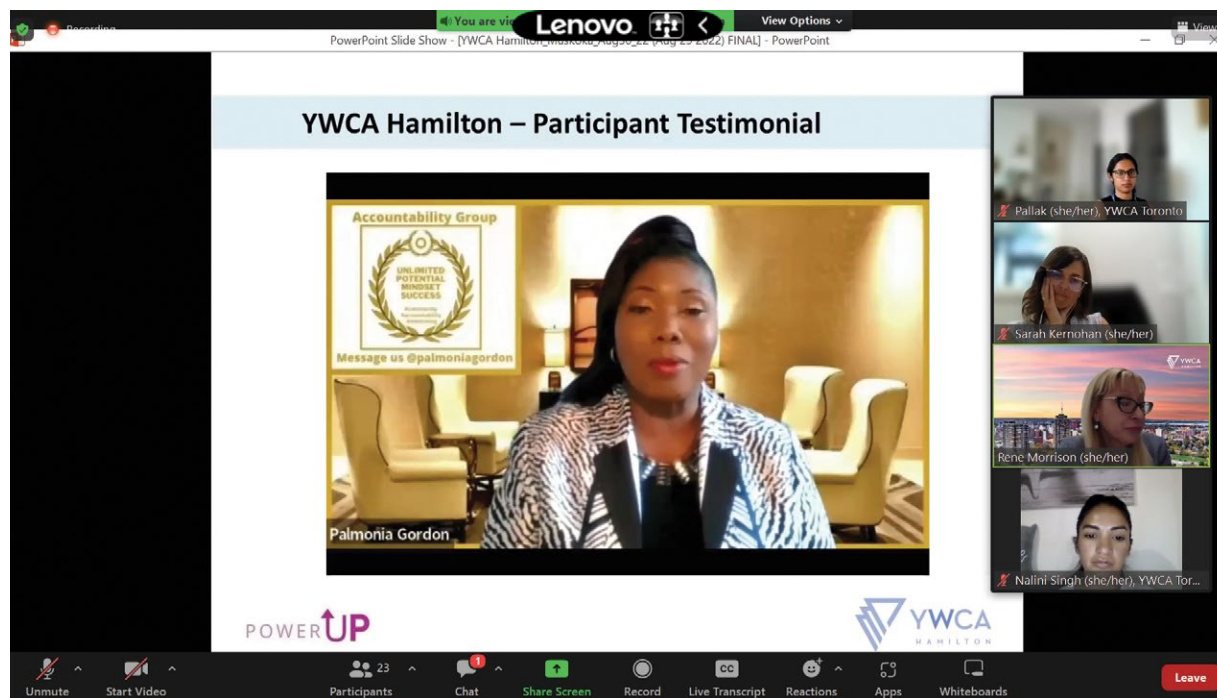
Our program supports women entrepreneurs in small business ventures, to help them develop strategies and tactics, to connect them with contacts, and to keep them moving their businesses forward. Workshops are held bi-weekly through Zoom and feature topics such as starting your business, building resilience, business planning, marketing, finance, operations and legal issues. Those who are accepted attend a free,

intensive ten-week training program which includes lectures provided by trained business advisors and industry experts. By the end of the program, women entrepreneurs are able to present their business plans to us and to the two business advisors present, which prepares them to pitch their ideas to the outside world.

We begin with the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) Asset Mapping webinar, which emphasizes the importance of goal-setting in business plan development. It helps participants to focus on reaching certain milestones during the rollout or pivot of the business. **YWCA Hamilton's** adaptation of the YWCA BSF Individual Participant Asset Map to a small business focus is featured in Section 4.4 as a promising practice. Participants then take a look at their core values, as showcased in our Lesson Plan. These values will inform what they want their businesses to convey to their consumers and how those values will impact their brand development.

Additionally, by integrating essential skills into this program, such as budgeting in their financial plan, participants are able to write a detailed business plan, and learn how to commercialize their business and communicate effectively with their customers. A series of webinars delivered throughout the ten weeks covers the many facets of running a business. As new and existing owners of businesses, participants also have access to business advisory sessions to obtain more customized advice.

After learning about business planning, market research, sales, marketing, etc., participants prepare business plans, models and strategies, and present these to the group and to business advisors. As an added bonus, this creates an opportunity for networking and sharing resources, and refining their plans before finalization.



This program has connected with hundreds of entrepreneurs in the community and has helped them look at entrepreneurship in a new light. With the team's community connections and outreach, they have guided at least 50 participants in moving their businesses forward and generating revenue in the marketplace. We have a 90 percent success rate with respect to participants generating enough revenue from their businesses to provide them with a livelihood.

Participant Testimonial:

*"Hi, my name is Palmonia Gordon and I am the CEO of Order It Academy in Hamilton, Ontario. I have the distinguished pleasure of sharing with you the amazing experience I had as a part of the **PowerUp Ready** program through the YWCA Entrepreneur Centre in Hamilton. Now, this took place at the height of the pandemic when everyone was gripped with a sense of fear not knowing: How do I save or grow my business? The **PowerUp** program gave me the tools and the resources not only to build my business but to see how sustainable and viable it was. Having amazing mentors and coaches allowed me to properly identify my customers, to create a business plan, and of course to face my relationship with money by finalizing a financial spreadsheet—such a powerful experience. The program has helped my business in moving forward because it allows me to access valuable resources, and create accountability and consistency—these are some of the values I am able to share with my clients today because they were taught to me. Finally, the program gave me a new network of individuals which allowed for the creation of what you might call a form of 'mastermind', which gave us the opportunity to grow confidence and resilience. I am standing here before you as proof that the program does work. I look forward to seeing you and watching your story as you power up."*
(YWCA Hamilton participant)

2.3 YWCA METRO VANCOUVER, FOCUS@WORK

About the Association:

We boldly envision a just and equitable world for women, families and allies. We advance gender equity alongside women, families, Two-Spirit and gender diverse people through advocacy and integrated services that help support personal, collective and economic well-being, and equal opportunities. We recognize the importance of essential skills programming and how it relates to achieving our mission.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

We serve all self-identified women who are work ready or in career transition; the median age of women coming to our program is around 40. A significant percentage of women in the program are newcomers to Canada, many of whom are highly educated and highly skilled, while others have a basic level of education. Their socio-economic picture varies: some are in receipt of government benefits, some have family savings, others are living in poverty. Our participants come from local neighbourhoods, but they can also access our program virtually from up to a two hours' distance away.

Our Local Context:

Established in 1996, **Focus@Work** is one of the longest-running programs offered by **YWCA Metro Vancouver** and is well known in the local community. The program has changed over the years, to adapt to job seekers' needs, but it has maintained a focus on building community, group-based support, personal growth and networking. Currently Vancouver faces complex social issues including poverty, addictions and housing shortages. Despite the low unemployment rate in Vancouver, the combination of the high cost of living and rising inflation has made circumstances challenging for some women in our community, although some have family savings and/or support. **Focus@Work** routinely updates programming and refers participants to wraparound services provided by **YWCA Metro Vancouver** and community partners, to address the unique needs of women and their families.

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

The aim of **Focus@Work** is to help women to achieve economic and employment sustainability. We serve women from all of the four project demographic groups; the program is for those who are work ready or in career transition. Many participants have been out of the workplace for a while (e.g., for family reasons), have suffered shocks, or are “stuck” and have lost motivation; they often experience low self-esteem and confidence.

Program Description:

Focus@Work is a recognized employment program that equips women with the skills to promote themselves to employers, learn about suitable work environments and careers, and gain confidence in building their personal and professional networks. The program offers three weeks of full-time workshops covering topics ranging from: values assessment, diversity/inclusion/belonging in the workplace, essential skills for success, job boards, growth mindset, self-care, résumés, accomplishment statements, cover letters, “skills for success 2” (asset mapping), personal branding and LinkedIn, job-related information and mock interviews, networking, etc.

We have also introduced a cultural competency workshop into our training workshops curriculum, demonstrating how to participate in creating a healthy workplace team, the importance of diversity and inclusion, and the attributes hiring managers are looking for when helping to create a robust workplace culture. During the workshop component, there are also group coaching sessions where we split the cohort into two groups to create a more individualized setting; and we have created self-led study periods to allow space for participants to demonstrate leadership and team collaboration, and to practice their online skills together.

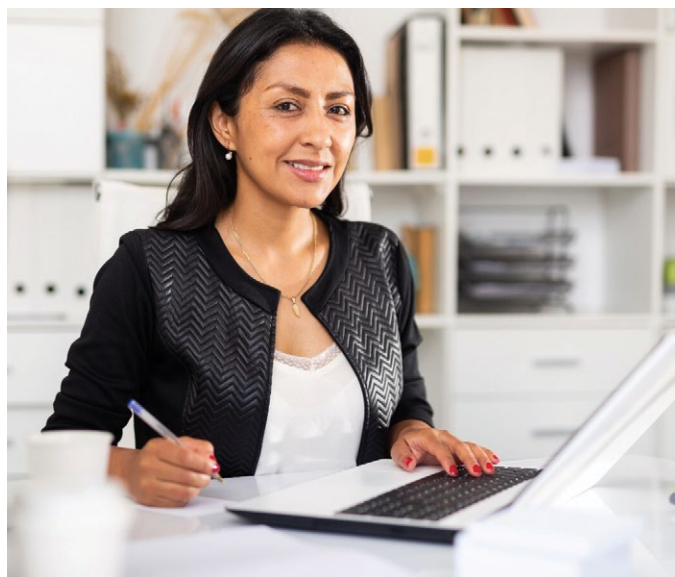
Participants then receive nine weeks of follow-up support, including five individual coaching sessions, once a week group meet-ups, and the use of the Slack platform for communicating articles of interest, jobs, training opportunities and **Focus@Work**-organized guest speaker events. All of this provides a rich and supportive environment for both career search learning and community building.

“The facilitators as well as the other ladies in my group helped me realize what my skills, accomplishments, and other positive aspects I am able to contribute are. This has greatly helped with my confidence and I have been receiving excellent feedback from outside resources (e.g., mock interviews, branding coach, etc.). The group of ladies I was placed with all had wonderful opinions and fascinating backgrounds. Between them and the facilitators, I have had some networking opportunities presented to me.”
(YWCA Metro Vancouver participant)

We introduce and run our program as a safe community from day one; the group-developed “community standards” is a living document that is revisited throughout the program. This supports and encourages participation. We have recently evolved to a hybrid program, which involves a first- and last-day in-person, as well as in-person group coaching once a week at two points during the program. These sessions help build strong connections among staff and participants. Otherwise, all workshops are delivered virtually via Zoom.

Focus@Work was our pilot program for Phase Two. For Phase Three, we have introduced SHETalks (SHE = Seen, Heard, Empowered), our weekly peer support program, to better prepare our clients to succeed in the labour market as it moves beyond COVID-19.

YWCA Metro Vancouver’s SHETalks is featured in Section 4.2 as a promising practice in creating an online platform to build peer-to-peer connections, networking and support.



YWCA Metro Vancouver Participant Testimonial:

"I miss our cohort #68—68 is a lucky number to me. I met so many wonderful women in these weeks. I was inspired by their stories. I cried several times during the program. This program helped me through the healing process, guiding me to find my work values, and getting to know many women on the journey together."

*"First of all, the **Focus@Work** program is well-structured. I thought we would just jump into learning hard skills such as résumé and cover letter writing. By looking at the first-week schedule, I did not realize it prepares us mentally and emotionally and is therefore very necessary. Oh my, was I glad that this program not just provides skills training for us to find jobs, but also allows us to heal ourselves. A lot of us were disappointed in ourselves, worried about uncertainty, and had little courage to find a professional job. We are no longer that way after the program. We are equipped with these positive mindsets and tools to start our adventures!"*

*"Second, I realized my work values were a lot different now from when I worked for big corporations. The **Focus@Work** program taught me to re-evaluate my identity and my work values. It was a surprise to me that I actually value work-life balance and family support more than contribution to the company*

and climbing the corporate ladder. Job security is another important aspect. In this regard, to work for a non-profit organization may be my next pursuit of a professional career. Money is no longer a primary factor for me to find my next job."

"Third, the women I met in this program are truly amazing! I appreciate their sharing of their stories and emotions. I felt not alone anymore. I became part of the group who dared to chase our dream. We supported each other during the program. No judgmental opinion. We were always encouraging each other. I have never been in such a group before. I felt a sense of belonging. I am going to keep contacting and networking with our cohort consultants and team members after the program. The end of the program is a new beginning for me. I found direction and the meaning of life during the program. May it flourish, and help more and more women just like me."
(YWCA Metro Vancouver participant)

2.4 YWCA MONCTON, EMPLOYMENT MY WAY

About the Association:

We support and empower women, gender diverse individuals, and their families through advocacy and integrated services that foster independence, wellness and equity for all. Personal empowerment is a key area of focus; this includes support to achieve economic and personal milestones relating to employment and life skills. As a growing organization experiencing a period of renewal, we have had to contend with a number of challenges. Drawing on community partnerships and the broader YWCA movement, as well as our commitment to a client-centred approach, has consistently ensured that challenges become learning opportunities.

Through our many accessible educational programs and support services, women are able to develop economic security and a livelihood. We support women to help them recognize the barriers they face, develop positive self-regard and a support network, enhance their employability skills, and create long-term career goals.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

Employment My Way is designed to serve women and gender diverse youth ranging from 16–30 years old who are facing barriers to economic security, and where normalized learning styles are not suited for them. It also focuses on women who are interested in learning about self-employment. Our main demographic is women living in poverty (as per the low-income measurement tools). Many are in receipt of government benefits; many are newcomers and Indigenous youth. Many of our participants face multiple intersecting barriers to employment such as: poverty (often intergenerational); trauma; life crises; absences from the workforce; sole-parenting; lack of essential skills training in literacy, numeracy, computer use and problem-solving; and low confidence and self-esteem.

Our Local Context:

Part of our work within our Beechwood community consists of meetings and soliciting input from community members. We take note of what they identify as systemic issues. For example, we obtained funding from TD Bank/Prosper Canada to develop a financial literacy program tailored to the needs of women accessing public income supports. Recently, we have seen a large influx of immigration and migration to New Brunswick without enough services to support those new to the region. There is also a huge lack of affordable housing in Moncton, and the cost of living has risen with inflation.

Since 2020, we have been part of the **LAUNCH Atlantic** regional partnership (see Section 4.1 below).

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

Employment My Way is a self-employment program that aims to engage local entrepreneurs in supporting participants toward developing and running a successful business. The purpose is to empower participants to stabilize their lives, build a holistic range of livelihood assets, and enhance their essential skills toward full participation in the labour market.

Although there are other business development programs in the community, because our program is based upon an equity framework that recognizes and responds to the nuances of women and gender diverse peoples, we remain an important pillar of the economic development sector. We aim to help women move from stabilizing their lives to transitioning toward a sustainable livelihood.

Program Description:

Designed to empower women through supporting them to engage in self-employment opportunities, the program takes a strength-based, client-centred approach that recognizes women's unique and varied individual backgrounds, experiences and strengths. It is particularly targeted toward women living in low-income households and welcomes newcomer women. When **Employment My Way** was launched, 90 percent of participants reported as visible minority or newcomer women. After starting the program, **YWCA Moncton** connected with the Greater Moncton Local Immigration Partnership to talk about barriers to women's self-employment, particularly those they face in setting up their own businesses. Part of our program now focuses on networking, practising English, and exposure to Canadian culture.

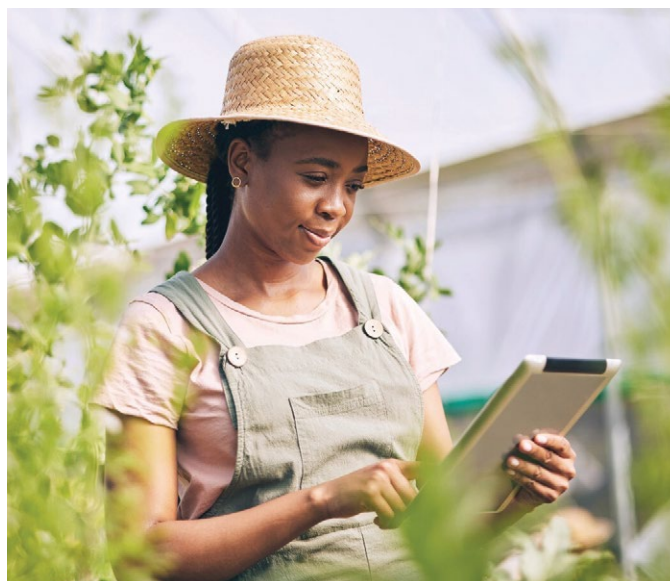
“Bridging community connections and maintaining contact with past participants has provided deeper insight into the vast dynamics that contribute to economic empowerment. For example, EMW supported the development of a newcomer’s business plan and through sustainable livelihoods-based coaching came to realize her skills, passion, and extensive experience as an architect. The program connected her with a former volunteer who owned an architecture firm and supported the individual in navigating how to acquire Canadian credentials.”
(YWCA Halifax staff)

SECTION 2

For self-employed individuals, the development of social assets is an integral aspect of advancing within the economic landscape. To maintain these assets beyond the scope of the program, **YWCA Moncton** nurtures partnerships with local organizations that provide business supports in the Greater Moncton Area. These include the Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC Women in Business), Business & Professional Women of Greater Moncton Inc., Enterprise Moncton, and various banks and credit unions. With these partnerships, participants are able to build new and lasting relationships with local organizations that provide support throughout their professional and personal journeys.

Along with social assets, **Employment My Way** provides workshops that help participants expand their personal, professional and financial skillsets. Workshops and program activities teach them methods that build self-confidence and provide them with access to various community supports. The Essential Skills for Employment are taught during workshops and significantly improve participants' ability to lead and flourish in various types of work environments. For example, participants develop basic understandings of accounting, budgeting, personal/business cash flows, etc., which in turn boosts their financial literacy and prepares them to run successful businesses.

By partnering participants with mentors from local organizations, the program ensures that participants gain meaningful knowledge from those who have met the challenges of running businesses. Once they have gathered knowledge from these partnerships, participants can apply learning to their own businesses, increasing the possibility they will experience successful business outcomes. They are not only improving in the skills required to flourish within the employment sector but also have consistent access to experienced individuals beyond the scope of the program.



YWCA Moncton Participant Testimonial:

*While on a road trip, Jessika Gauvin listened in to an **Employment My Way** session that her mother was participating in. The discussion and group caught her interest, and she requested more information from her mom on what the program offered. She has always had a strong passion for exploring and foraging nature's bounty of edible goods and at the time was engaged in providing presentations to schools, community groups and businesses on edible nature foraging, but lacked the confidence and logistical know-how to legitimize as a business. As a result, she operated under a "by donation" model, or for free, out of a sheer passion for the topic.*

Jessika soon joined the next cohort and began to develop her business plan. She created a solid brand, launched marketing, including a robust social media presence, and identified a fee-for-service model that reflected the flexible and adaptable services she provides. With increased public awareness came increased engagement, and she quickly received a flood of requests for presentations and public and personal land tours. As a result of the hype from her business launch, she was featured in a Global News segment and on CBC and in local newspapers, bridging connections to more service users as well as local groups focused on food security.

*In the few years since her participation in **Employment My Way**, Jessika has established a solid social media community of like-minded folks locally and abroad who are passionate about sustainable, whole and healthy foods. Due to her rapid growth, her future plans include automation of administrative tasks (program registrations, payments, finance management, etc.) so she can free up more time to keep up with the requests for her teachings, and also developing her own product line. (YWCA Moncton staff report)*

2.5 YWCA MONTREAL/Y DES FEMMES DE MONTRÉAL, WOMEN'S WORK INTEGRATION PROGRAM (FEMMES VERS L'EMPLOI)

About the Association:

Our mission is “Building together a better future for girls, women and their families,” and our Theory of Change is grounded in a holistic approach to the lives of women and girls, with a focus on building their pathways to better, more sustainable futures. Our Association offers multiple employment programs adapted to serve the diverse range of clients who enter our doors. We know they come from different walks of life, and we are constantly striving to ensure that we have something to suit each client's needs. For example, our Unique (pre-employment) program is focused on serving women in highly precarious circumstances, with experience of Violence Against Women (VAW) issues. Working from a holistic approach, our services are designed to offer all of our clients a safe space to grow not only professionally but also personally.

Client needs are met by a multidisciplinary team of university-trained professionals composed of guidance counsellors, employment counsellors, employment skills teachers, language and computer teachers, and psychosocial workers. This team is further supported by the greater YWCA Montreal team as well as diverse community partners who grant easy

access to legal information, family caregiver support, volunteering opportunities, professional mentors, conferences on various life skills-related subjects, a temporary housing residence, new and used low-cost clothing for the workplace, and the support of peer helpers.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

Our program is open to women and gender diverse people from across the Island of Montreal. Our clientele base includes recent immigrants, single mothers, and family caregivers who are either without income or receiving social assistance. The typical participant has been socially isolated, due to various life circumstances including intimate partner violence, their role as a stay-at-home mother, their migration experience, the demands of a caregiver role, and addressing health/mental health challenges. Overall, our target audience for the program is women who have not worked for quite some time.

“Back in the day we had participants more distant from the labour market (low education, no work experience, etc.), but there has been a shift during COVID where we're seeing people with more education and experience who could find work if they needed to because there are so many jobs available. But their low self-esteem is hindering them from finding work.” (YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal staff)

Our Local Context:

Our employment services department at YWCA Montreal was not spared the impact of a “full employment” labour market, and we have as a consequence faced recruitment challenges for our programs. Our staff teams have showed great creativity and diversified our approaches to emphasize the strengths of our programs in order to reach a clientele that is out of the labour market or is interested in reorienting, as some women reflect on their options following the changes brought about by COVID-19.

The majority of our clients for the **Women's Work Integration Program** are immigrant women. We have seen a shift over the last couple of years in the type of immigrant population we serve. We still have a large group of newly arrived immigrants (those who have been in Canada fewer than five years), but the majority of our immigrant clientele have been in Canada between five and ten years, and have had little to no work experience in Canada. Over the past several years, we have also noticed an increase in the age of the average participant. Given these client characteristics, and put in the context of a post-COVID bilingual city, strong language and digital literacy skills continue to be of the utmost importance to their success.

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

The format of our **Women's Work Integration Program** was designed strategically to help women gain the courage to share their stories through group career counselling and job search strategies. Participants most often come for help citing low self-esteem, and we work with them to help them recognize and appreciate their skills, knowledge, values and experience. Our workshops have been adapted to the YWCA Life Skills model, with a focus on emphasizing transferable skills and building participants' emotional intelligence. The aim is to enhance their capacities for motivation and self-direction, despite the barriers they continue to face. The support that group members offer each other is invaluable to this process.

Program Description:

The **Women's Work Integration Program (WWIP)** at YWCA Montreal is a 19-week employment preparatory program offered in both French and English that helps women find their path through online and in-class workshops tailored to their personal, social and professional development. Since the start of our collaboration with **YWCA Toronto's** BSF initiative, the program's content and structure has been reworked to follow the YWCA BSF model and YWCA Life Skills model.

YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal is featured for its promising practice of cross-program Life Skills integration in Section 4.3.

Essential Skills for Employment, with an emphasis on computer and literacy skills, were integrated into the program to ensure that women continuously develop their skills in order to build a competitive advantage in the labour market. For example, the French and English language courses offered by the program enhance participants' employability because bilingualism is important for those residing in the province of Quebec.

"I improved my abilities and obtained new skills. I also had the chance to create new friendships. You really helped me update my CV and cover letter. In addition, your training questions and answers for interviews helped me a lot when passing real interviews and getting the job. The Life Skills workshops were invaluable." (YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal participant)

We include the skills of reading and writing in all of our workshops. We know that individuals learn differently, and that there are different ways of taking in information. We also know that some participants are timid and reluctant to speak up, so knowing how to put their thoughts on paper gives them a different kind of "voice." Our program also focuses on teamwork and the creation of a safe/dynamic space. Being able to work in a team and collaborate with peers is important for our participants. Learning to tell stories and "share the air" also allows for proper communication, and makes it more inviting for those afraid to speak up.

During the pandemic, we recognized a shift in skills required for job readiness, which led us to update the program, to teach participants how they can adapt to change in difficult situations. Additionally, participants were given a newfound sense of confidence through the use of YWCA's BSF participant asset mapping workshops. They were able to draft an overview of existing strengths and identify how to develop new assets.

After completing various skills development workshops, and overcoming barriers such as lack of self-confidence, program participants are encouraged to find internships in a field of their choice. From filmed interview simulations to quarterly follow-up sessions with participants, we support women in their search to find the right employment “fit” for them, as well as to benefit from great opportunities to build lasting peer relationships through the program.



YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal Participant Testimonial:

“Before WWIP, I had hit the lowest point in my life. I was laid off from a job in January 2019, and had to apply for welfare assistance for the first time, which I felt deeply embarrassed by, because it was very difficult for me to ask for help. As I continued my job search without success, the pandemic hit and suddenly there was no longer work available in hospitality. While I knew I had the capable skills to work in the film industry, I hadn’t used many of those skills in several years and was worried that I wouldn’t be able to adapt to the current entertainment industry. My case worker sent me a flyer for the YWCA WWIP and it looked like the answer for exactly what I needed help with, so I reached out and asked for assistance.”

“Throughout the program, I met a group of empowering women, and people from all walks of life. I learned an abundance of new skills and discovered skills I didn’t even know I had. The staff were encouraging even when I experienced failure, and I found those experiences were valuable learning lessons. I regained my inner confidence while learning to be a better communicator and listener. I learned to tap into my empathy without carrying the burdens of others. I also learned to not settle in life, but to seek out opportunities that offer career growth and personal expansion. I am very grateful for how the staff were conscious about holding space, while creating a safe environment to be vulnerable and share amongst fellow participants. Pandemic precautions were also handled very well throughout the program. I will forever be grateful for this program and I feel blessed that it came into my life at the right time! I am now happily working with an amazing team, at a job where I can utilize my skillset to help fellow creatives develop their careers in the screen industry. The program also assisted me in learning how to prioritize work flow and stress management, which has been incredibly helpful as I adjust to working again. Thank you to all of the staff at the YWCA! Virtual Hugs.” (YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal participant)

2.6 YWCA MUSKOKA, WOMEN THRIVING

About the Association:

Our vision is for a future in which all women and girls are thriving. We champion positive change through education, leadership and advocacy. We actively collaborate with community partners to challenge assumptions within our community and further common goals of supporting and honouring women, encouraging them to heal and grow. We believe that to have women leading and engaging in our communities plays a fundamental role in ensuring a healthy environment and future for generations to come.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

This program is targeted toward any women, be they un/underemployed, navigating transitions, starting a new business, or just looking to move forward on their personal journey. The women who come to our program are from a wide range of life circumstances. Most are over 50, and many are seeking to make changes in their lives. The program is designed to build their confidence and overall happiness, and to help them remain in their jobs, develop a willingness to try new jobs, or expand their employability with new trainings. The aim is to send women into the workforce who are happier, healthier, and able to sustain a healthy relationship with their employers and work (whether volunteer or paid).

Our Local Context:

YWCA Muskoka serves a large geographical area with a very varied socio-economic picture, from wealthy households, to seasonal occupants and visitors, to local people living in poverty. Housing is an issue, as it is everywhere else in Ontario. Our economy and resulting employment patterns are highly seasonal. Transportation is a big challenge given the breadth of our service area, large parts of which are rural. The move to virtual program delivery during the pandemic was an advantage in this respect, even though we find in-person groups are best to reduce social isolation and build networks of support for participants. We hope to benefit from both in-person and virtual programming by exploring hybrid delivery.

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

With an emphasis on self-care, health and finding the leader within, the purpose of this program is to boost participants' confidence so they can tackle the wide range of life and work challenges that they may face.

Program Description:

YWCA Muskoka's **Women Thriving** is a free ten-week program that brings women of all ages together for personal growth, social connections and

self-care. It helps them to identify their strengths, build skills and knowledge, and develop strong networks. It also focuses on supporting them to manage transitions in life, such as: coming into a new community, starting a new job/business, becoming a sole support parent, beginning retirement, and/or longing to move forward with a personal journey. Teaching soft skills—communication, creativity, problem solving, collaboration and adaptability, emotional intelligence, leadership—supports women to get to know themselves better, and therefore have the ability to lead their lives according to their own needs. When women meet their own needs, they have more capacity to move in the direction of building sustainable futures for themselves and their families.

Program facilitators realized early on that the most significant barriers that participants face are stress and other emotional hurdles that can become easier to handle when there is more of a focus on emotional intelligence. To identify these barriers, the program commences with the YWCA BSF participant asset mapping tool, which allows participants to recognize their strengths and other aspects of life that require attention, as well as to outline the steps they need to take in order to achieve their goals. Additionally, the Personality Dimensions workshop helps participants understand their working styles and how they can collaborate with colleagues who may have different styles than theirs. This helps them learn how to respect and value both their own and others' workplace preferences, and also manage potential conflicts in the workplace.

"It was a fun and interesting course. Asset mapping was neat. Stress was good to know more [about]; the information was great. The Setting Boundaries workshop is something everyone should do in their life. I learned I needed more of them in my own life again and will keep them for the rest of my life this time! I already knew I had humour, but I needed more in my life like before when I was younger."
(YWCA Muskoka participant)

We are now offering our program workshops on a flexible basis to accommodate participant needs, goals and schedules, so that women can attend when and how they choose rather than having to commit to a whole program series. One workshop, Money Mindset, explores how we can change the way we view money. Another workshop, The Leader Within, introduces a new leadership model where the individual is at the core (for more detail on this model and leadership training, see Section 1.1.5). We also offer a workshop on motivation that integrates the Life Skills model and Lesson Plan.

YWCA Muskoka's workshop on motivation is featured in Section 4.3 as a promising practice for using the Life Skills model for exploring emerging skills.

Even through the pandemic, participants have built a sense of community with each other and found ways to maintain friendships and support their peers. It is evident from each program cohort that participants feel more confident about their identity, the values they stand for, and the skills and assets they have to offer to their communities and families.

YWCA Muskoka Participant Testimonial:

*"It was suggested to me that I contact **YWCA Muskoka** for some moral support as I hit somewhat of a rocky patch professionally, so I spoke with one of the staff who assessed that **Women Thriving** would be a good class for me and referred me to the program facilitator. Both ladies were extremely kind and compassionate and knew right away that I would benefit. I took the class and I'm really glad that I did.*

"It gave me great insight into what kind of person I am, and further to that what kind of boss I am. It provided me with some really good tools to lead my team more effectively based on how they work and how they conduct themselves, and an understanding of how they process direction and how they can accomplish work expectations that I set out. Having those tools now makes our day-to-day business run



smoother, ultimately providing a better service to our clientele. I also acquired new conflict resolution skills, which is always helpful in life, and skills that I can use professionally and personally and that really worked on my own self.

*"The facilitator was integral in helping with some soul searching and some introspective work to help us all be better versions of ourselves. I also had a privilege to work one-to-one with another staff person, as I have been trying to change careers of late and while that hasn't happened yet, she took some of my submissions to various different jobs that I have done as well as submitted my résumé and helped to fine-tune them. She also gave me some tremendous tips on better letter writing and affirmed that my résumé was in good form, which of course I had been worried about. I would say that at my initial start, I was a bit of a wreck emotionally and I had a sense of despair. The **YWCA Muskoka** and the fantastic people there have turned me around. I look forward to the Fall classes being offered. I've already investigated some of them, and they look terrific. This group of people have really helped me gain a new and more positive attitude and I am thankful for that. So, look out YWCA, I will see you in the Fall." (YWCA Muskoka participant)*

2.7 YWCA SASKATOON, TRADE JOURNEY

About the Association:

At YWCA Saskatoon, we honour our commitment to women's issues by providing services, programs and advocacy to advance reconciliation, independence, wellness and equal opportunities. Our employment and learning programs at the Employment and Learning Centre are an integral part of our program offerings. The **Trade Journey** program is one of our women-specific training programs at the Centre. Together with our other departmental programs and services, we are working to eliminate poverty, homelessness and violence for women and their families in our community.

A core strategy is to take a proactive approach to preventative programming. We strive to empower and equip all our clients to make long-lasting positive and sustainable changes in their lives. We offer a continuum of programs, from emergency services (emergency shelter), to basic life skills, to various targeted programs to assist them on their career and life paths. Every step is a step forward.

Our Local Context:

According to Statistics Canada, Saskatoon's rate of unemployment is 4.2 percent, which is lower than Canada's national rate of 5.2 percent (2022). Certain demographic groups struggle inordinately to find and sustain employment, in particular Indigenous people, often due to essential skills gaps. In 2021, 15.9 percent of the city's population was comprised of Indigenous people. As the largest city in Saskatchewan, in the last year Saskatoon has seen a growth of 1.1 percent as a result of international migration. High rates of visible and invisible homelessness in our community are an ongoing issue. Program staff have noted recently the increased competition for trained "job-ready" candidates: employers in the trades sector do not have enough trained employees to fill the available jobs. There are also similar program offerings in the community. Many of these programs are better funded than **Trade Journey** and include a wage for participants while in the program.

At the same time, circumstances are harder for many of our participants, who may be dealing with issues of housing, childcare, the rising cost of living, and travel expenses. These often-intersecting challenges can make it extremely difficult for them to stay in and complete the program. There have also been changes made to the Provincial Training Allowance (PTA) that can impact women's ability to participate. In response, we work flexibly to meet each participant "where she is at," and to support her to visualize the program as "one leg on a journey" of her path toward a sustainable livelihood.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

Trade Journey is designed for women aged 18 or over who like working with their hands. Some may already have experience in construction, renovation, mining or maintenance positions, while many others are new to and want to transition into a trades career. Our demographics include Indigenous and newcomer women, and youth coming out of high school. Trades are attractive to many people as a faster route toward a sustainable income.

Applicants may be seeking to strengthen basic workplace essential skills such as math, reading, writing, etc. They may lack access to employment supports, and career exploration resources about trades. They may not have strong job-management skills, which can have an impact on their opportunities for obtaining and maintaining employment, or on their goal of working toward a career in the trades (e.g., having a confident attitude, understanding employer expectations and workplace culture). Many need to build their positive support networks (role models, mentors) and/or connections to community resources. Many are balancing life responsibilities, such as childcare, and some may be the sole support providers for their families.

"The biggest challenge remains to keep them in the program when life's challenges try to knock them down before they can finish... How do we get people who are really ready to commit to the time and the effort that this program takes—it is a fast-moving program."
(YWCA Saskatoon staff)

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

The **Trade Journey** program at **YWCA Saskatoon** was created for women who are transitioning into the trades career field or those who wish to enhance prior experiences in the fields of construction, renovation, mining or maintenance. We support women who are unemployed or underemployed, with little or no skills and training on their path toward a viable career. This may include working toward higher education through an apprenticeship.

From our learning to date and with the support of our community partners, we have observed a huge impact both on participants' lives and their ability to provide for their families. **Trade Journey** can succeed in assisting women in enhancing their self-esteem, confidence, social inclusion and employability, thereby escaping chronic poverty. We aim to: help our participants break away from working for minimum wage; assist newcomers in establishing themselves; and over the longer term, enable all participants to move from subsistence to self-sufficiency, and ultimately toward thriving.

Our service-delivery model empowers women to visualize their career goals and set a self-directed path toward realizing them. Along the path to employment, our participants can access a whole menu of individualized employment services, skill-enhancement offerings, and supports to make hands-on connections with employers within a new "one-stop shop" designed by women, for women.

Program Description:

This 16-week program offers self-identified women the ability to experience trades, build confidence, and enhance the skills necessary to enter these traditionally male-dominated fields. The program takes a multi-faceted approach to supporting participants. Each component is designed to combine with the other parts of the program, culminating in a streamlined menu of: skills training and supports;

life skills for success training; a hybrid learning environment; physical fitness training; job search training; support to obtain necessary certifications; and employer contributions such as work placements, mentorship, and other learning opportunities. **Trade Journey** was designed using an asset-based approach to women's economic development. During this phase, we have been able to adapt the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools at both individual participant and program/organizational levels.

YWCA Saskatoon's program-specific adaptation of YWCA BSF asset mapping tools at both levels is featured as a promising practice in Section 4.4.

We take a holistic approach at a range of levels: to build participants' assets, to demonstrate the value of having women in non-traditional industries, to collaborate with women and employers to mitigate barriers that influence one's potential for success, and to create a network of partnerships among industry and community. Our team has also introduced new emerging skills modules for the **Trade Journey** curriculum, including: Active Listening, Critical Thinking, and Stress Management.

"I have a positive outlook on my life now, more than I ever did." (YWCA Saskatoon participant)

"I've learned to be more open and not afraid. The math and hands-on learning are a big confidence booster." (YWCA Saskatoon participant)

Through experiential learning in contracted workshops and other training facilities, participants can recognize their strengths and determine which path(s) to pursue in their apprenticeship journey. The workshops allow participants to explore, nurture and develop new skills while building upon assets identified using the YWCA BSF asset mapping exercise. Participants also develop new skills in safety, fitness and nutrition while building valuable relationships to support their career journeys.

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Participants' skills are put to use during a three-week work placement. They are provided with the necessary tools as they embark on their new careers, such as Personal Protective Equipment. To ensure that we continue to follow current labour market demands, we collaborate closely with local employers, thereby giving recipients of the **Trade Journey** program a certified reference that provides a competitive advantage over other individuals seeking similar work opportunities.

Program staff are working to explore new collaborative community partnerships in the field of trades. Workplace tours, guest speakers, and publicity in the community through the **Trade Journey** "Employers' Package" and "High School Package" have helped build new partnerships and networking contacts at a range of levels for participation in the program and/or employment opportunities.

"Not every employer has the capacity to host a work placement, but they DO want to be a partner in some shape or form, providing opportunities for the future."
(YWCA Saskatoon staff)

Trade Journey Partnership with Optimist Hill:

Program participants were involved in a project for Optimist Hill (<https://optimisthill.ca/>), a non-profit winter recreation area that offers a full range of low-cost outdoor activities for children and adults. The shed project was completed in early December 2021. It was a great experience for the participants, received appreciation from Optimist Hill, and provided social media opportunities to promote the program. It was hands-on building experience for the group—they constructed the walls, floor and roof from our studio at Makerspace, and then put it all together onsite. Our communications worked with Optimist Hill on recognition, which included a sign on the shed thanking the program and participants, and passes to the facility for the participants and their families. **Trade Journey** currently sells sheds and other items built by program participants. All revenue generated from sales is redirected toward participant supports that are not currently funded.



YWCA Saskatoon Participant Testimonial:

A participant in one cohort enjoyed the welding Trade Sampler and wanted to become a welder. She interviewed with five employers and was able to choose the job that made sense to her and opened doors to a future of training. She found a job right away as a labourer for a welding company. She has been working with this company, welding the framing for an office tower. She is now apprenticing with them and is actively pursuing her Journey person welding credential. She recorded the following comment on the Building Sustainable Futures Survey: "I will be able to follow my dreams in welding, and have the confidence and know how to make it happen!"
(YWCA Saskatoon staff report)

2.8 YWCA ST. JOHN'S, LAUNCH ATLANTIC

About the Association:

In 2015, YWCA St. John's celebrated 90 years of empowering women and girls with programming that helps them develop socially, politically and professionally. By giving women a space to speak and learn about themselves and about the world, YWCA St. John's has been nurturing and mentoring young women since its inception in 1925.

YWCA St. John's vision is a community where all women, girls and gender diverse folks are safe, supported and empowered. Our work is rooted in our key values of equality, diversity, collaboration, respect, trust and balance. All of our programs operate from a trauma-informed approach with a focus on supporting the leadership journeys of the individuals we work with. Our programs focus on supporting newcomer women; providing peer support and mentorship opportunities for LGBTQIA2+ newcomers; leadership and civic engagement opportunities for youth; and employment programs like LAUNCH Atlantic, which provide employability skills training and hands-on work experience through work placements.

Some of our programs provide individuals with skill-building opportunities, such as employability skills training, entrepreneurship-focused training, and/or support work placement opportunities. We have delivered workshops to build on an individual's advocacy skills and offer facilitation skill training for young women and gender diverse youth through our Young Women's Leadership Program. We build in networking opportunities and capacity building to all of our programs, supporting participants to connect with others in their chosen employment field and in the community more broadly. No matter the program or service being provided, we want to ensure that all of the women and gender diverse folks we work with feel supported and have the tools they need to reach their livelihood goals.

To advance our mission and objectives, we are now part of the LAUNCH Atlantic capacity building partnership facilitated by YWCA Halifax, which offers the program in three provinces: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland & Labrador. The partnership has been a great source of support and mutual learning about how to work with youth to address their employment training challenges and move them forward in their goals toward sustainable futures (this partnership is featured as a promising practice in Section 4.1).

Demographic Focus of the Program:

LAUNCH Atlantic is designed for young women and gender diverse youth aged 15–30 who are currently out of school, unemployed or underemployed (working fewer than 20 hours/week). Participants must be a Canadian citizen, Permanent Resident, or someone who has been granted refugee status in Canada.

“The St. John's cohorts have been very diverse. We had participants who had never completed high school while others had completed graduate post-secondary programs. There were participants who identified as racialized, Indigenous, and living with a disability. Some participants had work experience and some did not.” (YWCA St. John's staff)

Our Local Context:

The geography of the St. John's Metro Region is challenging. Our transportation system is very inaccessible, especially during winter months. But even more of a challenge is that we have folks living just outside of the city centre (where it is more affordable to live) who have no access to a bus system. They must rely on cabs, which can cost upwards of \$75–100 dollars a day to get them to most employment opportunities. So, without access to a vehicle, many young people are effectively unable to make it to their workplaces even once they are able to find a job. This obviously limits their search options even more.

On the upside, there are a lot of youth employment-focused programs in the community, which is great in terms of support for youth. We also have multiple agencies directly focused on supporting youth that provide housing and wraparound services. We are also a part of the Community Employment Collaboration, which strengthens our connection to other youth service and employment-focused agencies. This has further enhanced our career development approaches and skills as an agency.

We have seen a huge surge in the tech industry here and anticipate that many more jobs will open up in this sector. But they require post-secondary education, which many of our participants have not explored.

“Since it’s our first time running an employment program of this nature, we are still learning about the local labour market, but have continued to build relationships with employers to get a sense of their needs. Because of the stress of COVID on businesses, I think employers had less of an opportunity and/or fewer resources to provide time to support job-specific skill building (e.g., in the tech field with coding). We are thinking about what ways we could address this moving forward.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

LAUNCH is an employment program designed to serve young women and gender diverse youth who are currently experiencing multiple barriers to employment. It aims to support all members of diverse and minority groups, as well as folks facing various barriers to employment (including but not limited to those who live with disabilities, are single parents, experience language barriers, are recent immigrants, have not completed high school, have a criminal record, etc.). While cohorts vary, according to one 2023 staff estimate, about 70 percent are often living on extremely low incomes.

“In one of our early cohorts, four out of seven of the participants identified as transgender or gender diverse. This is a significant and steady increase in gender diversity among participants connected with the LAUNCH program. When the Program Coordinator asked one group what they had ‘taken away’ from the day, one participant, who identifies as a trans woman, mentioned that she often feels really different from the group (she used the term ‘outsider’), but that the LAUNCH group was extremely supportive and welcoming, and that she consistently feels safe and accepted. To date, 19/25 of all participants served in the St. John’s LAUNCH program identify as LGBTQIA2+.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

This program is a great fit for folks who are in the preparation and action stages of change, and could also be very useful for those in the contemplation stage prior to deciding on their path forward.

Program Description:

For an overview of program components, see Section 2.1 YWCA Halifax, LAUNCH Atlantic.

YWCA St. John’s programming is embedded in trauma-informed practice. Staff use a strengths perspective in workshops, allowing participants to improve their self-awareness. For instance, using the YWCA BSF asset mapping tool and activity, participants not only come to recognize their strengths but also to identify key areas for growth by reviewing short-term and long-term S.M.A.R.T goals. They also build connections with staff and as a group, for mutual support and learning.

“During the Entrepreneurial Skills workshop for one cohort, we had a great discussion about arts-based entrepreneurship and looked through local examples of successful entrepreneurs. One person self-identifies as an artist (and entrepreneur) and shared their ideas about growing their online presence, how they intend to grow their art business, and what ‘gap’ their art is filling in the Newfoundland & Labrador arts & culture ecosystem.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

During the paid eight-week training before participants enter their paid 12-week work placements, the Program Coordinator and the Work Transition Coordinator work with them to address life concerns outside of employment, and to build upon topics including personal management, mindfulness and the nervous system, employment skills, values and qualities, job searching in the digital age, etc.

*“We do have financial literacy workshops that were a part of a **LAUNCH** project, and we are currently in a process of upgrading those for all of our programs, including **LAUNCH**, with more of a financial empowerment lens, and through our collaboration with a Dollar and Cents Project. We are also wanting to cover more in-depth about what benefits are available to an individual federally and provincially and what it means to access them and how—doing a deeper dive than just covering what a budget is, what payroll is, what paystubs look like, etc.”* (YWCA St. John’s staff)

After securing the paid placements, staff conduct check-ins with participants and provide ongoing support to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and to determine whether participants’ confidence levels are increasing. By program end, the hope is that participants will have: learned more about the skills required by employers, increased their confidence in these skills, acquired experience demonstrating employability skills in a workplace, and gained new references to call upon in the future.



YWCA St. John’s Participant Testimonial:

*“Before I started in the **LAUNCH** program, I had shut myself out from the world. I had been sober for two years and been out of a job for a very long time. I was scared to return to the workforce and live a normal life, meet new people, learn a new job and all that comes along with that. The program was online because of the coronavirus, which I happened to enjoy more than in person, due to me not having left the house much in two years. The group of women with different backgrounds and situations, working together is empowering and a great chance to start meeting new people again in life. Everyone was in different positions in their lives but needed a refresh on the hiring process. There was no judgement and we all got along great. The trainers were always there for help and encouragement every step of the way. I’m super happy to have been a part of it.*

*“I like to think that I have an incredible résumé now :) Learning in the beginning doing résumés and cover letters along with doing practice job interviews were so helpful. I feel that I now have the tools to be more comfortable and most important, successful! So much of the information for cover letters and the importance of them I had never known, plus the layout of your résumé and being professional. Without attending **LAUNCH**, I honestly would be in the same position I was before. Finally, I look forward to finding and getting to experiment with different jobs and roles within my life. I am very thankful for the program, and it should definitely continue on as it has done me so much good!”* (YWCA St. John’s participant)

2.9 YWCA THOMPSON, STEPS TO SUCCESS

About our Association:

In 2014, the **YWCA Thompson** mandate and strategic plan were revamped, from a focus on community building and education to a return to building equality for women and girls. We have several programs to support women in becoming more independent. The Transition Program provides housing and coaching for women who are homeless or threatened with homelessness; the Women's Centre provides counselling, clothing and toiletries; and the Assessment Centre provides academic assessments as well as career counselling. **Steps to Success** provides literacy and other essential skills training needed for the workplace, as well as other pre-employment supports and services.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

Our main focus is on equity-seeking groups, and our clients are primarily Indigenous women from remote communities with multiple barriers to employment and who are seeking pre-employment skills. Although many of our participants have experienced hardship, they have developed the skill of great inner resilience. Many have overcome, or are overcoming, huge barriers such as addictions, mental health issues, poverty, illness, language issues, entanglement with child welfare, and lack of educational opportunities; however, they have managed to navigate these barriers and are ready to make changes in their lives. Our program works to draw on these strengths to help participants rebuild their belief in themselves, and to encourage them to set and move toward new goals.

Our Local Context:

Thompson is a city of extremes. On the one end, we have more people than the provincial average earning over \$100,000, but we also have more people than the provincial average making less than \$40,000. As the "Hub of the North," Thompson attracts people from outlying communities who are looking to make a better life for themselves and their children. We have a large Indigenous population in Thompson, many of whom arrive lacking formal training. Most people we work with in the program face multiple intersecting barriers within their lives. Many have been affected by the residential school system and carry a burden of distrust toward the education system as a result. Within the Indigenous communities in Northern Manitoba, schools have been underfunded, and qualified teachers are rare. The majority of people who manage to graduate have a Grade 12 diploma but a Grade 4 reading ability. Another serious issue that has major social and health repercussions for our communities is a shortage of decent affordable housing.

The local labour market has seen changes: Our two biggest employers, Vale and Manitoba Hydro, laid off large numbers of people, with Vale citing low nickel prices, and Manitoba Hydro because of the completion of a large dam project. Employment opportunities became yet more uncertain with the pandemic. COVID-19 had a huge impact on our Thompson community and on the remote Northern Manitoba communities in our region. Employment training was neither practicable nor an immediate priority for many people. We needed to take urgent action to keep our community members safe, and to provide accommodation for people who had come in from more remote communities. For a detailed profile of Thompson's experience during the pandemic, see Section 3.1.

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

This is a pre-employment program that focuses on building life skills and workplace essential skills to prepare clients for employment. Our clients are primarily Indigenous women often facing multiple barriers such as low literacy skills, low technology skills, or no access to technology. Many of our clients have no work experience. In response, the program offers adult literacy instruction separately, in addition to the pre-employment classes.

“A lot of people accessing the program are requiring basic skills such as how to dress, this is what’s expected of you in a workplace, this is a calendar, this is a clock, this is how time works. It’s really [about the] basic skills and knowledge needed to get them to a place where they can be ready for employment. One of the interesting comments from one cohort was how much they enjoyed being on a regular schedule. Having to get up in the morning benefitted not only our participants but also their families as they no longer let their children sleep in and miss school.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

“The program staff are very encouraging, helpful, know how to draw you out of your shell. I hope this program continues because it can benefit many more people just like me.” (YWCA Thompson participant)

While the program covers many essential skills—life skills and soft skills—it focuses on the skills identified by potential employers through the employer survey as their top priorities. These tend to be dependability/reliability, willingness to learn, and basic technology skills. The program aims not just to remedy essential skills gaps but also to help participants develop professional portfolio pieces in order to excel at a job-shadowing experience, and to secure work. The final outcome of securing employment after six months of program participation is the ideal goal.

Program Description:

YWCA Thompson’s Steps to Success is normally an eight-week pre-employment program followed by a two-week job-shadowing component. It is designed to help individuals build the essential skills that support their professional and personal growth, and takes an asset-based approach to preparing its participants with the skills required to succeed in a competitive workforce. In the initial weeks leading up to various program workshops, we implement the YWCA BSF asset mapping tool, which allows participants to recognize their existing assets and learn about areas that require growth.

A key challenge for many is low digital literacy due to a lack of access to technology. During the pandemic, this resulted in several participants being unable to participate in online workshops and trainings when in-person classrooms had to shut down.

“For participants in Thompson, some were able to complete some parts online. However, even in Thompson, a lot of participants did not have access to Internet at home. Additionally, a number of activities in the program are hands-on, and people often didn’t have the supplies on hand to complete the activities on their own. For example, to create their own goal-setting boards, people didn’t have paper, scissors, glue, etc.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

Building participants’ digital literacy has since become a top program priority. We have now resumed in-class delivery, and we provide accommodation for our participants at **YWCA Thompson** for the duration of their training, as many fly in from their remote communities in order to attend. Having a safe and welcoming place to stay is a key asset to participation and building connections with staff, peers and employers within the community.

In the first eight weeks of the program, participants receive customized trainings focused on building their soft skills, adaptability, financial literacy, time management, etc. Since participants often face similar barriers to employment, peer support is strongly encouraged throughout the program, allowing them to build meaningful connections based on shared experiences. We provide a number of courses in “chunks” such as basic computer skills, Microsoft Office software, essay writing, learners’ permit preparation, grammar, goal setting, dictionary use, mechanical reasoning and more. Our program has to be flexible to participants’ needs. We could plan at the beginning of the program to provide training in time management, motivation, confidence, etc., but we have to be prepared to shift should it become apparent that something else, or something more is needed.

“We always have everything neatly planned regarding the courses and workshops, but sometimes we have a group of the students who are staring at us as if we’re speaking a foreign language. So, we have to ask ourselves, how can we adapt it? Sometimes we have to bring it down quite low depending on who is in our classroom, but on occasion, even that is not enough. For example, two people in our last cohort were showing up, but they didn’t understand a word of what was going on, we were trying to get them to be involved, and they wanted to be but just couldn’t.”
(YWCA Thompson staff)

Portfolio building is another important element used to help participants learn new skills or learn to recognize prior skills, which they record on sheets. These become the building blocks of their skills-based résumés. After the classroom component, participants connect with cooperating businesses for a two-week job-shadowing position. At the end of job shadowing, participants are expected to apply for available jobs. We incorporated the “Value of Volunteering” and “Job Search Techniques” Lesson Plans from the YWCA BSF Phase Two Toolkit. As this is a pre-employment program, both of these lessons fit in well with what our clients need to prepare for the job market. We have also continued to include the Sharing Circle Lesson Plan that we showcased in that Toolkit.

The YWCA BSF employer engagement model is not a great fit with our program because this piece is already covered in Thompson through Manitoba Economic Development, Investment and Trade, who are our primary funders, and as such we cannot work in competition with them. But we have managed to integrate some aspects of the model to maintain effective employer engagement practices. The organization holds events, such as employer open houses, that introduce the program to employers and outline the benefits of hiring program participants. An important aspect of these events is to gather information about skills and gaps that employers are looking to fill through new hires, and to integrate this information into the program’s structure.

Building these connections with employers contributes greatly to the “Job Shadowing” feature of the program. Those who participate are able to learn about various job requirements and gain first-hand experience from employers. To learn new skills and increase their exposure to different professional settings, participants are also encouraged to volunteer with community partners. For instance, many participants volunteered with local schools to gather more experience before entering the employment pool. All of the employers who worked with participants from our first few cohorts wanted us to send them more. Although participants are not always guaranteed a job afterwards, it gives them exposure to different industries and workplaces.

The Skills for Success “Scavenger Hunt”:

For our Skills for Success Day, we broke our participants into groups to go out and explore businesses in our community. Not only did it reinforce the importance of the skills participants were learning in the classroom, it also gave them an opportunity to see what jobs were available in Thompson.

YWCA Thompson’s Scavenger Hunt is featured as a promising practice, combining Skills for Success with employer engagement in Section 4.5.

Program progress is tracked by revisiting the YWCA BSF asset mapping tool as it allows participants a visual way to examine the assets they have gained after undergoing various trainings and workshops. We are very proud of our program graduates. Of the 23 women that participated in the last cohort, 13 gained employment with full-time positions. As of April 2022, the program has been introduced to a new cohort. Program staff are looking forward to continuing to support women who are systemically marginalized in gaining new skills and experiences, and enhancing their engagement with employers and community partners.



YWCA Thompson Participant Testimonial:

*“During my time with **Steps to Success**, a lot was definitely gained in my class. From refreshing my school learning, to learning new things, making new friends, being gifted with such amazing teachers, to gaining experience, to being certified for many different things along with having a great outcome upon myself and my reflection to others. The ten-week Essential Skills for Employment course I did was definitely something I’d recommend. It’s highly appreciated, significant and amazing in many different ways. Everything we were taught was a great experience, and something that will benefit me along [the] way.*

“Not only did I receive many different learning experiences; I also did a course to gain my licence to drive and am now a fully licensed driver. It’s something I’ve always wanted but could hardly get the help I needed with it. There are no greater ladies to help pull such an amazing class together other than the two program staff, and for that I am forever thankful. I am glad I took the course, and although I can’t say that I have maintained a full-time job yet, I still have all that experience to take with me. Life just puts me on hold for now. I still have time to settle where I want to be settled when it comes to a job. One last thing, I am 30 years old and thought it was too late to start somewhere again. It’s never too late, never stop taking chances and trying new experiences. Step by step is all it takes to get you started, one day at a time.”

(YWCA Thompson participant)

2.10 YWCA TORONTO, SUCCESS READY

About the Association:

Since 1873, **YWCA Toronto** has been dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls. We help women, girls and gender diverse individuals flee violence, secure housing, find jobs, establish their voices, enhance skills and develop confidence. We offer a range of housing options, employment and training programs, community support programs, girls' programs and family programs; we also engage in systemic advocacy. **YWCA Toronto's** employment and training programs have for many decades provided support to women at all stages of their employment journeys. We offer career exploration and readiness workshops, skills development and training, placements and pre-apprenticeship opportunities, mentoring and job retention supports. For more information about **YWCA Toronto's** history of employment training programs and our Skills Development Centre (SDC), see Appendix 2.

Our Local Context:

In 2022, our regional labour market provided ample opportunities for entry-level/low-skilled work especially in the hospitality, tourism and food services industries. Our **Success Ready** program participants often explore these more immediate options while also considering investing in paths to longer-term goals, which may provide stronger financial stability and independence. In Toronto, youth have numerous service providers to choose from, many of which offer paid training models. Although we do not have the capacity to offer training stipends, we can offer other incentives to attract participants. These include our reputation in the community, a combination of one-to-one and peer support opportunities, in-demand 21st century skills training, and hands-on work-integrated or experiential learning opportunities. This comprehensive set of tools, learning experiences and wraparound support services for systemically marginalized youth assist them in building stability in their lives on their paths toward strong, sustainable futures.

Demographic Focus of the Program:

Success Ready is an innovative employment program designed for systemically marginalized young women and gender diverse individuals aged 16-29, including racialized, BIPOC, newcomers and LGBTQIA2+ peoples. Since 2014, YWCA Toronto has cultivated a transformative partnership with the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) Foundation, which continues to provide vital support and funding to this program. Through this collaboration, we remain dedicated to empowering young people to achieve economic security and build sustainable futures.

"I would say the diverse cultural backgrounds of people accessing our program represent the Toronto landscape. Fifty percent of participants are newcomers, so recently immigrated new Canadians. Newcomers are one of our larger groups."
(YWCA Toronto staff)

Program Outline

Program Purpose:

Success Ready provides youth participating in the program with foundational essential skills and emerging labour market skills training, as well as mentoring, work-integrated and experiential learning, and job retention and advancement support to help them build successful, sustainable futures.

Program Description:

Our program is grounded in the YWCA BSF asset-based approach toward enhancing young people's resilience, self-direction and economic security. This approach takes into consideration the whole individual and their unique strengths and assets, rather than perceived deficits. We aim to build the skills needed for systemically marginalized youth to gain satisfying employment in the 21st century labour market, as well as supporting their self-empowerment and continued growth. Our program's unique, flexible menu of employment training modules allows them to explore their strengths and customize their pathways toward employment while also maintaining crucial one-to-one support from their Employment Counsellor and having access to a range of our other wraparound supports.

Success Ready flexible program modules include:

- Module 1: Essential Skills Training (Core program/up to two weeks)
- Module 2: Advanced Skills Training (Optional/ includes a menu of customized training to support each individual training plan)
- Module 3: Employability and Job Readiness/ Job Search Skills Enhancement (Optional/up to four weeks)
- Module 4: 21st Century Skills Training (Core program/up to two weeks)
- Module 5: Work-Integrated or Experiential Learning (Optional/paid and/or education-related opportunities to gain work-relevant skills in real workplaces)

After the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, program staff have continued to monitor and provide for specific needs to support participants to complete the program and reach their employment goals.

“For some where computers are a barrier, we are still going to give them that support because some people are really struggling. Schooling is an issue, too; and some people are still asking for jobs to work from home, because that’s just what they are comfortable doing. More and more people talk about the mental health issues they’re enduring, so I send out whatever resources I receive. We have to be more open to the anxieties people may face being [back] in a public setting, and be more aware of the challenges. It would be good to give people a choice as to whether they would like to come in or do everything remotely, or maybe in a variation for some of our sessions. Some of this will depend on our program and funder’s mandates, and also on employers: if it’s a job fair for example, some people might want to engage virtually and some in person. For those who do benefit from that in-person contact, they may be missing out by not seeing those verbal cues, because there are only so many people you can see on a screen.”
(YWCA Toronto Employment Programs Manager)

In October 2022, we established a new employer engagement initiative, both to share about the positive impact of **Success Ready** and our other employment training programs, and to promote job-ready graduates throughout their networks in the Greater Toronto Area. The aim is to increase their chances of gaining work placements and employment opportunities in a range of roles. We created a dedicated Employer Engagement Advisor & Trainer position to support this new initiative and to continue to work directly with our participants to meet their varying employment needs. A key focus of this staff is to provide and nurture targeted supports for job seekers moving into the COVID-19 “new ways” of work. Through the initiative, we offer expertise and resources to help people enhance their skill portfolios—especially in the area of digital skills, and honing skills and strategies important for online recruitment—and position themselves for success in a hybrid working environment.

In terms of our program partnerships, for nearly a decade the Toronto Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW) Foundation has been supporting generations of women seeking new employment opportunities by providing them with bursaries to attend programs at **YWCA Toronto**’s SDC and our Education & Training Institute (ETI). In addition to providing sponsored training opportunities, Toronto CREW volunteers have piloted and conducted a number of mentoring and networking events for participants, including from **Success Ready**. We were able to work with our employer partners from CREW to develop the new 2022 employer engagement initiative described above. In Fall 2023, CREW will continue to collaborate by offering sponsor training seats for **YWCA Toronto** participants, and also direct connections to employment.

YWCA Toronto’s partnership with CREW is featured in Section 4.6 as a promising practice in partnering with women professionals to support employment opportunities for participants.



Success Ready Participant Testimonial: Fatima's Story (2022)

"I am Fatima, 22, from Kabul Afghanistan. Following the collapse of the Afghanistan government in August 2021 at the hands of the Taliban, I was forced to leave my country. The Taliban had closed all girls' schools and education institutions and cracked down on all basic human rights. Life under Taliban rule has extremely been difficult, particularly when you are a woman and a girl. A girl can't go to school and a woman can't go out in public without a chaperone. Afghan women and girls have lost all their basic rights and the Taliban are even further shrinking the space for women.

*"I was evacuated by the Canadian Armed Forces and landed in Toronto in late August 2021 with a couple of clothes and a backpack. I had left everything behind in Afghanistan, including my family, dreams, and aspirations. I called Toronto home and had to immediately adjust and adapt to life in Canada. While I was still in transition in a hotel waiting for my immigration documents, I took online English classes. As soon as I completed these, I was referred to **YWCA Toronto** for further building my capacity and gaining new skills. I was admitted to the **Success Ready** program, followed by the **YWCA Toronto Education & Training Institute's Administrative Clerk Certificate Program**, and successfully completed it.*

*"**Success Ready** not only helped me build new skills, but it was an opportunity to further improve my English language. It was an extremely helpful and enriching experience attending this **YWCA Toronto** program. It also helped me build self-confidence to continue my education in Canada. Simultaneously, I applied for colleges and was admitted to Seneca College. Moreover, I work part time while continuing my education at the college level.*

*"I have big dreams and aspirations, and I have promised to work hard for them. I am grateful to Canada and Canadians for everything they have given, including the YWCA education program as well as the warm hospitality when I first landed in the country. As an Afghan girl having gone through so much, I will not take for granted any education opportunity in Canada and I promise I will do whatever in my capacity to give back to this beautiful country. I owe to Canada and the **Success Ready** program."*
(YWCA Toronto participant)

SECTION 3:

Project Findings

Overview

Phase Three proved to be a highly productive stage in the YWCA BSF project, along the Collaborative's continuum of learning about how to advance the careers and essential skills knowledge of women, and of systemically marginalized demographic groups. In spite of pandemic-related disruptions, it produced strong outcomes. Across the ten sites, a total of 846 participants were served through the pilot programs, significantly above the anticipated outcome of 500.

All Phase Three Collaborators mentioned how the pandemic forced programs to innovate at an unprecedented pace with curriculums, modes of delivery, and relations of support among staff and participants. Staff and program activities became great supports to participants during anxious and isolating times, especially when women and gender diverse youth, and Indigenous, immigrant and mature individuals were facing disproportional intersecting



impacts brought on by COVID. Programs provided the comfort of routine and assistance with problem-solving and social connections, as well as help with accessing basic needs and other services. Meanwhile, Collaborators themselves were having to deal with stress, fatigue, childcare and general uncertainty. They were also dealing with high rates of staff turnover. In the circumstances of COVID-19, the non-profit sector as a whole was even more stretched than usual to address clients' needs, as documented in the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) report below:

“Many [practitioners from women-serving-women-led organizations] agreed that the early days of COVID-19 were a ‘big scramble’ where ‘all hands were on deck.’ Some commented that it was so intense that even the recollection of it was a blur. Yet most also expressed pride in how they rose to the challenge and kept services running. There was a general sense that the crisis had been a period of intense learning, or as one participant described, it was like being dropped in the Sahara Desert and not knowing your capacity to survive until you are in that situation.”
(Abji, Major and Khemraj 2021, 36)

For a select sampling of other relevant external research sources that support many of this project's findings about the gender-related impacts of the pandemic on women, the non-profit sector, and the broader community, see Appendix 3 Bibliography.

Pandemic conditions created a big challenge for rural and remote programs, and for programs intentionally designed for in-person delivery. **YWCA Thompson's Steps to Success** participants were less likely to have access to or be comfortable with online learning. Virtual delivery was also challenging for “hands-on” trades-related programs such as **YWCA Saskatoon's Trade Journey**, and for programs working with participants seeking to reduce social isolation and build new networks of support, such as **YWCA Muskoka's Women Thriving**.

These programs—together with the **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal Women's Work Integration Program (Femmes vers l'emploi)** and St. John's **LAUNCH** program—have since returned to mostly in-person delivery. Others, such as those of YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and Toronto, have been pursuing a hybrid approach, drawing on their experience of what worked best for participants and what did not during the pandemic. **YWCA Metro Vancouver's** delivery is mostly online. Already geared to online delivery, **YWCA Hamilton's** program will continue as such, except for its guest speaker events, which are found to be most successful in person. All Collaborator Associations are now offering some trainings and services online, if not the core components of their programs.



3.1 OVERALL FINDINGS: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF PROGRAM DELIVERY IN A PANDEMIC

Most Collaborator and participant feedback was gathered during the time of pandemic restrictions, as is reflected in the comments shared below.

The Shift to Online Delivery

The greatest immediate pressure for programs was to move classes online. This required nimble thinking and practical solutions in a range of areas: how to ensure everyone had access to online delivery and the hardware/software to participate in programs; and how to accommodate different learning styles and levels of comfort with digital platforms, including the length of time that people could comfortably and productively spend at their screens. Programs had to find ways to facilitate group-building and staff/peer relationships intentionally in the absence of face-to-face interactions, and to give participants opportunities for independent learning outside the group.

“We had to address a range of challenges in the logistics of program delivery. For example, providing technology (laptops), and program materials (stationary, USBs, worksheets, etc.) to participants was one thing, but facilitating delivery of these materials proved to require creative problem solving. Some sites partnered with community organizations to coordinate material pick-ups, while others delivered to participants directly. Obtaining necessary signatures was also a major challenge for some. Without having access to a printer, many participants were unable to print and sign documents, and without having the digital literacy or digital capacity to provide electronic signatures, Coordinators had to spend much time travelling to participants individually to retrieve signed documents.” (LAUNCH partnership staff—YWCA Halifax, Moncton and St. John’s)

Camera etiquette became an issue to address, to ensure that people were actively participating in-class.

“Even with our sessions, I had my camera on and everyone else had their cameras off. It’s really difficult to talk to a blank screen. When activities are being done virtually, we may not know who is actually doing the work.” (YWCA Toronto staff)

For some participants, Zoom was not always a comfortable medium.

“A challenge that we have navigated has been how to deliver a virtual program while remaining as trauma-informed as possible. One example of this is when a participant experiences moderate-to-severe distress while on camera. To participate fully (especially during interviews) it is preferable to have video turned on. However, this was an issue for some participants.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

New Participant Challenges

Collaborators noted having to adapt to changing needs and skills levels in their cohorts as Phase Three unfolded. Some programs, such as those of YWCAs Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal and Muskoka, experienced recruitment challenges for their cohorts, especially at the height of the pandemic, as well as issues of attendance due to illness or lack of supports in the home. Program staff generally reported that participants needed more one-to-one contact and support to deal with the social isolation, stress and depression experienced globally, and to keep them motivated to continue in the program as part of pursuing their career and livelihood goals.

“Clients have cycled through their own varying patterns of COVID fatigue, Zoom fatigue, collective stress/trauma, etc. Many of the clients are immigrants so feeling both somewhat isolated from their home and also concerned about the situation and how it’s affecting their family and friends back home. In addition to these stresses the pandemic brought on, the majority of childcare and eldercare, as well as homeschooling responsibilities falls on women, so they are juggling so much, and report feeling lonely, tired, burned out and overwhelmed.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

Some program participants also faced greater financial hardship during the pandemic.

“All of the sudden we had people in the last cohort telling us, I don’t have money for gas to get to that Trade Sampler; and they are trying to arrange rides with each other and help each other out. But the reality is if that person doesn’t have money to put gas in their car, how are we going to work around this? I feel hopeful that we can keep working on these issues and get them solved but it does take extra help and time.” (YWCA Saskatoon staff)

Participating in the program from home was yet another challenge for those living in less-stable housing and/or crowded situations, often sharing space, computer equipment and bandwidth with other family members. Childcare would emerge as an even more stressful issue than in “normal” times for some, while others who had struggled to secure childcare during program hours found participating from home to be an advantage. For many of those without easy, affordable access to public systems, virtual delivery eased the pre-existing challenge of transportation. Many Collaborators—YWCAs Halifax, Hamilton, Metro Vancouver, Moncton, Muskoka and Toronto—mentioned how they could now work with more geographically distant participants, as was the case with **YWCA Moncton** and a woman in Morocco who was planning to migrate to Moncton.

Impacts on Employment/ Self-Employment Prospects

COVID revealed the true picture of some kinds of employment, particularly in care and other service sectors: low wage, precarious, exhausting, dangerous to health, and now potentially lethal. At least two Collaborators—YWCAs Metro Vancouver and Montreal—noted how reluctant people were to return to or take up certain public-facing jobs, even though there were many vacancies (for external research supporting this finding, see Appendix 3 YWCA BSF Bibliography).

The context of COVID also had an impact on participants’ readiness and availability to engage fully in programs and for job/training placements, and it affected their range of options and decisions about accepting available employment. It was particularly difficult for women seeking to build their own businesses in the service sector.

“Self-employment usually spikes when people struggle with employment: people typically turn to monetizing their skill sets. However, that’s not what is currently happening. Unless you’re independently wealthy and can cover start-up costs, the money is not there to do it. Women’s business typically involves service-based business and they have just seen a revolving door of closures. We have seen some participants start businesses pre-pandemic and they have been struggling. There have been some incentives available through the government; however, a lot of the participants we have seen don’t meet the threshold to access these funds, so it’s challenging.” (YWCA Hamilton staff)

The pandemic had perhaps the most dramatic impact on **YWCA Thompson**, which works mainly with Indigenous program participants. When programming shifted online, the Association as a whole saw an increase in applicants with higher income, digital skills and access to technology, and who were closer to the labour market. Yet for some members of the community, particularly the program demographic for **Steps to Success**, participating in employment training programs in the midst of a health crisis was neither possible nor a priority when they were focused on urgent basic needs.

In the Time of COVID-19 Health Restrictions: YWCA Thompson's Steps to Success

"Everything [in Steps to Success] was in person, because we are working with people who have really low skills in a lot of areas, and the outside [remote] communities have basically nothing for Internet. We are sometimes working with people who are under Grade 3 level education; we have people who only know how to write their name, we have someone people who don't know that much. When we're dealing with people with low literacy, they cannot transition very easily to technology; they can't follow directions online.

"At the YWCA Thompson, we just have the one building that houses both the programs and housing. During COVID, the YWCA Thompson created the SHIP Program (Sheltering Homeless In Place). We had the most vulnerable of Thompson's homeless staying on the one floor of our building. On another floor, we were also sheltering people who could not go back to their home communities because they had been in contact with COVID or were testing positive for COVID and had no place to go because all of the reserves here and remote communities shut down. People were not allowed to go in and out unless they were tested, and they had to have an excuse to be going in and out.

"Once we were sheltering people who tested positive for COVID, our building was deemed Code Red by the province and we couldn't have any outside people coming in. We spent three years seesawing between open and closed to the public. When open, we tried running programs. We had people signed up for the first cohort and then everything got shut down just as that began. Many came back for the second cohort and we almost got it completed before we had to shut down again. Participants came back during future cohorts just for some of the things they had not finished, but it was kind of hit and miss when they could come in. A few came back and signed up for the third time. It wasn't until the sixth cohort that we were open fully. We had lots of people signed up, and we were able to get through everything. So that was nice: we actually have people sitting on the waiting list for

when we can offer the program again. It was good for the Y as well, because we had people from outlying communities that wanted the training and were sending people to stay at the Y to take the course.

"COVID actually was good for our YWCA training programs as a whole, because it forced us to do something different, such as doing classes over Zoom, and through email. We are still doing those because it's great for some of our people that they don't have to leave their children at home. With the essential skills for employment programs, we did try offering them as an online course as well, and we did have three or four people who tried doing it. Finally, one came in and said I have to come in—I can't do it from home. The other three got through, but it wasn't great for them." (YWCA Thompson staff)



Impacts on Project Facilitation, Capacity Building and Deliverables

During a period of such tremendous disruption, it became harder for Collaborator staff to follow up with participants post-program. The electronic survey tool designed for the project to capture participant feedback was also not as easy to implement without in-person facilitation, particularly in the case of some participant groups with less access to connectivity or less familiarity with doing surveys online. This resulted in a lower completion rate than in Phase Two.

As Collaborators reported, the challenge of data collection was exacerbated by the many demands on an already-stretched staff and by staff turnover at various levels across organizations.

Over the course of Phases Two and Three, the ESE team worked with both primary staff involved in the project and other program staff who were involved in some but not all of the pilot programs' activities. While all ten Associations experienced some staffing changes during Phase Three, the ESE team counted five associations that were affected by the loss of primary staff: YWCAs Metro Vancouver, Moncton, Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal, Muskoka and Saskatoon. By the time of wrap-up, the ESE team estimated that just five associations still had primary staff who had been with them since rollout: Hamilton, Halifax, St. John's, Thompson and Toronto.

Such a high rate of staff turnover, particularly in the case of longer-term experienced primary staff, resulted in a loss of institutional memory. It had a corresponding impact on the YWCA BSF capacity building strategy to deliver trainings in key frameworks to Collaborator staff. Even though a number of training sessions were offered in the main frameworks (see table below), approximately 30 of the trained 47 staff were no longer at their respective Associations by the end of Phase Three. The ESE team did not have the capacity to offer trainings on an ongoing basis to all new staff. This setback to knowledge exchange reflects, again, the challenge of working to build capacity in a precarious funding environment.

On the other hand, the delivery of trainings online proved to be a great advantage in saving people's time as well as the costs of travel, meals/accommodation, and training space. It allowed for more trainings to be delivered, and also enabled staff to review digital recordings of content that can be preserved for future knowledge exchange.

Overall, Phase Three data shows that a combination of the program supports to participation mentioned above and the use of the following key project frameworks had an identifiable impact on individual participant and program/organizational capacity outcomes:

- asset-based approaches and reflection exercises using the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools;
- an experiential Life Skills approach to facilitating learning; and
- a focus on the emerging labour market skills identified in Phase Two as a bridge to continuous learning, alongside the nine OLES essential skills.

Of these newer skills, Flexible and Adaptable Digital Skills assumed yet greater importance for everyone in times of COVID, but so did the core personal skills of Motivation and Self-Direction, and Emotional Intelligence.

Furthermore, Collaborators were able to draw on the YWCA BSF model and employer engagement strategies to find new ways to work with businesses, community partners and funders to provide employment training and job opportunities for participants in a uniquely unpredictable socio-economic context. Below, we share findings at the three levels of Phase Three's research: individual participant, program/organizational, and the online learning community.

Phase Three YWCA BSF Project Overall Outcomes 2019-2023

Individual Participant Level:

Total aggregate number of participants served across all ten programs 2020-2023: 846

Program/Organizational Level:

Ten Associations, including **YWCA Toronto**, delivered pilot programs that drew on the YWCA BSF model and other key Phase Three project frameworks customized to their demographic populations and regional contexts. Nine programs were offered in English, and one in both official languages.

YWCA Toronto Life Skills Coaching Training (Phase One):

Total number of Trainings: seven

Total number of Participants: 75 (Collaborators: 30; Stakeholders: 45 [Stakeholders include other community service providers across Canada, and including staff from other programs at Collaborator Associations])

Other YWCA BSF Capacity Building Trainings:

Total number of Trainings: nine

Total number of Attendees: 235 (All sessions included Collaborators and staff from other programs at Collaborator Associations)

- YWCA BSF Model Training (two sessions)
- YWCA BSF Asset Mapping (Individual) (three sessions)
- YWCA BSF Asset Mapping (Program/Organization) (one session)
- YWCA BSF Employer Engagement (two sessions)
- Leadership Training (one session)

Employer and Community Partner Engagement:

Total Aggregate number of Employer Connections across all ten programs 2020-2023: 497

Total Aggregate number of Community Service Providers across all ten programs 2020-2023: 241

YWCA BSF Regional Learning Forums:

Total number of Events: eight

Total number of Attendees: 219

- YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's: About the **LAUNCH Atlantic** Partnership
- **YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal**: Maintaining Hope (English)/Garder l'espoir (French)
- YWCAs Hamilton and Muskoka: Transforming Lives
- **YWCA Metro Vancouver**: Building Community in a Virtual World
- **YWCA Saskatoon**: About the Trade Journey Program
- **YWCA Thompson**: About the Steps to Success Program
- **YWCA Toronto**: A Way to Lead

YWCA BSF National Learning Events:

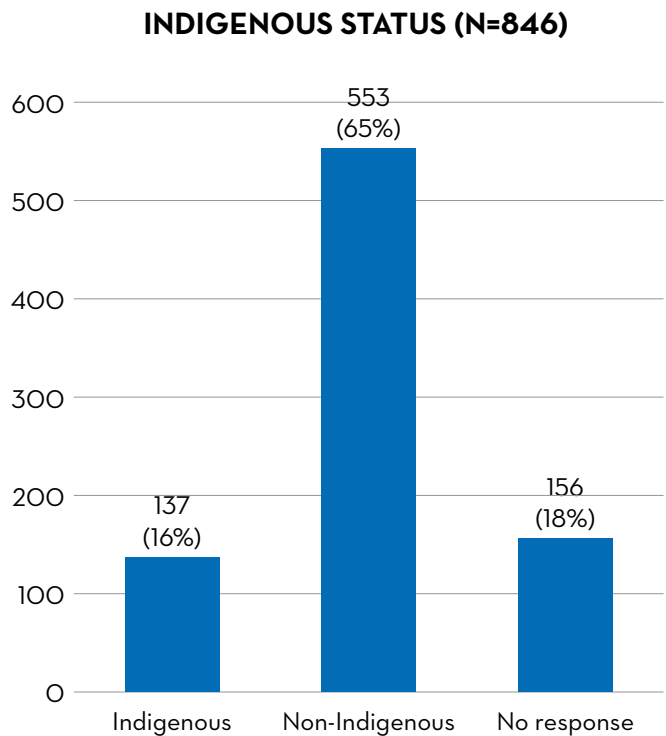
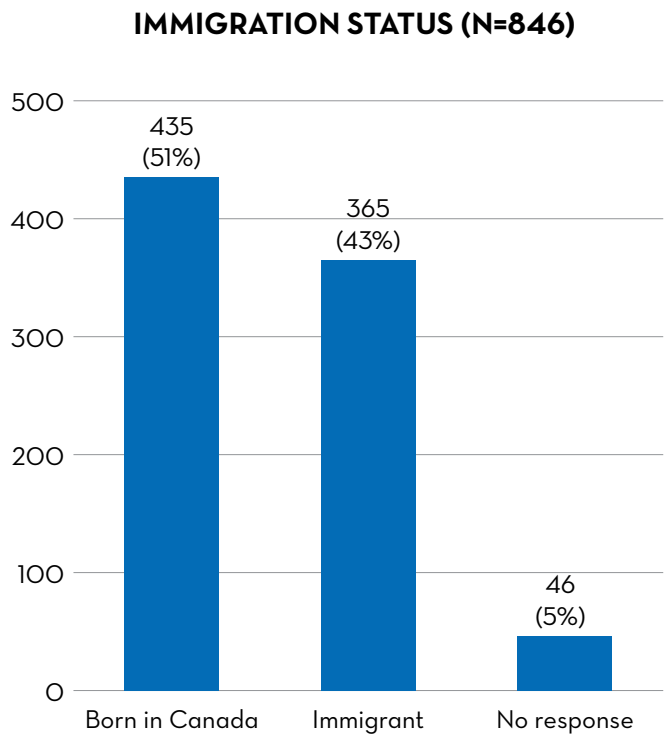
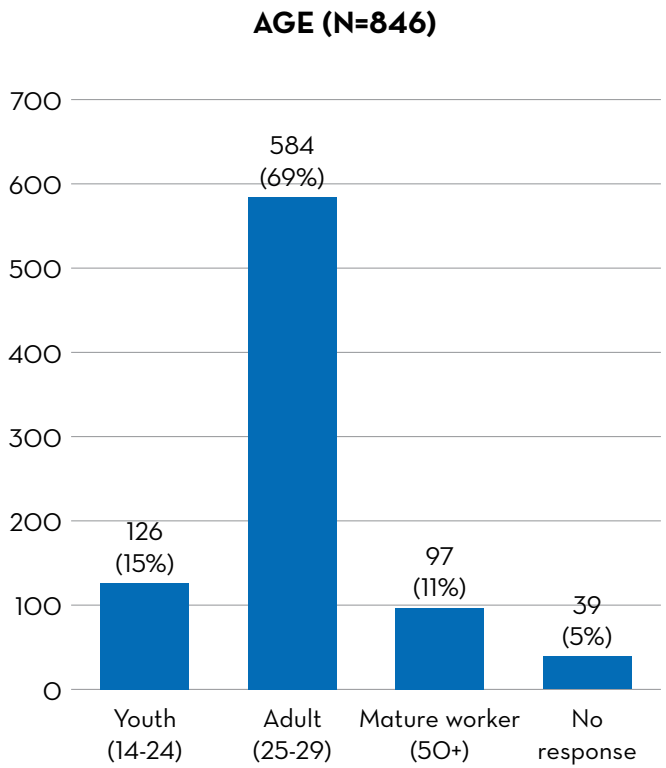
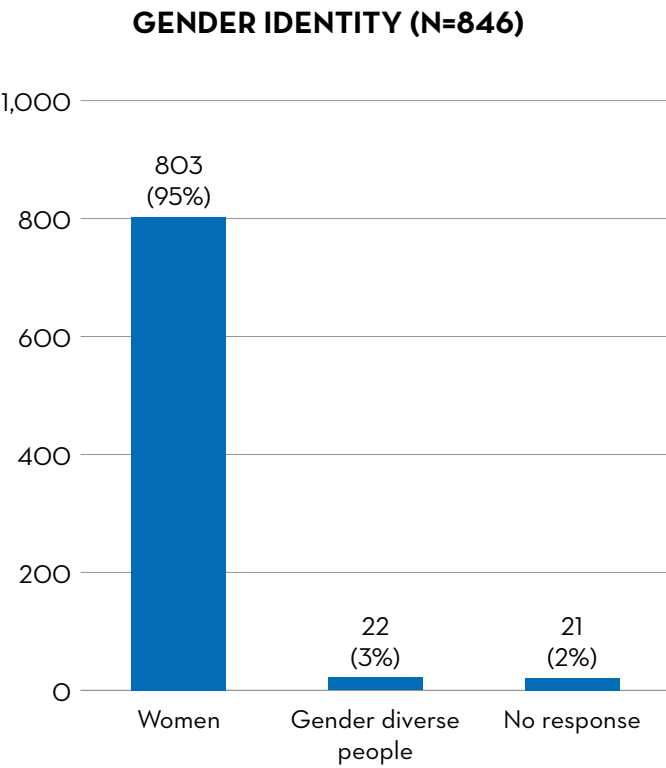
Total number of Events: three

Total number of Attendees: 141

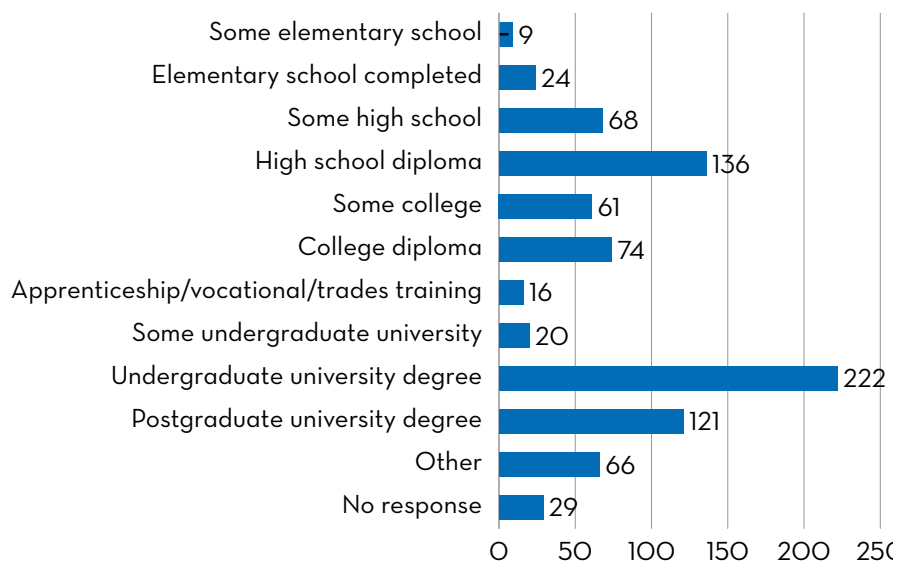
- YWCA BSF ESE Project Phase Three Launch Event
- National Learning Event on Employer Engagement
- YWCA BSF Virtual Learning Community Launch

3.2 INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT LEVEL

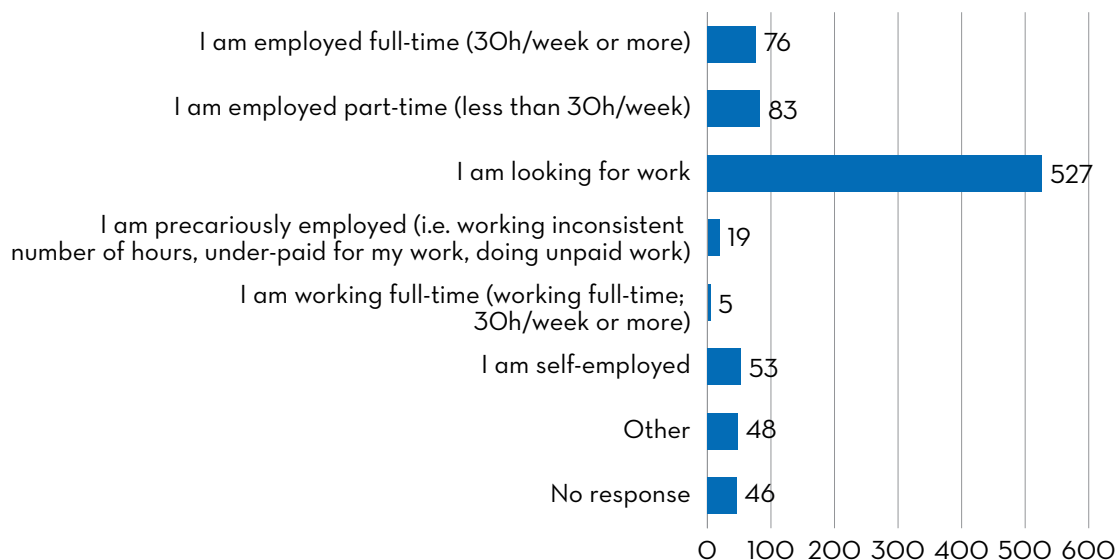
About Our Pilot Program Participants At-Intake:



HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED (N=846)



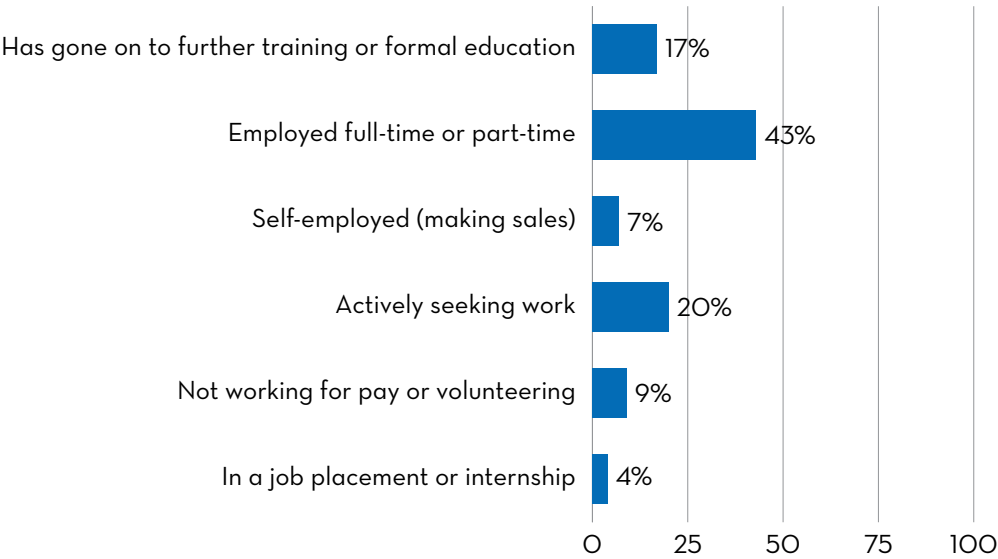
CURRENT WORK STATUS (N=857)*



* A small number of participants provided multiple responses to this question (e.g., some were looking for work while already working); most participants who selected “Other” indicated that they were unemployed.

Post-Program Follow-Up Participant Outcomes:

OVERALL PARTICIPANT POST-PROGRAM OUTCOMES (N=604)



242 participants are not included due to “not known”/“no response,” which indicates that follow-up was unable to be completed with these participants. Some participants provided multiple responses (e.g., employed and further training; employed and seeking work, etc.). A total of 728 responses were received from the 604 participants.

A Sampling of Jobs Obtained by Program Graduates 2020-2023:

While **YWCA Hamilton** and **Moncton** programs focused on self-employment, the other eight programs (**YWCA**s **Halifax**, **Metro Vancouver**, **Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal**, **Muskoka**, **Saskatoon**, **St. John’s**, **Thompson** and **Toronto**) reported a range of job outcomes for participants. **YWCA Saskatoon’s Trade Journey** graduates mostly found employment in the construction industry. Among other sectors most frequently mentioned were: administrative (e.g., office manager, receptionist); sales/marketing/customer service (e.g., retail clerk, cashier); technology (e.g., software developer, data analyst); and project coordination/facilitation.

Some other jobs mentioned included: early childhood assistant, account executive, professor, home care worker, pet groomer, real estate agent, baker, security guard, driver, bartender and postal worker.

Collaborators expressed great pride in participants' achievements, especially given their many intersecting life challenges and the added impacts of the pandemic. Participants noted how being in programs boosted their self-confidence and motivation, and instilled in them hope for the future while also helping them to build the personal and technical skills needed to succeed in a fast-changing workplace.

Collaborators and Program Participants Talk About Successes:

"Of our LAUNCH 1.0 participants, 94 percent completed the in-class program and 83 percent completed our program. We connected with over 120 employers and had 48 different employers host placements; and we engaged with 93 community organizations. We estimated that we saved employers over two hundred thousand dollars in on-boarding and training cost for participants. In our completion surveys, we received high praise from participants who felt that the online programming made it easier for them to join in their work experience, and that the support they received enabled them to feel confident in joining the labour market. Three months after the end of our program [in 2021], 49 percent of our participants remained employed—and all that, during COVID a time of real labour market challenge." (LAUNCH Atlantic partnership staff)

"It is much sweeter when they do graduate, when you know that they have struggled so hard just to make it to the end. The main [Trades Journeyman] instructor basically had a big envelope with all of the participants' assignments in it. He marks every single one. He put their final marks on the front of the envelope and when he presented the certificate, he handed each woman this envelope. And he made sure to express from where they started: 'You started at a 60 percent and you are graduating with 94 percent, and you know how to do trigonometry!'" (YWCA Saskatoon staff)

"We are pleased that three FOCUS@Work alumnae were selected to be part of the YWCA City Shift program. City Shift is a revolutionary program funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada to make cities more equitable, prosperous, and just by engaging cities like Metro Vancouver to commit to equitable decision making." (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

"Two participants from one of our cohorts who had co-created and soft-launched their business with the support of Employment My Way, have successfully established full operations. Two of the participants want to continue their business as a side project and work to build their business at their own rate. Another participant needed to complete a training course before starting her personal fitness coaching business. The fourth participant will continue to learn about her field and will work towards the goal of opening her own naturopath wellness centre. All four participants expressed gratitude for the program and completed it feeling more confident in their abilities." (YWCA Moncton staff)

"A participant who had just gotten a new job closer to the beginning of the program expressed how without our program she's not sure she would have been able to stay in her new job. Because of the sessions around asset mapping, stress, personality, communication, and leadership she realized all of the skills she had to successfully do her job. Her comment was that, 'Without this program, I would have likely quit out of fear of not being enough.'" (YWCA Muskoka staff)

"During the pandemic it has been easy to slip into a negative mindset. The Focus@Work exercises for mind and body showed me how important it is to check in with myself and care for myself, and that I matter. The tools and resources to help in my job search are abundant and if I came into this program with little hope, I now feel more hopeful and supported every day. I have made some real connections here and was given the invaluable opportunity to support and be supported." (YWCA Metro Vancouver participant)

*“This program gave me my confidence back! After being out of a real job for a hot minute I feared most that I wouldn’t have what it takes to follow through with the work placement. But with the tools I learned during the **LAUNCH** program I was able to adapt to a changing work place, and really dig my feet into all that was happening around me.”*
(YWCA Halifax participant)

“YWCA Toronto’s program allowed me to transform into a better leader, providing me information and the resources needed to help me find employment. For example, the budgeting workshop helped me understand how I can save money in simpler ways and gave me a template to actually work out my current finances. As someone who has had few resources on how to find a job in the past, having a positive environment where I can learn and vocalize some of the concerns that I had helped me with my future job search. A lot of the resources I had access to previously were outdated, so having more recent resources and having someone talk about how COVID-19 can affect the results helped me process the information more clearly.” (YWCA Toronto participant)

Key Phase Three Frameworks:

- The YWCA BSF model; individual participant asset mapping
- The nine OLES essential skills (revised as Skills for Success); emerging skills for the labour market

3.2.1 The YWCA BSF Model and Individual Participant Asset Mapping Tools

In Phase Three, the ESE team facilitated two trainings on the YWCA BSF model and three on YWCA BSF individual participant asset mapping attended by 45 and 69 Collaborator staff respectively (see Sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 for diagrams of the model and map).

As we explore here and in Section 3.3.3 below, all Collaborators integrated two components of the YWCA BSF model—Personal Development and Career Management Services, and Essential Skills and Employability Training—into their programs. Eight programs integrated Job Readiness and Placement Services. For the two self-employment programs—at YWCAs Hamilton and Moncton—this component of the YWCA BSF model was directed toward small business development coaching and mentoring. **YWCA Hamilton** provided Leadership and Business services to their more business-ready participants, as well as ongoing professional networking opportunities. Professional Development Services were on offer mostly at larger-capacity YWCAs in urban areas; for example, some participant graduates were later hired and found career advancement opportunities within the specific YWCA that offered their programs.



Carolina's Story:

*"My name is Carolina, I am Venezuelan, and I arrived in Canada in 2019. I want to share my testimony to express my gratitude to the YWCA and to all the women who work in this incredible organization, especially those of the Y des femmes de Montréal because it is important for me to recognize all the work and dedication that all of them do for the benefit of all the participants in the different programs the organization offers. As an immigrant I had to live a new reality. I went through a process of adaptation during which I did some research to learn the best steps to take. First, I enrolled in francisation because it helped me integrate into the Québec culture. Once I finished that, during the unspeakable time of the pandemic, I enrolled in the **Women's Work Integration Program (WWIP)** after an acquaintance, who had participated in it 20 years ago, suggested it was the best thing for me to do because it was going to help me find the right path in this new experience of life.*

"That step was one of the most important I took since I arrived in Canada because it helped me focus on reaching my dream. I felt very proud of all the things I had achieved in my country, such as the studies I did at the Universidad de Los Andes where I completed my two bachelor's degrees, the first in Modern Languages and the second in Education, all while being the mother of two wonderful children. After I had the incredible experience of collaborating with the first

cohort of deaf people who obtained their university baccalaureate, I confirmed once again how important it was for me to be part of a team where we could give the best of ourselves both professionally and personally for our community. I therefore decided to pursue a master's degree in Special Education and thus continue with my knowledge and experience, to contribute to society.

"During my experience as a WWIP participant over the course of 19 weeks, I was guided by a team of professional women determined to facilitate, step by step, the process of job placement. As a part of the program, I did an internship, which led to a job that I enjoyed to the fullest. I am now thrilled to have the opportunity to work at the YWCA with the program that I was proud to have been a part of, and to offer all the knowledge and experience that has been part of me for so many years. I am delighted to be able to share part of my culture, my experiences, and my knowledge so that the women of our community know that, through perseverance and the recognition of all the potential within them, they are also capable of fulfilling their dreams and goals." (YWCA Montreal/ Y des femmes de Montréal past program participant and now staff)

As a part of Personal Development and Career Management Services, all Collaborators implemented the YWCA BSF asset mapping exercise with participants (in a group or individually) at the beginning of each cohort or shortly after, and then again at program's end. Timing of the first asset map varied according to the interests and comfort levels of the various program groups. For example, with **YWCA Hamilton's** participants embarking on their small business development program, asset maps were implemented at the very start—they had been customized by staff for an entrepreneurial focus (see Section 4.4 for more on this adaptation). At programs whose participants needed more time and greater familiarity with staff and their groups to disclose, maps were often not introduced until the second week. Most asset mapping sessions went online until restrictions eased, after which some Collaborators preferred to implement the exercise in person.

The exercise supported many participants in identifying previously unrecognized assets and becoming motivated in setting goals for areas they wanted to strengthen. For some, it acted as a testament to their progress.

“The main thing that changed a lot for participants was the asset mapping tool: they knew themselves where they were at day one, and then at 11 weeks after the workshop portion of the program they did the tool again and were really able to see the changes on paper.” (YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal staff)

It was also an effective way to share with each other as a group.

“[It] brought the group closer together as it served as a visual representation of diversity; this activity built a foundation for honest conversations about experiences, traumas, personal adversities, and growth. Overall, a great tool to reference during other workshops, particularly when participants express feeling ‘stuck.’” (YWCA Halifax staff)

“I love it when they see their asset maps, as in, I didn’t think of the strengths I already have. I love doing it first and I use it as a team building: as in, okay, we’re going to get together and get to know everyone else.” (YWCA Hamilton staff)

For some participants, however, the exercise was less positive and required careful facilitation by staff.

“Some clients and newcomers to Canada found asset mapping helpful to reflect on their identity since they immigrated to Canada. Many rated Identity as low, which helped us focus on the importance of building connections and community supports during our individual coaching sessions. This activity can be stressful for folks who are in precarious housing situations or have other challenges with basic needs. In these situations, clients realized they may need to obtain ‘survival’ jobs, or employment that helps them move to a place of stability and financial security.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

“Some participants became quite emotional while sharing about areas on the map that were low. The facilitator had to be prepared to maintain a safe space for the individual and class in general. From my experience with the participants, presenting the content related to asset mapping in a group context worked well, but when it came to completing the asset mapping activities, participants seemed more engaged with and got more out of the experience if they completed the mapping one-to-one.” (YWCA Saskatoon staff)

“The first five cohorts really enjoyed it. It just seemed that the majority of the last cohort were not in any place where they could say, I have got these assets. A large number of them needed to work on other aspects of their lives before working on employment. There were several battling addictions, a few who had just gotten out of abusive relationships, people that were homeless. In this instance the asset mapping served as a reminder of what they did not have.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

These experiences from staff, especially those working with participants who face many intersecting barriers in their lives, have been a valuable learning for the Collaborative with respect to: when to implement the mapping exercise; whether to make it a group and/or one-to-one activity; and how an exploration of individual strengths needs to be situated within the broader context of forces that may be holding people back as they seek to move toward more sustainable futures (for more reflections on and recommendations related to asset mapping, see Sections 5 and 6).

3.2.2 Essential Skills (Skills for Success) and Emerging Skills for the Labour Market

All Collaborators had integrated the nine essential skills for employment and the emerging skills into their program components, including into the workshop Lesson Plans showcased in the Toolkit. Some participants used the context of the pandemic as a chance to explore new opportunities through the programs, such as testing out a small business and/or second career; and/or new skills training

(e.g., upgrading computer and other skills for the digital/remote work sectors). As noted earlier, both digital and more experiential skills were particularly relevant to programs and participants during the pandemic.

“Due to the COVID pandemic I lost my job. In this hard time, I got a chance to develop my skills, honed my ability to deal with tailoring résumés and cover letters. I learned new techniques to find jobs in this digital age.” (YWCA Halifax participant)

“The Focus@Work program gave me confidence and self-awareness. I got to meet people that are going through the same things I am and this connection was very good for my mental health and to make me feel more appreciated, especially now with the pandemic. Made me more confident in my position in the job market. A focus on vision, values, goals is a good foundation to build my job hunt on, and assess where I want to go and what is important to me. It has given me more direct tools to hone in on my résumé, cover letter.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver participant)

At the August 2021 focus groups, Collaborator staff shared a number of essential and emerging skills as being particularly useful to participants during this time, including:

- Computer literacy and tech skills *
- Digital Literacy *
- Motivation and self-direction *
- Document use
- Oral communication
- Working with others
- Networking *
- Reading *
- Writing
- Collaboration *
- Time management
- Problem solving
- Budgeting (entrepreneurs)
- Adaptability
- Teamwork

**Indicates a skill mentioned more often.*

Of the four emerging skills areas researched in Phase Three, YWCAs Hamilton and Moncton both focused directly on building an Entrepreneurial Approach for small business development. Although the pilot of **YWCA St. John's** was not an entrepreneurship program, staff highlighted the value of an entrepreneurial approach to pre-employment skills by creating a workshop and Lesson Plan with this focus (see the 2023 Toolkit, Section 2.8). Entrepreneurial skills were also important for programs supporting participants in exploring new career options.

While Flexible/Adaptable Digital Skills were a major focus across all programs, building Motivation and Self-Direction and Emotional Intelligence fit especially well with other essential skills during this phase.

“We had to relearn how to do business online; also, oral communication and working with others. When you do networking or would like to do business with others, there is a lot of body language involved, but online there is zero body language—and you need to express yourself especially for newcomers and immigrants. We could see how much they improved in expressing themselves, to present themselves to be a little bit more confident, less intimidated. Another thing is reading because since we are not in person most of the time, we have to send some papers for them. So, they have to get used to reading. Not only to read but to understand what [the information] is telling them, as in what are their next steps.” (YWCA Moncton staff)

This combination of skills building supported participants in navigating the uncertainties of the health crisis and addressing its unique challenges, including the back and forth of lockdowns.

“Some women have been able to pivot businesses—for example, one business called Tea Amo used to do tea and sandwiches for weddings and events pre-pandemic operating out of a trailer. During the pandemic they pivoted to transforming their trailer to a kitchen and producing delivery boxes of goodies.” (YWCA Hamilton staff)

“[To the skills participants built], I would add problem solving, for example, applying for CERB, childcare and things like that; and otherwise, digital skills, the importance of networking, collaborating, we saw all of that too.” (YWCA Saskatoon staff)

3.3 PROGRAM/ ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Key Phase Three Frameworks:

- YWCA BSF Program/Organizational Capacity Asset Mapping
- YWCA Life Skills Model and Coaching Training
- Leadership Training
- YWCA BSF Employer and Community Partner Engagement Model

3.3.1 The YWCA BSF Program/ Organizational Capacity Asset Mapping Tool

A total of 15 Collaborator staff attended the program/organizational capacity mapping training (see Section 1.1.2 for a diagram of this map). Afterwards, all sites implemented the exercise with their staff teams as a retrospective reflection. A number mentioned they hoped to use it going forward as a tool with their staff groups, to explore the strengths and challenges of the program and its overall organization, and to identify areas for improvement.

“It was great: 30 out of 10! I really liked it. Even for supervising folks, it was really nice to just come together as a team and talk about what are we doing well and what are we doing not so well; and people feeling safe enough to be honest. It was really great reflection for me and a great energizer. I definitely think we will reuse it. My plan is to type up the notes and then see how we can use it as an accountability piece, even with the Board. It’s interesting that in Phase Two you did the pre- and post-organizational mapping. I wasn’t familiar with the program/organizational map, so I think that [a pre-mapping] would have been really useful.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

YWCA Saskatoon staff went a step further, drawing on the five program/organizational asset areas—Participant-focused, Connected, Agile, Effective, and Resilient—to explore the holistic components of their **Trade Journey** program (see Section 4.4 for detail on this customized use of both individual and program-organizational asset maps).

Of these five areas, most Collaborators reported strong confidence in their participant focus and connections, and emphasized how the circumstances of COVID had been a great test of their agility as programs and organizations. They also rated themselves well on their efforts in the Effective and Resilient areas, but noted how pressed they were to maintain let alone build these assets in the face of uncertain and inconsistent project-based funding.

“As with all women’s programming, most of our funding comes in the way of specific funding sources and we rely on the government and other funders to provide the financial means to support this very necessary work. There are times when there is a funding gap and programs lose funding and it takes time for new funding announcements to come. As a result, there was a gap of approximately five months when our last women’s entrepreneurship program ended and this new one began. This resulted in us losing our experienced staff and the need to recruit and hire new staff and a new manager to oversee this new program.” (YWCA Moncton staff)

“[Regarding resilience], we do not have a strong visibility in the community and we don’t have the human power to have good social media or to have a communications person. We’re all just doing that off the side of our desks. Last night I sat down and went on Instagram and reshared a thousand things, so it’s really happening in chaotic moments. Program sustainability just doesn’t exist, and I really just want to drive that home: we have no sustainability here, and I think it’s hard to meet the effective asset without strong sustainability.” (St. John’s staff)

3.3.2 YWCA Toronto Life Skills Model and Coaching Training

YWCA Toronto's ESE team facilitated trainings with a total of 75 individuals, comprised of 30 Collaborator staff and 45 project stakeholders (including other community service providers across Canada, and staff from other programs at Collaborator Associations).

From the start, the YWCA Toronto Life Skills Coach Trainer faced the new challenge of adapting coaching trainings for virtual delivery.

“When we first talked about moving [the training] online, I was very adamant that it was not something we would be able to do because it is so experiential. My concern was, how can participants experience that same impact, because it’s a group dynamic moving from a ‘me’ to a ‘we’ group mentality. I think probably one in every ten [participants] would still say, I wish we could have done it in person. But overall, I think people are quite happy with the delivery online. It definitely saves people that they are still at home when their doing it, still in that friendly safe environment. I think we’ve also tapped into more organizations because they have not had to travel—because of saving them the cost.” (YWCA Toronto Life Skills Coach Trainer)

In their anonymous feedback comments, most trainees reported finding the training highly beneficial. They saw the particular value of a Life Skills approach to facilitating adult learning for different styles of learners and audiences, and also to ensure consistency in the delivery of program components. Some were already using the model to develop workshops but now felt equipped to apply it in a broader way, to make learning more accessible.

“I am now going back to my lesson plans and incorporating the format and looking at the learner from a different perspective and approaching it from a different view. Not just knowledge of the technical skill, such as how to develop a business plan, [but also how to] grow as a person as well and embrace change. It was a good reminder of how the lesson should be impactful, and not just for the sake of giving information.” (Anonymous Collaborator feedback)

Trainees mentioned a few technical issues to resolve, and suggested ways to refine the pace and method of working through the course materials. They also identified some activities in the Lesson Plan that might require adjustments when being delivered online as opposed to in person, notably in the Warm-Up exercises to introduce people to each other and build a group dynamic prior to the actual lesson.

The Life Skills model and Lesson Plan format clearly resonated with Collaborators across a wide typology of programs, from small business development to more general pre-employment and employment training.

“The Life Skills training was an amazing opportunity to create Lesson Plans that will have the most impact on PowerUp Ready participants. I love the structure of the Lesson Plan and all the tools we learned that helped us to be better facilitators. One of the webinars I created from taking the Life Skills training was Building Your Business on Core Values. It sends a direct message to participants about their image and branding and creating a business on values that they believe in. One of my clients creates environmentally friendly products so is very conscious about sourcing sustainable raw materials for her product line.” (YWCA Hamilton staff)

Staff at YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal found Life Skills so powerful that they were inspired to integrate it across their employment training programs, starting with their Unique pre-employment program for women further from the labour market who are just starting to explore career options. The YWCA's decision was in part a capacity building strategy to address the challenge of staff turnover and the resulting loss of staff trained through the YWCA BSF Phase Three initiative (for more detail on promising practices in Life Skills integration, see Section 4.3).

For one Association with lesser capacity, however, this strategy was harder to implement:

“We are working towards having all of our workshops over all our employment programs under a Life Skills format. it’s a long road and we are nowhere near there, but we are working on it. And again, with staff changeover or turnover we now have staff in programs who never got to avail themselves of the training [offered by YWCA Toronto].” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

3.3.3 Leadership Training

A total of 36 attendees participated in the June 2023 Leadership training, The Leader Within (see Section 1. 2. 4). In their feedback, Collaborators mentioned how the workshop stimulated them to reflect on their own roles as leaders, to apply new perspectives to their program components, and to create more intentional activities to build participants’ leadership skills.



They appeared particularly inspired by the idea that there are many kinds of leaders with a range of diverse attributes, and that leadership itself can be seen as a dynamic “dance” in response to different situations and needs. The Co-Active model was noted as a great fit with a Life Skills approach to adult learning and with the emerging skills focused on personal growth.

“The Co-Active multidimensional approach to leadership is a tool that can be empowering to participants, but it can also be used as a tool to build individualized rapport. Each participant may need a different leader to help empower them and build their self-awareness or confidence. You can easily incorporate the five qualities that are at the centre of the Co-Active leadership model into programing or conversation. I want to incorporate this information in our employment programs, to help our participants see the leader they have in themselves. During the training, I was thinking of different employees on the [staff] team and what different styles of leadership with different people will guide and help everyone grow their potential. And that is amazing!!!!” (YWCA Moncton staff)

Collaborators also valued the importance of drawing on intuition, active listening, and “being present” in life and work situations. They saw a clear connection between the Co-Active model of leadership and the mindfulness training with building self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-motivation.

“Most of the participants in employment programs, when they start, they do not see themselves as leaders. I see myself applying different questions about the different type of leaders to let them see how we can all be leaders: Have you ever helped a friend or a kid with their homework? Have you ever shared knowledge with people at work? Have you ever called a friend to make sure they are okay, out of pure intuition? If you have answered ‘yes’ to any of these questions, you are a leader!” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

One Collaborator suggested the model could be used as a lens to explore broader power dynamics of systemic inequalities, within both organizations and relationships. The Co-Active model also resonates with a Collaborator reflection about changes in the nature of work and the workplace during the pandemic, for both program staff and participants:

Work in the Time of COVID-19 Health Restrictions: Shifting Hierarchy

“It occurs to me that motivation and self-direction were personally honed in myself, moving to a work-from-home capacity. As someone who does better with someone [looking] over my shoulder, it was new for me; and it was a new struggle at first, and a type of struggle that you even struggle to share: ‘I know I need to do this and I know I need to be self-motivated, self-directed, disciplined and things like that but I’m really finding it hard, and now I’m anxious because I’m finding it hard, and now I’m anxious because I can’t share that I find it hard.’ So, it’s not just for participants but for staff; and being able to use that example with participants becomes part of the practice. We talked with our coordinators, and a lot of the feedback is that participants and staff were able to connect better, have better discussions when there wasn’t a hierarchy. When your coordinator was able to share in the challenges of employment, it made for an opportunity for connection, it eliminated a bit of that hierarchy and it provided a lot of insight to coordinators into how participants must be feeling and dealing with this as well.” (YWCA Halifax staff)

3.3.4 YWCA BSF Employer and Community Partner Engagement Model

In Phase Three, the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model incubated during Phase Two grew to include community partners, as an enhancement to this holistic approach to building sustainable futures. The ESE team facilitated two trainings on the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement Model. These were attended by 34 Collaborator staff. Over Phase Three, the Collaborative engaged with a total of 497 employers and 241 community service providers nationally.

Employers were involved through a range of ways including on the expressed interest of participants, one-to-one outreach and contact, staff referrals, community events and conferences. Many employers provided placement/job/mentorship opportunities, and some—such as trades-related businesses in the case of **YWCA Saskatoon’s Trade Journey** participants—offered training opportunities, and others consultation services.

Community partners helped with outreach, program promotion, and knowledge exchange about available services, as well as service coordination and referrals. They were also involved in information sessions and presentations, as guest speakers, and as collaborators in providing rental classroom space, workshops, trainings and certifications.

Collaborators mentioned working with Business Improvement Agencies, libraries, universities and colleges, regional innovation centres, school boards, and professional women’s associations, such as **YWCA Toronto’s** partnership with CREW (see Section 4.6 for more detail) and **YWCA Hamilton’s** women in business guest speaker series.

“About our speaker series, started in September 2022: these speakers have businesses and are very powerful women who might talk about marketing, financials, different aspects of a business—they’ve learned all the dos and don’ts, and they want to share them. The speakers are all women. It’s not that we couldn’t get men, but we wanted to focus on seeing women come into the program, as some of our participants always have the imposter syndrome. I’m dealing with some very talented women participants—we would not believe their résumés and the things they have done—but they just feel: oh, I don’t know if I can do it. So, it’s good to hear from these other women: here are the steps you need to think of taking, because you can do it too.” (YWCA Hamilton staff)

Collaborators also developed strategic relationships with specialized community agencies to advance their participants’ opportunities and, in the case of **YWCA St. John’s**, to dismantle barriers that hold people back.

“One challenge we have encountered is employers who are not interested in hiring folks with criminal records despite their fit and ability for the job. Despite advocacy around the person for the role, it can be challenging, at times, to change a potential employer’s thoughts on this. We developed a new partnership with the John Howard Society—a voluntary, non-profit agency that provides counselling, residential, employment and related services to adult and youth ex-offenders. Through this partnership, we were able to invite one of their employment staff to join our group and facilitate a session on the process of obtaining a record suspension and how to navigate employment when having a criminal record. This facilitator and agency also became an essential resource for several program participants who required more direct and knowledgeable support on this process.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

The YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model was not always a perfect fit with Collaborator programs’ needs, capacities and goals. **YWCA Thompson’s** primary funder (Manitoba Economic Development, Investment and Trade) already covers this piece for the program. Since YWCAs Hamilton and Moncton both focused on self-employment, their programs did not integrate all stages of the model; and **YWCA Muskoka’s** program was not directly focused on engaging participants with employment opportunities. Not all programs built a Candidate Pool (Stage 1), but most included Pre-Assessment, support with Employer Connections, Follow-Up, and some form of Career Advancement (Stages 2–5).

Some Collaborators lacked the staffing capacity and other resources to implement the full range of stages. Some—such as **YWCA Thompson**—were working with participants who were less ready to engage with and advance in the labour market, particularly during the pandemic. The model appeared to work best as a template for larger urban programs, such as those of YWCAs Halifax, Metro Vancouver, Montreal and of course Toronto.

Again, a key challenge to building employer and community engagement for many programs has been lack of funding. Without money for a dedicated Job Coordinator position, some Collaborators have been stretched to explore new, and even to sustain, existing connections with partners. Several Collaborators also mentioned the impact of staff changes at their organizations on these partner relationships, and how much harder it was to build new relationships during the pandemic.

“YWCA Halifax’s LAUNCH program was originally funded for nine months, and those types of things really make an impact in terms of creating employer pools, maintaining employer connections, and the turnover among staff. For example, if you have a staff member with a nine-month contract, they may not be committed to completing that contract if something more consistent and long-term becomes available. So, within a short-term contract you may have a number of turnovers there, and that certainly does impact your ability to have consistent staff and consistent contacts for employers and clients and maintaining those relationships. With COVID it makes it even more of a challenge, because you’re not making that face-to-face connection. Oftentimes things happen behind the scenes and via email whereas pre-COVID at the very least I would know someone’s face or make that personal connection even if it was just as limited. We facilitated entire placements via email. Yet the relationship just isn’t there, and we’ve had staff turnover.” (YWCA Halifax staff)

The LAUNCH Atlantic partnership has proved a promising strategy to build capacity for employer and community engagement by sharing resources—including three Work Transition Coordinators, and employer pools—across three Associations in the region (for more on this partnership, see Section 4.1 below). Even so, issues of staff turnover created a challenge:

“Our LAUNCH Atlantic program has seen two Work Transition Coordinators staff turnovers in seven months, making establishing new and maintaining ongoing employer connections a bit challenging.” (LAUNCH partnership staff)

YWCA Metro Vancouver already had in place a strong and well-established employer and community partner engagement framework for **Focus@Work**, and with the pandemic was inspired to seek new ways of working with participants, to support them more intentionally in a virtual context.

“I’m working with a few different clients now who are finding that they also need that support to sustain their job in a virtual workplace. They’re being onboarded virtually, they’re having to figure out how to communicate virtually with new staff around them and new people around them... [We might develop a workshop regarding] okay, now you’ve got a job, how do you function in that job? Because employers are more careful about hiring people that they maybe haven’t actually met, and it takes longer for an employer to determine that maybe it wasn’t the right fit, and references etc. become super important. But also, for the employee, what kind of communication do you need to set up right from the get-go and how to understand what your employer needs in terms of communication right from the get-go?” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

3.4 BUILDING KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Key Phase Three Frameworks:

- The YWCA BSF Virtual Learning Community

As mentioned, the ESE team was able to facilitate only one in-person national event to launch Phase Three before the pandemic lockdown. Two national learning events, one on the YWCA BSF Employer Engagement model and one on the YWCA BSF Virtual Learning Community, were facilitated virtually. A total of 141 attended these sessions.

The pandemic appeared to have a negative impact on strategies involving use of the online platform Slack for knowledge exchange. Collaborators simply did not have the “bandwidth” to participate in an exchange when they were more stretched than ever for time and resources, working to address multiple COVID-19-related challenges, and to keep up with funder and project deliverables. Screen fatigue was another issue: they were already spending so many hours online that it was hard for them to contribute “off the side of their desk” to the platform. As a result, Slack was used mainly by the ESE team to post information for the Collaborative. The ESE team noted that it would be difficult to promote an active knowledge exchange resource even in “normal” times without a dedicated staff position to facilitate it.

“We spent a significant amount of time researching the different platforms and landed on Slack as the most effective one for our needs. We added all our resources on to the platform and posted weekly discussion questions and articles. There was bit of interest at the beginning, but we were not able to capitalize fully on this strategy. My understanding is that people really appreciated having all the resources accessible but did not feel comfortable participating and writing in Slack, so in the end it became a one-way exchange. Getting people engaged online is never easy, be it on social media or in a private group, especially when none of our members were using Slack in any other way. Also, I believe that digital fatigue added to the issue: it was in time of COVID, everything was online and to have one more thing to post where

you couldn’t really see the person or interact with them was not an attractive activity for anyone. Once we realized that, we shifted our focus to organizing more virtual check-ins and regional forums that allowed us still to conduct knowledge exchange, just not in the ways we had initially imagined.”

(YWCA Toronto Manager, Essential Skills for Employment program and Digital Skills in the Workplace program)

The online regional forums, focus groups, and other national events (see Section 3 for detail) became the “go-to” vehicle for sharing knowledge and building connections across the Collaborative, along with Zoom check-ins and email. All sites delivered forums, with a total of 219 attendees. In their informal remarks after the presentations, Collaborators emphasized how fruitful these were for learning. As was the case with the YWCA BSF capacity building trainings, online delivery saved time and resources, and enabled more staff to attend than would have been practicable in person. Recordings can also be reviewed at a later date, supporting further online knowledge exchange. For Associations that chose to co-deliver regional forums, presenting together provided an excellent opportunity to learn more about one another’s work and build collegial relationships.

“I found the pairing of other regions quite remarkable, as we got to know more about individuals and their programs and the tools that they use to deliver their programs.” (YWCA Hamilton staff)

SECTION 4:

A Sampling of Phase Three Promising Practices

Overview

This section presents a sampling of the many promising practices refined by the Collaborative through Phase Three. All connect back to themes from the project learning, and almost all draw on one or more of the key YWCA BSF frameworks. As much as possible they are described in Collaborators' own words, to give a sense of the direct "voice" of frontline staff that was captured digitally in this phase—a silver lining of the pandemic.

The power of collaboration is evidenced by **LAUNCH Atlantic**, a regional initiative among YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's to build capacity to deliver a program for women and gender diverse youth across their three provinces: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The strength of connecting is shared by **YWCA Metro Vancouver**, through its new enhancement to the FOCUS@Work program, SHETalks—an online platform developed and facilitated to offer participants and program graduates warm personal peer-to-peer supports and job-related networking opportunities that were formerly fostered through face-to-face in-class participation.

YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal focuses on the integration of Life Skills across all of its employment training programs. The aim is to promote the quality and consistency of delivery, while building staff capacity as a response to the challenges of turnover and lost institutional knowledge. **YWCA Muskoka's** promising practice also draws on the Life Skills model and Lesson Plan, to work with participants to build motivation and self-confidence—emerging skill areas foundational to both career and life goals.



Two different customized uses of the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools are featured by YWCAs Hamilton and Saskatoon: one is an adaptation to fit the needs and goals of participants in **PowerUp Ready**, a small business development program; and the other explores both individual participant and program/organizational asset areas to capture the model of **Trade Journey**, a woman-focused trades training program.

YWCA Thompson shares its Scavenger Hunt, an experiential exercise for participants that combines an active investigation into local employment opportunities in the local community with practice in the skills of self-presentation and interviewing, along with a chance to learn first-hand about how the Skills for Success are involved in a range of different jobs.

Finally, YWCA Toronto showcases CREW, a partnership built with women professionals in the real estate sector to promote employment training, mentoring and consultation opportunities for participants.



4.1 LAUNCH ATLANTIC (YWCAs HALIFAX, MONCTON AND ST. JOHN'S): CREATING A REGIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING PARTNERSHIP The Launch Atlantic Partnership

The **LAUNCH Atlantic** employment program is offered as a partnership across YWCAs Halifax, Moncton and St. John's, spanning the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland & Labrador. It is funded by Employment Social and Development Canada (ESDC) through their youth employment and skills strategy. **LAUNCH Atlantic** serves female and gender diverse youth (15–30 years of age) who are out of school, unemployed or underemployed, and are facing significant and multiple barriers to employment (see Sections 2.1 YWCA Halifax and 2.8 YWCA St. John's for detail on program components).

“LAUNCH Atlantic arose from the success of YWCA Halifax’s LAUNCH program: we decided to engage our own Atlantic YWCA Associations to see if they would be interested in collaborating on learning the ropes of this new kind of dynamic approach to programing. It was natural to seek out YWCA Moncton and YWCA St. John’s to partner with, not just for the convenience of geography but for similarities we shared, such as labour market, immigration, socio-economic context, and participant barriers to employment. It also didn’t hurt that YWCA Moncton has been delivering quality successful employment programming for a while and that St. John’s was really on the edge of organizational expansion in terms of their community programming, service delivery, and the acquisition of very talented staff.” (LAUNCH Atlantic team lead)

Key to the success of this partnership has been the sharing of staff resources, promotional outreach on social media, and employer pools and engagement strategies. Funding across the three provinces has further supported work placements and the enhancement of participants’ skills.

“LAUNCH Atlantic employed three Work Transition Coordinators to engage with external organizations and community employers. Our social media and websites were used to promote advantages to employers for engaging in partnerships with our program. We also offered a full wage subsidy for employers for the duration of the participant’s 12-week placement. We implement frequent check-ins and formal reviews during placements to allow employers to maintain open communication, and resolve any existing challenges immediately and in a collaborative way. The program has provided funding for upskilling for participants; and sites also have relied heavily on our existing employer pool to facilitate placements. Coordinators and participants also used job search boards and websites to seek out employers that were actively looking for staff and approaching them with placement opportunity. A variety of staff were also informally a part of employer recruitment: for example, Program Managers, executive staff, and Directors of Philanthropy and Communication.” (LAUNCH Atlantic team lead)

All three sites experienced provincial COVID-19 lockdowns. During this time, Coordinators had to adapt to the needs of both participants and employers. For example, accommodations were made to have participants remain in their placements, or at least have placements put on hold.

*“We have also been so lucky to have a team lead at **YWCA Halifax** who is particularly able to provide so much inside support as well as the flexibility and availability she is able to offer to all members of the **LAUNCH Atlantic** team in a different Association; whether that is providing support to program managers navigating budget concerns, or directly supporting the program coordinators in work transition. Of course, there is also just the general collaboration that happens as well as the sharing of best practices. Coordinators meet regularly with the partnership team lead to discuss what’s working well, what the challenges are, and to troubleshoot together. There have also been a lot of supports within the three Associations to work together in terms of on-boarding training and staff recruitment and retention. In particular, we have been able to have training hosted by the team lead for all of the Associations’ program coordinators, so the partnership has taken a lot of stress out of the individual agencies by allowing all of this to happen together—unfortunately, due to COVID, not in person, but we made it work.”* (YWCA St. John’s staff)

While not every participant returned to placement after lockdown, all placements were made available for participants to return to. This was due in part to Coordinators’ ability to maintain positive relations with employers and to provide above and beyond support to participants.

*“Among the great things coming out of the partnership is being able to support participants throughout the whole region when there is a wait-list for the program: for example, **YWCA Halifax** is presently supporting a Moncton participant on a wait-list, because the program has been virtual.”* (YWCA St. John’s staff)

As **YWCA St. John’s** staff noted, the partnership has also enabled programs to offer emergency supports to participants who are struggling to make ends meet:

*“Especially when folks have kids, our emergency fund has been invaluable and we use it to the full extreme. There is nowhere people can go, at least in St. John’s, where they can get access to money to pay off a bill in a low barrier way, and if you can’t pay your heat and light bill and your power gets cut off, I don’t know how the heck you’re showing up for work and not feeling frazzled, let alone un-showered or whatever... Someone can call us and say, I’m about to get evicted, and we can say okay no problem how much do you need to stop the eviction? We will put it in an emergency shared cost request to Halifax [our **LAUNCH Atlantic** lead partner] and fingers crossed it gets approved, and at least then you are not having to worry for this month.”* (YWCA St. John’s staff)

Over the delivery of the partnership’s first **LAUNCH Atlantic** (Summer 2020 to early Spring 2021), program staff across the three Associations worked closely to deliver employment and training workshops to more than 63 participants, with **YWCA Halifax** having the highest number of applications and program participants. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, 94 percent of participants completed in-class programming, and staff received over 290 expressions of interest across the three provinces from potential participants, employers and community partners.

The demand for this program indicates a clear need for employment programming focused on women and gender diverse youth, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. Another promising aspect of **LAUNCH Atlantic** has been the community outreach component, through which Coordinators delivered group/one-to-one employment workshops to community members not already engaged in the program. In total, YWCAs Halifax and St. John’s supported 102 participants over the course of Phase Three (YWCA Moncton piloted a self-employment program, **Employment My Way**, for this phase).

4.2 YWCA METRO VANCOUVER: FACILITATING AN ONLINE PLATFORM FOR PEER-TO-PEER CONNECTIONS, NETWORKING AND SUPPORTS

YWCA Metro Vancouver – SHETalks

“FOCUS@Work was our pilot program for Phase Two of the YWCA BSF initiative. Since then, we have introduced SHETalks (SHE = Seen, Heard, Empowered), our weekly peer support program, to better prepare our clients to succeed in the labour market as it moves beyond COVID. We have incorporated a five-part series on topics that include Shifting Your Mindset, Knowing What You Need to Get Unstuck, Using Micro Habits to Create New Behaviours, Setting Realistic Goals, and Using Your Experience to Grow Stronger. This series is delivered by a registered Clinical Counsellor with extensive clinical supervision experience, specializing in Somatic Therapy.” (YWCA Vancouver Staff)

Below, program participants talk about SHETalks:

“SHETalks is, by far, one of my favourites of all the wonderful things proposed by FOCUS@Work.”

“SHETalks allows me to reunite with women who feel the same because they go through unemployment at the same time. There is nothing like this anywhere else that I know of, which adds value to this powerful experience and why I am so grateful to have access to this strong support system.”

“SHETalks is about understanding each other on a deeper level: it’s sharing and listening. It’s finding a way to name and express what you’re feeling, either because this safe place allows you to speak up or because someone else found the words you were looking for to put on your emotions. SHETalks is a weekly meeting I never want to miss; I am always saying if you don’t feel like going that’s the exact reason why you should go. To conclude, SHETalks is also so much more than all of that. This women’s support helped me through a strong personal breakthrough and I’ll always be deeply thankful for that.”

“The incredible group of women I was privileged to be introduced to have been an invaluable support. Hearing their stories that so closely mirrored my own experiences and emotions made me realize that I am not alone and that together we can all find success in life. We keep in touch with regular group chats and come together to cheer each other on through our successes and offer support in moments of doubt and disappointment. My experience with the FOCUS@Work program has been life changing and I am eternally grateful to have been chosen to participate. The ongoing support through SHETalks and various webinars helps to motivate and encourage me to stay on track with my goals and provides an environment of female empowerment and community to which I wouldn’t otherwise have access.”

4.3 YWCAS MONTREAL/Y DES FEMMES DE MONTRÉAL AND MUSKOKA: INTEGRATING THE YWCA LIFE SKILLS MODEL AND LESSON PLAN INTO PROGRAMMING YWCA Montreal/Y des Femmes de Montreal – Life Skills Integration to Build Capacity and Quality of Program Delivery

This Association experienced a lot of staff turnover during Phase Three. They found it a challenge to train new staff while also keeping up with the deliverables of the YWCA BSF initiative. Along with a review of staffing positions, job descriptions and salaries, the Association began to integrate the Life Skills model and YWCA BSF individual asset mapping exercise across all employment training programs, starting with its Unique program for women just beginning to explore opportunities in the job market. As one staff member expressed, life skills are integral to the overall programming approach: *“When a lesson is over, it’s never over.”*

“Before, the way the Y functioned was that whoever was in the role developed the workshop based on what they thought could be interesting. But the Life Skills framework really created a shift in the programming. We see now: it’s not a degree in university that’s going to get you the job, it’s those soft skills that you have that you can develop within the organization. People are more interested to hire people with more soft skills, so having a soft skill-related title for the workshops and having it clear that this is what we’re developing was super useful for participants and the Y as well. These workshops are being seen across other departments, inspiring them to begin developing and integrating life skills themes—a huge positive impact for participants and programs.

“The use of the Life Skills model has helped us in the delivery of all our workshops. Since our employment counsellors come from different educational backgrounds, this methodology allows us to be consistent in our delivery and helps us guarantee that, going forward, all women will experience the same learning process and receive the same information from the workshops. The Life Skills training also reflects the fact that adults learn differently from children. We had to learn to adapt our workshops in order to keep our participants engaged and interested. We are also aware that the women in our program often have other personal obligations, making it hard for them to be entirely devoted to the program. Having a structured methodology allows us to be clear and consistent in the actual delivery of the workshop, making it easier for the women to participate.

“We took Life Skills workshops that were already available in the YWCA Toronto Life Skills series and integrated them into the program. I’m not an expert in the field so I used the content that was already there. But just in doing that, it’s not like a lecture that I’m giving for five hours a day but instead shifting the perspective: I am a facilitator getting the ideas to come from participants and getting them to reflect on their own lives. This process included delivering theory, sharing a little, and doing activities based on a theme. The adult education approach to teaching has had a huge positive impact. Adults don’t want to be in a classroom just listening to someone speak; they want to be more active and you have to keep their energy up. So, having activities that allowed for exchange and collaboration had a huge positive impact on the framework of the program. The themes were interesting, but it was the way they were taught that had the most impact. There was a lot of trial and error to find out what themes captivated participants the most, and learning from these. Keeping content relevant, and what participants like. Overall, a lot of the content we teach these days comes from the YWCA Toronto Life Skills volumes.”

(YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal staff)

YWCA Muskoka – A Life Skills Approach to Build Motivation and Self-Confidence

Many of the women who come to YWCA Muskoka’s **Women Thriving** program are seeking new opportunities in their lives, often after being out of the workforce for some time. Some are experiencing social isolation, and some may feel they need support to find the confidence to move forward and embrace change. The Program Facilitator, who also delivered the Leadership Training to Collaborator staff, has created a workshop using the Life Skills Lesson Plan structure to explore how to build and nurture the foundational skills of motivation and self-confidence by drawing on one’s inner values or authentic self.

“The rationale for this is that when we understand what motivates us, it helps to guide us in finding employment that fits and in being a leader in our lives and within our workplace. When we’re aligned with a job that motivates us, and is connected to our values, it increases productivity, increases personal satisfaction and we’re naturally successful in the job that we’re doing. Confidence goes hand in hand with this because confidence is motivating on its own. It also helps with clear communication, self-direction, believing in having something to offer; and it increases creativity.” (YWCA Muskoka staff)

For more on Life Skills and an overview of the Life Skills Lesson Plan components, see Section 1.2.3. For more detail on this workshop and its practitioner resources, contact **YWCA Muskoka** (see contact details at the end of this Compendium).

Workshop Goals:

- To explore how we are motivated and how we can generate motivation within ourselves.
- To explore how self-awareness increases our self-confidence.

RATIONALE: When we are aligned to our values, to our purpose and what matters most to us, we naturally are more confident and make choices that are attuned to ourselves. When we are aligned, we naturally have more motivation. This class focuses on self-awareness, because building self-awareness increases our ability to maintain alignment with our highest values and purpose, and it therefore motivates us.

WARM-UP: Pose the question: What motivated you to attend class today? Have signs up around the classroom that say: Money, Family, Personal Satisfaction, Challenge, Vision. Read participants each bullet point listed below separately, then have them “walk” to the sign that indicates how they are motivated by each topic.

Generally, what motivates you when you are: picking a career or job?

- buying a large appliance/vehicle?
- joining an organization/group?
- in a friendship?
- taking care of yourself?

Questions to consider when everyone has chosen their spot for each point:

- How do you feel (or what do you think) about your choice?
- Do you feel the motivating source is a positive one?
- Is there anything you would change about this choice?
- What other sources motivate you?

STIMULUS: Brainstorm ways that people stay motivated and record on a flip chart.

Here is my list:

1. Goal Setting (remember the Goldilocks Rule—something that is not too easy or too hard to meet).
2. Be aligned with your values, higher purpose or authentic self.
3. Know the Why behind what you’re doing.
4. Have an accountability partner.
5. Let go of the all-or-nothing attitude (cognitive restructuring).
6. Have a Vivid Inspiration Vision (it has to be exciting to you!). Jump start the dopamine pleasure pathways.
7. List the benefits of staying motivated.
8. Acknowledgement of your wins. Celebrate all of them—big or small.
9. Focus on what matters (one task at a time).
10. Positive affirmations. (Rather than self-criticism, you can say every morning: “I’m ready to tackle today. I feel motivated.” Or, “I like myself and I love my _____.”)
11. Set your own goals for motivation (this is work related).

Show video on Motivation by Mel Robbins:
[Mel Robbins | One of the Best Talks Ever on Self-Motivation](#)

EVOCATION: Discuss the video: What did you think? What did you like/learn?

- Mel Robbins says, “You can’t choose how you feel, but you can choose what you do.” Can you think of a time when you heard the voice in your head saying, “NO!” but you powered past it anyway? How did this impact that time or situation?

OBJECTIVE INQUIRY/SKILL APPLICATION:

Share:

- Self-Concept
- Small Meditation for Self-Awareness; discuss experience
- Share story (Victor Frankl’s) and talk about Stimulus and Response
- Why are we not more self-aware? We work on Automatic Pilot

SKILL PRACTICE: Do the questions on the worksheet (see note above, for this resource).

EVALUATION: How might knowing ourselves moment to moment be helpful in building confidence? Be helpful in motivating us and building more confidence? How has this lesson been helpful for you?

4.4 YWCAs HAMILTON AND SASKATOON: CUSTOMIZING THE YWCA BSF ASSET MAPS TO DIVERSE PROGRAM MODELS

From the Sustainable Livelihoods asset map drawn on in Phase One of the research, through to the YWCA BSF innovations in Phase Two, to YWCA Hamilton’s and Saskatoon’s customization of asset mapping tools in Phase Three, practitioners have demonstrated how flexibly these strength-based tools can be adapted to work with a range of individuals, groups, programs/ organizations and communities.

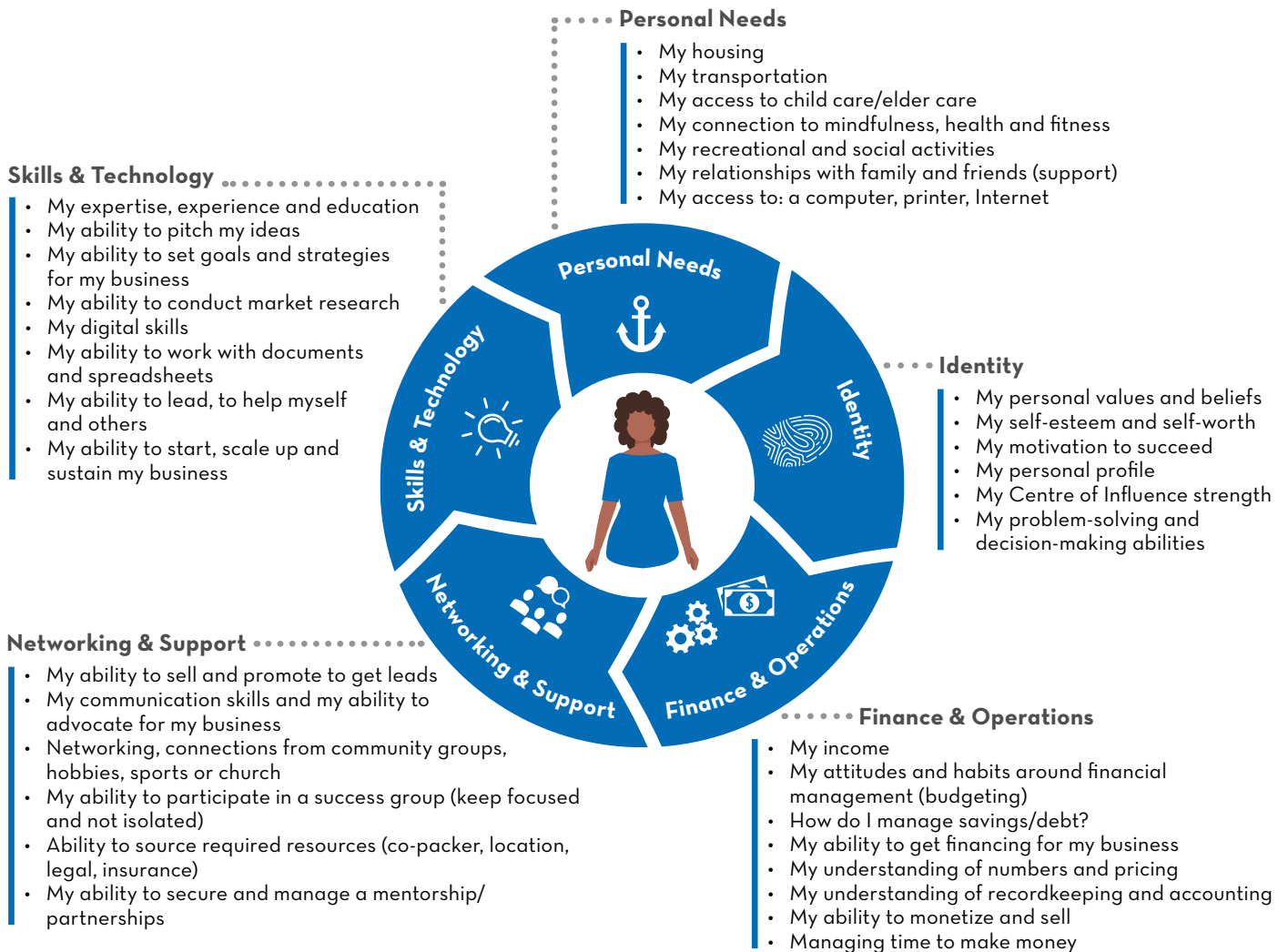
YWCA Hamilton – An Individual Participant Asset Map for Women Entrepreneurs

For their **PowerUp Ready** program, YWCA Hamilton staff tailored the YWCA BSF individual participant asset map specifically to explore women’s assets as they relate to small business development. The mapping exercise is implemented as a group at the very start of the program, both as a personal exploration process and as a way to get everyone introduced and to begin building group dynamics.

The five customized areas in this map are:

- Personal Needs (rather than Basic Needs; includes some different assets such as mindfulness, health and fitness, recreational and social, and family and friends)
- Identity (including “My Centre of Influence Strength”; problem-solving and decision-making abilities)
- Skills & Technology (rather than Skills & Employability; includes more business-oriented assets such as “My Ability to Pitch Ideas”; the ability to do market research, and work with documents and spreadsheets; leadership and self-help abilities; and the ability to start, scale-up and sustain a business)
- Networking & Support (rather than Support & Connections; includes entrepreneurial assets such as abilities for self-promotion, sourcing resources, securing and managing mentorships/partnerships, and participating in a “Success Group”)
- Finance & Operations (rather than Money; includes the ability to get business financing; understanding pricing, record keeping and accounting; and gaining the abilities to monetize and sell, and to manage time to make money)

CUSTOMISED INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT ASSET MAPPING GUIDE



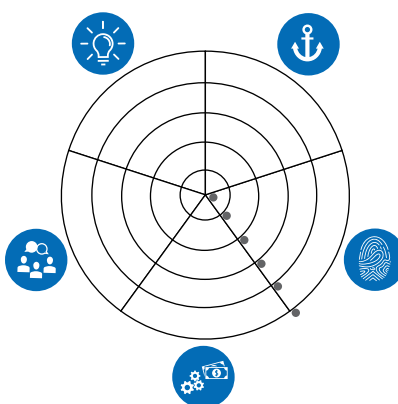
MY PLAN 2 - ASSET MAPPING






Name: _____ Date: _____

What do I really want to move ahead with right now?

What assets do I have to make it happen?
Personal Needs 
Identity 
Finance & Operations 
Networking & Support 
Skills & Technology 

What are my key assets right now?



My plan to build assets:	I can do this myself
Personal Needs 	Y/N
Identity 	Y/N
Finance & Operations 	Y/N
Networking & Support 	Y/N
Skills & Technology 	Y/N

YWCA Saskatoon - The Trade Journey Program Captured Through Two Levels of Asset Mapping

As part of their regional forum presentation, staff at **YWCA Saskatoon** used the YWCA BSF individual participant and program/organizational asset mapping tools to identify how they work intentionally with participants to build assets in each of the five areas and at both levels. The two maps enabled them to capture and convey a detailed picture of their holistic trades-focused employment training model: *“It puts a label on stuff we just do. We can look at it and name it. And it can be a checkbox.”* (YWCA Saskatoon staff)

At the individual participant level, they moved through the asset areas from Basic Needs & Money (the program admission process), to Skills & Employability (detailing their focus on the nine essential skills, training certifications, job readiness and placements), to Support & Connections (referring to their guest speakers and workplace tours), to Identity (covering their list of workshops on “soft skills” and their self-care/fitness supports).

After completing the retrospective YWCA BSF program/organizational capacity mapping exercise, staff reported how helpful it had been for them to view the components of **Trade Journey** from a different perspective, particularly as both staff had only recently come on board with the program:

*“It was definitely an interesting reflection for us being new in our roles, really just to dig a little bit deeper and ‘get’ each other’s roles because we see things under a different lens. It was a way for us to come together and have a tool to identify: okay, what are you seeing in this area? As Director of Employment and Learning, I have a broader lens, while the Program Coordinator has the ‘boots on the floor’ lens—no pun intended, because our **Trade Journey** logo is a boot on the floor!” (YWCA Saskatoon Director of Employment and Learning)*

Staff used the asset areas of this map to move from Participant-Focused (see below), to Agile (showing the three phases of the program, all the way to applying for Apprenticeship), to Effective (listing the Trade Samplers available for participants to test out their fit with a range of different trades), to Resilient (covering what funding and supports they offer to participants), to Connected (providing a glimpse into their marketing and promotion, active collaborations and networks with industry partners and community stakeholders).

Examples of program assets within the Participant-Focused area:

- Meet each participant where they are at and help them move forward from there—every participant’s journey is unique.
- Support participants as they build skills and confidence to pursue a viable career in traditionally male-dominated roles in the trades.
- Build and strengthen Essential Skills with curriculum that incorporates all of the nine essential skills.

- Include experiential strengths-based learning—the hands-on skills training lets participants “try out” different paths in the trades as they start to recognize their strengths and interests.
- Take a holistic approach that builds the physical, human, financial, social and personal assets of participants (PPE, physical fitness, success training, team building, etc.).

4.5 YWCA THOMPSON: COMBINING SKILLS FOR SUCCESS WITH EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

YWCA Thompson – Skills for Success Employer “Scavenger Hunt”

“For our Skills for Success Day, we broke our participants into groups to explore businesses in our community. We created groups of three, each of which had a diverse set of skills: at least one person who knew their way around town, one who was comfortable speaking, and one who was comfortable taking notes. Each group was given an envelope containing charts to fill out, pens, handouts to share with the businesses they visited, and directions that included a script they could use if they chose. The idea behind the Scavenger Hunt was twofold. Not only would it reinforce the importance of the skills participants were learning in the classroom, but it also gave them an opportunity to see what jobs were available in Thompson.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

The graphic used on the handouts was from the Skills for Success website:



“The Hunt gave participants a chance to actually see... how the essential skills are being used in the workplace. It also gave them a chance to talk to people there to find out what they liked about their jobs, and introduce themselves. It went over really well, and we had a lot of excited participants when they came back. We had set it up by sending out a little warning beforehand just to let [businesses] know that our people were going to be coming around; and for the most part they were really wonderful. The employers

brought them in and talked to them... and they came back with business cards from all over. I have been here for 20 years, and some of the businesses I had never heard of! For the majority of the students, the big surprise was how almost every job used all nine of the skills for success in some capacity. Some were also surprised by the number of people who were willing to talk to them about the work that they do.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

SECTION 4

Below is a picture of some of the information collected by participant teams:



4.6 YWCA TORONTO: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH WOMEN PROFESSIONALS TO SUPPORT EMPLOYMENT TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Toronto CREW Foundation and YWCA Toronto

Partners in Women's Economic Advancement

For nearly a decade, the Toronto Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW) Foundation has helped generations of women seeking new employment opportunities by providing them bursary support to attend programs at **YWCA Toronto's** Skills Development Centre (SDC) and Education and Training Institute (ETI). We are thankful for the opportunity to receive funding and support to empower more women and gender diverse individuals—including **Success Ready** participants—who are unemployed or underemployed and living primarily in Toronto's Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and surrounding areas, to move out of poverty and build sustainable lives.

Engagement Opportunities

In addition to providing sponsored training opportunities, Toronto CREW volunteers have piloted and conducted a number of mentoring and networking events for participants, including moderated panel discussions, and provided valuable career and recruitment advice in group-based settings and/or one-to-one breakout sessions with industry leaders. Although these events were traditionally held in person (as seen in photo above), Toronto CREW actively worked with **YWCA Toronto** staff to plan and provide these opportunities virtually for women throughout the COVID-19 pandemic—a further display of their commitment to empowering women even through the toughest of times; to help keep them motivated and to provide them with sector-specific training and holistic supports.

In 2022, we were also fortunate to work with employer partners from Toronto CREW to develop a new *Employment Partnership Initiative* that includes outreach resources (i.e., a slideshow presentation) and active word-of-mouth referrals to share throughout their Employer Network regarding our job-ready graduates seeking placements and/or employment opportunities. As part of this initiative, and to further strengthen our partnership, we are now planning an in-person Fall 2023 job fair for our participants. **YWCA Toronto** is grateful to Toronto CREW for supporting our Workforce Development Initiatives for women and gender diverse individuals.



Participant Testimonial – Ashlee

Dear Toronto CREW,

I had the opportunity to apply and participate in the YWCA Administrative Clerk Certificate program... which you helped sponsor. When I began the course, I was able to talk a little bit about my experience in the past, working in the trades industry. I have a background in Architecture and Interior Design, and I wanted skills that would complement my background and allow me to contribute more to a team in my industry. The role of an administrative assistant is also a career path that is very fulfilling and allows me to contribute to my team more wholly.

During the course, the administrators and teachers were very passionate about helping elevate women in their chosen career paths or who are looking to re-enter the workplace, which is something that should not go without mentioning. They were terrific, supportive and above all, a support for women of all different backgrounds.

Being around other women with the same goals, I learned more about myself and did build a lot of confidence at the same time. Each morning meeting with my peers, discussing issues of the day or just things that they are experiencing personally, such as with child care, especially during these unprecedented times, was a way for me to feel like I had a support system and something that would help me re-enter the workforce after the pandemic.

*I felt **YWCA Toronto** was a pivotal choice in deciding where I wanted to be in the future and how I would be able to allocate the skills and job security that I was looking for. I am forever grateful for your sponsorship, because it has opened doors and other avenues that I wasn't able to access in the past. Thank you, for your support and continued contribution to women like myself who were hoping to explore our goals and achieve our goals at the same time.*

(YWCA Toronto participant)

SECTION 5:

Reflections on Learning from the Project

Overview

Phase Three of the YWCA BSF project has been a great source of learning about effective practices in Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) training. Although the ESE team could not facilitate the same in-person connections and detailed quantitative documentation of changes in participants' essential skills levels as in Phase Two, the shift to online enabled

the Collaborative to preserve a highly textured record of information and reflections that can be shared digitally, to contribute to knowledge exchange. The project also offered a network of support for Collaborators and other stakeholders faced with similar programming challenges, many of these exacerbated during the pandemic.



As in Phase Two, the YWCA BSF asset-based tools captured a holistic picture of strengths and challenges across Canada at the level of individual participants, programs and regional contexts. A serendipitous discovery was made, in seeing how remarkably effective the approach and tools were for learning about the impacts of COVID-19.

The pandemic has proved a perfect example of an external shock, as identified in the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) “Vulnerability Context”: an event that can affect livelihoods, in ways often difficult or impossible to control. It was, for many of us, a humbling experience that brought home a more personal understanding of other people’s employment and life challenges, in particular those facing a multitude of intersecting barriers to their full participation in society and the economy. The context of a global health crisis reminded us all of how easily unforeseen setbacks—including in this case sickness and death—can derail our progress and result in cycling back on the path to building sustainable futures. The constraints imposed by the pandemic also aptly illustrate the finding from Phase Two that people need both the external “Conditions” and the internal “Capacity” to engage in programs, and in the labour market and the broader community. One without the other is not enough.

Some of the reflections below highlight how much of our earlier learning still resonates in Phase Three, while other learning emerged from this phase which was rolled out in the unique circumstances of COVID-19.

5.1 LEARNING ABOUT THE PROJECT DEMOGRAPHIC

Learning from this project and our external research has shown the disproportional impacts of COVID-19 on women and other systemically marginalized populations, and has revealed a stark picture of intersectional barriers and regional disparities. It has also made clear the need for a continued proactive focus on gender, diversity and equity in employment training programming.

In the context of COVID-19, Collaborator programs had to work even harder and focus still more of their time and resources on the three asset-building priorities identified in Phase Two:

- The “Conditions” for Participation—growing a base of stability and resilience that can sustain people’s ability to participate in programming, employment and in the broader socio-economy, including health, provision of basic needs, child/eldercare, access to technology and training, etc.
- The “Capacity” to Engage—developing a set of emerging skills and competencies building on life experience that support self-direction and independence. These include: self-confidence, self-motivation, self-advocacy, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and the ability to navigate complex systems.
- Job Readiness—the alignment of skills for success and specific sectoral trainings with new labour market demands and types of employment.

Many participants across the demographic reported benefitting from programs’ investments in personal and foundational skills-building—from older women in programs such as **YWCA Muskoka’s Women Thriving**, who may have been out of the job market for some years; to urban immigrant women in programs such as those from YWCAs Metro Vancouver, Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal and Toronto; to Indigenous participants at **YWCA Thompson**; to female and gender diverse youth who were the focus of **LAUNCH Atlantic** and other pilot programs.

However, adult learners—especially those with lived experience of intersecting, intergenerational systems of oppression—can require more time and support to identify barriers and patterns that may be holding them back, as well as to gain, embed and build on new skills. The YWCA Life Skills Coaching trainer described the work as having **“to go from learned, to help them to unlearn, and then to relearn.”** As the “Vulnerability Context” (see Section 1.1.2) related to COVID-19 so clearly demonstrates, learning and skills building will not necessarily dismantle all barriers to participation. Unless larger systems are changed, many women and gender diverse people in the project demographic will continue to face socio-economic exclusion. Much research during the pandemic focused on the urgent need for and possibility of a “She-covetry”; but as the economy picks up a year after the end of most community health restrictions, it appears that we are still waiting for this “She-covetry” to happen.



5.2 LEARNING ABOUT THE STRENGTHS-BASED YWCA BSF MODEL AND ASSET MAPPING

Collaborators pursued a range of innovative strategies to integrate the YWCA BSF model and asset mapping tools into their work with participants, although some components of the model turned out to be more applicable and/or practicable than others for certain programs both during and beyond the period of pandemic health restrictions.

In Phase Three, the asset maps proved excellent tools for exploring the holistic impacts of COVID-19 at individual participant and program/organizational levels. As listed below (not in any particular order of importance), the most commonly mentioned pandemic-related challenges for participants at the Collaborator staff 2021 COVID focus groups all fell within the five individual participant asset areas: Basic Needs, Identity, Skills & Employability, Support & Connections, and Money.

- child/elder care challenges, especially with on-and-off school closures; reduced or absence of support to deal with a range of issues, notably domestic violence, due to social distancing/stay-in-place mandates/lockdown regulations
- stress and isolation; mental health challenges, such as fear of the virus/anxiety/distress
- physical health impacts (specific to those working on the frontline, e.g., in the care and service sectors)
- challenges to accessing space and technical equipment to be able to participate in programs; issues of digital literacy
- lack of access to resources and community services/difficulty navigating sources of information; loss of status (specific to newcomers/immigrants)
- employment uncertainties/layoffs and other labour market changes; loss of financial resources

Nearly all of these challenges identified by the project demographic pre-existed the pandemic, and many already placed a heavier burden on women but were brought into sharper relief and/or exacerbated by the arrival of COVID-19.

The program/organizational asset areas were equally relevant to exploring the impacts of the pandemic, as well as strengths and areas for potential improvement for programs and organizations. Collaborators talked of their “above and beyond” work to support participants’ “Conditions” and “Capacity” to complete programs and find employment; of their valued connections with employers and community agencies, and their agility in innovating during this difficult time; and of how hard it has been to remain resilient and do their work effectively in the face of new demands on their time, resources and energies.

Evidence from the project suggests that training in implementation of the tools could be further enhanced. For example, at the individual level, a number of Collaborators noted how some participants found the asset mapping exercise discouraging, revealing more their deficits than their assets. It could also reawaken past traumas. Some staff requested more support to address potentially negative experiences:

“I would love to see a little more ability to incorporate that into the asset mapping, so that we’re taking care of those people when we do finish the exercise. I will follow up with those that I see are quite concerned about where they stand. I have to do that outside of the asset mapping workshop, to ensure that they are safe and feeling comfortable and not going to leave the workshop. We would like to see additional information on how they can deal with any triggers. It would also be useful from a facilitator standpoint to understand how other programs deal with this. We would like to see some additional support/resources in talking about ‘shocks.’ This can be a trigger for some, recognizing that loss of a job is a shock and that they are truly in the middle of it—which is why they are taking part in our program. But [we would appreciate] any additional support/processes/mindset exercises [the ESE facilitation team] can offer.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

At the program/organizational level, Collaborators reported the mapping as being a very useful exercise, even when implemented retrospectively. As noted above by one Collaborator, an asset mapping exercise

at the start of programs would have been optimal, to introduce the different asset areas. It would also have supported a more intentional process of staff reflection about qualitative changes in the five areas over the course of Phase Three.

The upheaval of COVID-19 and the high rate of staff turnover might have had an impact on the asset mapping piece. Some Collaborator staff may have missed out on some of the ESE trainings, and there may have been much less time and opportunity available during the pandemic to absorb the new learning. All staff, including the ESE team, were extremely stretched in their daily roles, and Associations experienced staff absences for a range of reasons, such as health, lack of childcare, etc.

In Section 6, we offer a few suggestions to address the issues raised about the asset mapping trainings at both individual and program/organizational levels.

5.3 LEARNING ABOUT A RECIPE OF SKILLS FOR BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

Most of the emerging skills identified in Phase Two and explored in this phase—Motivation and Self-Direction, Emotional Intelligence, and an Entrepreneurial Approach—are both foundational and a part of continuous learning. Programs have been working to build these skills for years without necessarily naming them as such. In the same way, although they may not name it as asset-based, most effective community service agencies take a respectful, strengths-based approach to the people they work with rather than focusing on their deficits; which is why asset-based thinking resonates so well with many practitioners who are new to the concept. The Life Skills approach to adult learning, with its respect for past experience and subjective feelings, also puts a name to what practitioners and participants may already be doing, although perhaps less intentionally. Life Skills Coaching training has enabled staff to become more strategic and consistent in their work with participants.

As Collaborators have noted, Life Skills further provides an excellent framework for teaching not just emerging skills but also other practical skills that are bound to evolve with changes in technology, the labour market and broader society. For example, some of the personal capacities that grew in importance alongside the new virtual/hybrid workplace during the pandemic will probably become essential skills for employment and advancement in the “post-COVID” labour market.

Life Skills and asset-based approaches share the underlying concept that such skills can be modelled, taught, learned and reproduced—exactly the approach now being explored by the Government of Canada’s Skills for Success. As explained in the excerpt below from the SRDC’s report:

“This [approach] led to a guiding document that outlined the key goals and objectives of the work related to the core literacy skills, the challenges of defining soft and social-emotional skills, and a proposed conceptual approach. The proposed conceptualization involved understanding all skills—especially the soft or social-emotional skills—as repeatable processes or behaviours rather than as personality traits or pre-dispositions, iterating toward a skill-based language that is helpful for curriculum and assessment development.” (Nguyen, Auclair-Ouellet, Kaufmann, Pullman and Palameta 2022, 7)

The recipe emerging from this national project is a combination of a) a holistic asset-based approach + b) an evolving understanding of essential skills for employment + c) an experiential Life Skills approach to working with participants, so that they can build a foundation for sustainable success. These ingredients involve both the “Conditions” and the “Capacity” to participate in programs, and in the labour market and broader society.

As the SRDC report notes, the challenge will lie in finding ways to assess development of these “soft and social-emotional” skills areas with different styles of learners and in different demographic contexts, while at the same time taking the potential subjective bias of the measurer into account.

5.4 LEARNING ABOUT EMPLOYER AND COMMUNITY PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

The strategy to integrate the YWCA BSF framework for employer and community partner engagement inspired Collaborators to review their existing practices and experiment with new networks and partnerships, and ways to “get the word out” about their programs. Even during COVID-19 restrictions, without the advantage of in-person contact, Collaborators still managed to grow their connections and increase participants’ awareness of local employment opportunities.

The extent to which the YWCA BSF model could be adopted and implemented was dependent on a range of factors, including program demographics, purpose, organizational capacities, and the regional labour market. In the case of Collaborators working with self-employment programs, the model was not holistically applicable. For some Collaborators, the pandemic shifted their participant focus away from employment to providing for people’s more urgent basic needs, primarily food and housing, and immediate supports to accessing programming. Again, COVID-19 laid bare the difficulties faced by many people across Canada in securing the physical “Conditions” needed to engage in employment training let alone to move on to jobs. It also revealed just how stretched many staff were in offering their desired range of employment supports and connections. Simply developing and maintaining a current employer/community partner database requires time and resources.

The strategy was particularly a fit for Collaborators in larger urban areas, many of whom were more established and experienced in such work. It was also easier for them to integrate and sustain programs with more consistent sources of funding, and those with staff-assigned roles for marketing/branding and outreach. Programs with a dedicated employment staff specialist had a huge advantage, as was seen clearly when programs lost or experienced gaps in funding for these staff positions.

Nevertheless, the framework did encourage all Collaborators to be more strategic and formalized in their engagement activities. It also helped start a conversation about new ways that employers can engage more collaboratively with participants and programs, and not just as providers of jobs/job shadowing/placements and mentoring.

As in the case of **YWCA Thompson's** Scavenger Hunt (see Section 4.6), employers and community service providers can play a direct role in welcoming participants into their workplaces, where they can learn more about what kinds of jobs are available in the local labour market and which skills are currently in demand. The Scavenger Hunt and the guest speaker/mentoring events facilitated by most Collaborator programs were also a way for employers to learn more about diverse participants, particularly about their lives and some of the challenges they face, and the unique strengths/experience they can bring to a workplace.

5.5 LEARNING ABOUT PROMOTING COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The YWCA BSF national project and other capacity building partnerships have continued to find effective strategies to promote community economic development. As before, however, much of the “heavy lifting” was done by dedicated and professional Collaborator staff. The number of Associations and the varying organizational capacities involved also proved to be a lot of work for the ESE team, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and the sudden shift to online programming in March 2020.

“The YWCA BSF project has provided important lessons for us on collaboration and best practices—and setting aside the time to incorporate this into our programming. The challenge with this level of program enhancement is the limitation of time—the pandemic has upended the way we deliver our program and we’ve adapted beautifully—but it is because of the commitment and dedication of our valued employment coaches who have made it happen.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

Even before COVID-19 struck, staff were already hard pressed by their dedication to serving participants’ needs and supporting successful outcomes, while also worrying about their own futures and the sustainability of their programs. The context of COVID-19 has shown more clearly how difficult it is to “shockproof” programs against staff turnover within the same precarious project-based funding model. These talented and passionate people leave behind a vacuum, often taking with them a “library” of accumulated knowledge, resources, referrals, connections and organizational investments in training.

Other partnerships involved in the project, notably **LAUNCH Atlantic**, emerged as highly promising ways to build capacity. Fostered and studied by the national Collaborative, it has strong potential as a model for other regional collaborations. Even for this partnership, however, lack of adequate and consistent funding was a challenge. This pattern of uneven investment limits not only the effectiveness of programs in their work with participants but also the opportunity for staff to reflect on their practices.

“Around continuing improvement, I think staff really feel they have access to continuous learning and professional development and skill building, but they don’t have time to implement it in a way they would like and that is due to some of the structures of funding. With year-long funding, we have to fit so many numbers in a year. This means cohorts that run for 20 weeks need to happen at very specific junctures. There is not a lot of time in between cohorts to really sit back and implement what you have learned into the design of the program or workshops.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

SECTION 6:

Some Recommendations Moving Forward

Overview

Overall learning from both phases of the YWCA BSF national project has shown a clear and continuing need for long-term consistent investment in programs focused on women and gender diverse individuals, and for stronger action to dismantle the intersecting barriers faced by racialized and mature people and people with disabilities. The need persists for regional, cultural, and sector-specific programs and services, and for programs that offer foundational skills training as well as paths to upskilling and lifelong learning.

Lack of decent and affordable housing is also a huge unmet need that hampers people's ability to progress socially and economically, as witnessed by the growing number of un/under-housed people across Canada, many of whom are disproportionately Indigenous or refugee. This critical backlog of settlement services for refugees and many other new immigrants, well-known to organizations working on the frontlines, is again becoming mainstream national news.



When Collaborators were asked to identify their three most important areas for advocacy in building stronger futures for their participants, common responses included: cost of living; decent work and livable wages; housing, transportation, childcare and mental health supports; digital access; and the specific employment challenges experienced by Internationally Trained Professionals (ITPs). All of these areas are included in the YWCA BSF map of assets and refer to the “Conditions” needed to participate in the economy and society (see Section 5.1 above). They are challenges difficult and sometimes impossible for individuals, organizations and communities to surmount without systemic change. One Collaborator, at **YWCA Thompson**, expressed this very simply: ***“The big conversation impacts all of our participants, but it’s not something we control.”***

While it is beyond the scope of this Compendium to address these challenges in the detail they deserve, below are some key interrelated recommendations based on learning from Phase Three of this national research initiative.

6.1 KEEP OFFERING AND ADVOCATING FOR WOMEN- AND GENDER DIVERSE-FOCUSED PROGRAMMING

“As a 50-something woman trying to find herself after devoting years to everyone, I am grateful to have spent the last few months with this organization—no, with its people. My confidence returned and new opportunities are on the horizon. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.” (YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal participant)

More women- and gender diverse-specific ESE programs and approaches will be vital to building a strong, inclusive and equitable labour market, especially for our project demographic. As one Collaborator noted, COVID-19 exposed this need, which might otherwise have been passed over:

“Our initial application in March 2020 for our YWCA Halifax LAUNCH program was denied; there was some feedback saying that gender-based employment programming was not the priority of our funder. Skip to the Spring of 2020, and the disproportional impact of COVID on youth and female and gender diverse individuals was becoming quite apparent. We received a request to deliver our program. We resubmitted an application that included some of the general intersectional barriers for our demographic but also those created by COVID.” (YWCA Halifax staff)

These intersectional, often systemic barriers have not vanished with the lifting of health restrictions. We call for funders to recognize, sustain and promote the importance of gender-focused programs as a step toward addressing some of the challenges that women and gender diverse people continue to experience. Programs and organizations must also have support to evolve and innovate in their curricula, to keep pace with new needs and demands for different types of skills. The “Conditions” to participate will require a stronger proactive focus, especially in areas such as the provision of free and/or affordable child and eldercare. COVID-19 also unmasked the need for more wraparound supports, particularly for people experiencing or at risk of violence, and for the gendered nature of emotional labour to be better recognized and more properly rewarded. As the Canadian population ages, far more attention should be paid to mature workers:

“Collectively we still need to recognize the value of and invest in older workers who are trying to return to work, find more sustainable work, or consider a new career/employment path.” (YWCA Muskoka staff)

Funding for diversity and inclusion training should also become a foundational “essential skills” plank in employment and continuing education programs across Canada, to support everyone to learn about each other in a safe, respectful environment:

“We had two different incidents where we recognized that people needed to come in and understand that diversity and inclusion belong in the workplace... What we do in that workshop is take them through a couple of different exercises that will reflect on how you deal with situations. If for example you are asked to call someone ‘they’/‘them’ who you have always known as ‘she’/‘her,’ how do you deal with that in the workplace? Or what do you think of if you come from another country originally and when someone asks where you are from, but you worked hard to get your PR, Canadian citizenship, and you may not necessarily appreciate that question. Or how do you deal with different language levels, etc. It is only a two-hour workshop, so we can’t cover everything but we try to give them some insight. Vancouver is quite a multicultural city: we now have 50 percent of our cohort typically coming originally from another country, so the diversity in our workshops is really high.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

6.2 ADVOCATE FOR LONGER-TERM SUSTAINED FUNDING AS A PRE-CONDITION FOR ROBUST EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

When Collaborators were asked about advocacy areas for programs/organizations, they universally included access to sustained funding with more flexibility as to how organizations could allocate the funds. Most Collaborators stressed how hard it was to keep and promote skilled and experienced staff without job security, appropriate remuneration, benefits, and opportunities for advancement. They recognized the dedication of staff as a form of unpaid emotional labour frequently taken for granted by those who view the non-profit sector through a gendered “charity” lens:

“You’re running an employment program when you yourself have precarious employment and you don’t have access to counselling or whatever else, and you are sitting there supporting someone who is basically in the same boat as you. So that is a work in progress. What affects participants’ access to stronger livelihood outcomes affects our staff teams and agencies. The work not-for-profits engage in is care work, which is gendered and devalued. At the heart of this is valuing the lives of women and gender diverse people. That means there needs to be an investment in the care economy. Everyone deserves a life without violence. Everyone deserves access to inclusive, affordable and quality childcare. Everyone deserves access to a living wage and decent work.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

Collaborators also advocated for the importance of funding for research and development, as well as a greater emphasis on qualitative outcomes in their reporting requirements to funders and simpler, more time-effective tracking tools (see below, Section 6.3). Funding for administration, another related challenge shared in this project, was also a theme in our external research:

“The move away from funds covering operational expenses meant that [women-led women-serving] organizations were having to work creatively just to sustain core operations: one participant described using the 10% administrative allocations from 25 different grants just to cover the cost of renting their facilities. Study participants [practitioners from women-led women-serving organizations] also described significant impacts of project-based funding models on their capacity to operate, to hire and retain staff, and to meet community needs.” (Abji, Major and Khemraj 2021, 52)

During the pandemic, especially early on in lockdown, when faced with the circumstances of a global health crisis, many organizations and businesses were allowed more latitude as to how they did their work. This flexibility should continue. Program staff take pride in what they do, and in their experience of how and where funding can be invested most productively. The irony is that their agile and effective strategies—and their dedication to work “off the side of their desks” to respond to participants’ needs and ensure that programs run smoothly—can obscure the true precarity of their organizational capacities. As is the case with many other community agencies, most Collaborators expressed how they are in a constant struggle to fill the gap of what used to be core operational funding.

“Organizations need funding beyond one-year project grants to be able to truly centre on their clients and develop, promote, and provide quality programs that include peer support and coaching, to meet women in the stages ‘where they are at’—through personal growth, economic resilience, job security and leadership development.” (YWCA Muskoka staff)

The context of COVID-19 brought into relief a related pre-existing issue: siloed short-term funding forces non-profits into a “scarcity” mindset where they feel obliged to apply for whatever money they can get, since they never know when the flow may be cut off. Silos can result in competition and duplication instead of collaboration among programs and agencies:

“There are programs that are better funded than we are that give meals and a wage. We have increased competition, more client challenges, static funding, and staff with stretched bandwidth. All of these factors combine to create a looming threat to the sustainability of our programs.” (YWCA Saskatoon staff)

Another key recommendation emerging from this project is that the nature of funding and staff turnover be viewed and tackled as interrelated challenges. All Collaborators mentioned this combination as having a major negative impact on their employment training programs, from those in urban Associations to those working with more remote communities.

“Our greatest challenge continues to be staffing. We are continuing to experience staff on leave and staff turnover in the pivotal roles for both the French and English groups, as well as in some of the supporting roles. Trying to find somebody who’s willing to work in person five days a week from the Y is not obvious anymore, especially if we’re looking to hire younger workers—it may not be the expectation that that’s what a work week is going to look like for them.” (YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal staff)

“We ask every year [for funding for a new staff position], and this year it sounds kind of hopeful. Part of it is really just having that extra person, which means that if I leave or if the instructor leaves, someone can fill in and then they can bring somebody else up, and then we can have some succession planning; but at the moment it’s just not there.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

More stable, multi-year funding over a period of at least three to five years would support organizations both in attracting and retaining staff, and in promoting the quality and sustainability of their programs and services. Meanwhile, as happened during the pandemic, new ways should be encouraged for programs and funders to work more flexibly together. In the case of YWCA Halifax:

“One of the wonderful things we were able to do from our funder was get a three-month extension to wrap up any work placements that were either started late or put on hold due to provincial lockdowns. [We worked] advocating, submitting applications, rationalizing why we would like this extra money and extra time. Our funder was really great in understanding how to accommodate the need for program extensions. Just a bit of advice if you are ever in the same position: do not hesitate to ask your funder for an extension. And we are fortunate that our funder was like sure yeah, no problem.” (YWCA Halifax staff)

And for the LAUNCH Atlantic regional partnership:

“We have worked really hard to source as much information for our funder that may not always be required; for example, for our 2017 and 2020 LAUNCH programs, we actually worked to calculate the return on investment for our funder. This included an estimate of what employers saved on onboarding and training in those first three months of hiring a program graduate. Being able to provide that information not only encourages employer engagement and funder engagement but participant engagement as well.” (LAUNCH Atlantic partnership)

6.3 ADVOCATE FOR COLLABORATION WITH FUNDERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS TO DESIGN MORE CUSTOMIZED AND STREAMLINED EVALUATION STRATEGIES

While the findings in Phase Three made particularly clear how hard it was for staff to gather data for a research project in the midst of a pandemic, many Collaborators mentioned the pre-existing need for funders and organizations to streamline evaluation and reporting processes. Especially with multiple and sometimes overlapping rounds of short-term project-based funding, staff spend an excess of time on these requirements, time they could otherwise allocate to their participants, to enhancing their own well-being and professional development, and to reflecting on and innovating in their programs.

Collaborators are eager to work with not just funders but all program stakeholders to find more appropriate and flexible ways to gather participant data. Also noted was the importance of making time and ensuring safe space for participants to provide feedback, and honouring their time and effort as well as their circumstances and preferences. For example, during the pandemic digital surveys were clearly not a suitable format for some, whereas for others they saved time and the expense/risk of travelling to in-person programs.

Another common theme was the issue of measuring success in a more equitable way related to participant life experiences, challenges and goals, rather than placing most emphasis on a “business” lens of Key Performance Indicators (KPI)/Return on Investment (ROI):

“We need to improve reporting evaluation not just to measure number of participants and ROI, but qualitative outcomes that shift mindsets and behaviours and affect change over time.” (YWCA Muskoka staff)

Some program staff actually found such forms of measurement counterproductive for their participants:

“Yes, outcomes matter for the funder, but I really encourage participants not to worry about the outcomes. This is taxpayer dollars and we have to be accountable, but it doesn’t mean that you have to make people feel bad about not meeting a very particular goal that we’ve set. I think that’s worked really well for us—really making folks feel comfortable. We have better outcomes as a result because I think at the end of the day, they feel like they have a cheerleader.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

Now that digital technology has become more accessible and familiar as a means of communication, information about outcomes could be reported more simply, in time- and cost-effective ways, through online focus groups and feedback from staff, partners, employers, etc. The wealth of qualitative learning collected digitally in this phase of the national initiative bears witness to the advantages of a more flexible format. It also shows the potential of such reporting to convey a fuller and more textured understanding of project outcomes than some of the more traditional “results-based” indicators.

6.4 CONTINUE TO BUILD DIGITAL SKILLS AND PROGRAM CAPACITY FOR FLEXIBLE HYBRID DELIVERY

The pandemic shift to virtual program delivery in Phase Three demonstrated how rapidly connectivity is becoming a basic need for participation in the 21st century labour market and in broader society.

“The need for digital skills capacity building training was already on the rise, but the pandemic really amplified that gap. Based on feedback from frontline staff and Collaborators, YWCA Toronto launched a basic-to-intermediate digital skills training program in July 2022 to address the gender gap in the digital economy. Although the program is only funded until March 2023, we hope that we can highlight the impact of training programs that are actively responding to the needs of the job market and job seekers.” (YWCA Toronto manager, Essential Skills for Employment program and Digital Skills for the Workplace program)

In remote communities, such as that of YWCA Thompson, the need became glaringly obvious. Governments and other stakeholders should be urged to ensure widespread access to connectivity, equipment and the upgrading of digital skills. Programs and organizations should also be supported to offer more workshops related to digital literacy, and to further virtual learning and employment opportunities, networks, etc.

“For remote communities, I think there will be more interest in continued digital literacy, with people recognizing that they need to learn how to navigate and be comfortable with online platforms. And I think there is going to be a demand for other skills training as well, with people who are looking to shift careers who were impacted by the pandemic and are seeking to change fields, change types of work. There will be a lot of shifts in the labour market.” (YWCA Thompson staff)

“We need advocacy for teaching and additional dollars for training in tech. We do have a tech connect program which accepts immigrant women,

but they have to have been here less than five years. Many women are excluded from that, but they want to go into tech, because they also recognize that they might be able to work remotely.” (YWCA Metro Vancouver staff)

At the same time, findings from this project show that even with the means to participate online, the virtual learning approach may not be suitable for everyone. Depending on participants' experiences and preferences, regional/cultural contexts, and specific program mandates, hybrid delivery could still be an effective feature for many programs where possible and appropriate:

“Going forward, we might need to offer hybrid delivery, because we have seen that we can offer services virtually, but then some people really miss coming in. Clients still did ask us: When are you reopening? Because people used to use our resource centre a lot, so I know our front desk staff constantly get calls. Sometimes people would stay there the whole day to use our computers. It would be good to give people a choice as to whether they would like to come in or do everything remotely, or maybe in a variation for some of our sessions. Some of this will depend on employers: if it's a job fair for example, some people might want to engage virtually and some in person; because we know our physical appearance and body language are a part of the interview process, so we know some employers might still want to do in person. And for those who do benefit from that in-person contact, they may be missing out on or not seeing those verbal cues, because there are only so many people you can see on a screen.” (YWCA Toronto staff)

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT THE YWCA BSF ASSET MAPPING FRAMEWORK

Collaborator and participant feedback suggest that the YWCA BSF asset mapping tools, at both individual participant and program/organizational levels, were overall a success, but that some pointers might be emphasized to facilitators about implementing the mapping exercises (see tips in sidebar).

Some Tips for Facilitating Asset Mapping at Participant and Program/Organizational Levels:

At the individual participant level:

1. Consider ahead of time what is the most appropriate context for different individuals/program cohorts, exploring:
 - a. whether to implement the exercise one-to-one, as a group, or first as a group and then one-to-one at program's end;
 - b. whether online, in person or hybrid; and
 - c. when to implement the first map, depending on people's comfort levels with disclosing their asset areas, particularly in the first session of a new group.

Where appropriate, the choice to work on one's map one-to-one might be offered flexibly within the group for those individuals who are not comfortable disclosing and/or who may have experience(s) of trauma.

2. Make sure to present the exercise within the holistic Sustainable Livelihoods framework of the "Vulnerability Context," to clarify that there are larger forces/external shocks often beyond our control, which have had and can still have an impact on us as we seek to move forward. If this context is not explained upfront as part of a strengths-based approach, people can be more easily discouraged when mapping their assets, and may even find the exercise triggering. COVID-19 is a major instance of an external shock, but other examples may be identified using a Life Skills approach to fit the experience of a given individual/group (e.g., specific systemic barriers).

If introducing the exercise as a group activity, the facilitator might offer to take time afterwards to debrief one-to-one with those who find the exercise less than positive. Some of the mindfulness techniques and resources introduced in the Leadership training (see Section 1.1.5) could also be useful to support participants experiencing distress.

At the program/organizational level:

1. As with the individual maps, the staff mapping exercise would be most powerful if built into YWCA BSF trainings early on and then repeated later—in the case of this research, both pre- and post-program – to enable a more in-depth qualitative assessment of changes in capacity over time. The facilitator might emphasize how the mapping exercise can be particularly useful for busy staff, as a designated moment to step away from day-to-day tasks and reflect together on their work.
2. Staff can also be inspired to think of using the maps in different ways, such as in presentations/conversations with boards, funders, and other stakeholders.

Finally, program staff should experiment with their own adaptations of individual and program/organizational asset mapping tools—as did **YWCA Toronto** in Phase Two, and YWCAs Hamilton and Saskatoon in Phase Three—while staying true to the core principles of a holistic strength-based approach and giving due credit to their sources.



6.6 CONTINUE TO EXPLORE THE RECIPE OF SKILLS FOR BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

The new Skills for Success areas are an exciting step forward in exploring the more personal capacities essential to advancement in the labour market, and how these can be acquired through experiential learning along with the other previously identified skills for employment. As the SRDC report acknowledges, much remains to be done to research how changes in the level of these skills can be measured.

It will be important for funders of ESE programming to allow for the pace of different learners. The process of change can be much more gradual for some people, especially those with experience(s) of trauma and continuing socio-economic exclusion; and there will be different indicators of “success” in attaining these new skills, depending on past experience and persisting barriers.

Evidence from this project also suggests that:

- Changes in some skills will not be easy to assess if people do not have the “Conditions” and “Capacity” to show and practice them—for example, Innovation and Creativity are often not a feature of some rote “survival” jobs, nor are they always encouraged in some hierarchical workplaces.
- The Skills for Success, as defined by the Government, are still missing the foundational pieces of self-confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness and resilience, which are fundamental to positive change, especially for people with experience of marginalization.
- The OLES skill of “Continuous Learning” has been removed from the Skills for Success. This change does not seem to fit with an experiential approach. Core to the Life Skills model is the concept that experience and learning are integrally linked, and that learning is a constant mutual process for participants, coaches and coaching trainers.
- Two of the Skills for Success, Adaptability and Emotional Intelligence, are not value-neutral concepts. As **YWCA Thompson** staff noted, people can adapt to living and coping with amazing resilience in circumstances of huge socio-economic disadvantage and personal hardship. Meanwhile, what a person in a position of privilege calls “emotional intelligence” might to another person be “emotional labour,” which is often gendered. One clear example is the empathy and caring expertise of workers in the health and community service sectors who were deemed even more essential during the pandemic and received such praise early on. Following the peak of the pandemic, and a return to “normal” times, many of these workers appear again to be just as under-valued—and consequently underpaid—as they were pre-pandemic.

Research into “Skills for Success” must actively involve community development and essential skills training organizations and the people they serve. Now is an opportunity, while the government is open to exploring new qualitative strategies, to measure and evaluate changes in skills levels. It will be important not to fall back into old rigid methods of evaluating skills that can end up reinforcing existing systemic barriers. As with the early development of the NewStart Life Skills model and its focus on Indigenous learners, assessment tools must reflect the broader holistic picture of challenges, learning styles and preferences of the demographic who participated in this national initiative.

A further piece for advocacy across the board, with private and public sectors and all levels of government, will be to act on the recognition that these newer personal skills are a work in progress for everyone, as part of an ongoing effort to move toward socio-economic justice. We are all in a process of continuous learning about how to create a truly diverse, equal and inclusive community.

6.7 CONTINUE TO ENHANCE THE YWCA BSF EMPLOYER AND COMMUNITY PARTNER ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Phase Three research suggests that dedicated resources are important to establishing, maintaining and growing effective partnership networks that can support participants to build stronger futures. The YWCA BSF model incubated in Phase Two has since broadened, but the main focus should remain on the individual seeking to build skills and find satisfying work with opportunities for advancement. The stages of the model could perhaps be refined to reflect this focus, based on learning from Phase Three, with different streams for leadership and community-engagement activities.

The model has great potential for further exploring how employers can learn from such collaborations about the life experiences, goals and preferences of participants. Employers could be supported through the model to experiment with new alternative work options designed to promote a diverse and inclusive workplace, including: shared positions, flexible schedules, hybrid work arrangements, lateral and collaborative rather than hierarchical working relationships, and strengthened avenues for addressing workplace discrimination. The key to success will be to include the voices of our project demographic, and especially of women, in designing these adaptations.

6.8 ADVOCATE THROUGH KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE TO PROMOTE MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Phase Three Collaborators faced similar challenges to building a community of knowledge exchange as they did in Phase Two—notably, staff turnover that resulted in gaps in program/organizational memory and expertise, requiring new staff to catch up while already pressed for time in their daily activities. This situation was exacerbated by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, Phase Three has demonstrated that a strong community of learning may now be much easier to facilitate, since access to and familiarity with digital technology has become more widespread and is coming to be viewed as a basic 21st century necessity. This phase has largely been facilitated virtually across Canada, representing great savings in both cost and time for non-profit sector organizations. The use of technology has also proven a highly effective strategy for gathering and making easily accessible a “bank” of learning, trainings, etc. for future reference, to protect against the loss of institutional memory.

SECTION 6

Programs are already working with employers and community partners who are pursuing diversity, equity and inclusion strategies, but without strong knowledge exchange about intersectional barriers and a commitment to social justice, these strategies risk being purely performative. Far more work also remains to be done to address subtle, less-visible barriers and forms of stigma that “fly under the radar” of those who are not subjected to them, such as micro-aggressions that can impact mental and physical health and/or discourage people from staying in certain jobs. We have to open up greater knowledge exchanges about emotional labour, and when and where it is unrecognized, unfairly demanded and unrewarded. Such labour is still a huge issue for women, and especially for racialized women and girls.

Evidence from the Collaborative suggests that practitioners could explore new avenues for learning from a greater diversity of experiences and perspectives, and for training in how to identify and address those more insidious forms of oppression. The YWCA Life Skills model, combined with the YWCA BSF strength-based approach to experiential skills building, would be an excellent framework for such innovations. But knowledge exchange and the work of updating and refining curricula cannot be done “off the side of the desk” by over-stretched staff. The potential impact of research initiatives such as this project may be limited unless programs and organizations have adequate resources to sustain their important core work.



Conclusion

In Phase Three of the YWCA BSF project, the pandemic stripped the veil from a host of socio-economic barriers faced by women, and especially by our project demographic. As a consequence, we had a remarkable opportunity to discover more about their challenges, pathways to learning and successes, as well as about the complex work of programs and organizations to support them in their journeys toward sustainable futures. COVID-19 sped up a shift in the use of digital technology, revealing a divide in connectivity but allowing for new ways of delivering programs and capturing findings that can be preserved as a contribution to knowledge exchange.

The global health crisis also drove home the reality that we have long needed to invest more in building resilience across our communities. As we emerge from the restrictions COVID-19 imposed on us and return to “normal” life, our stressed and precarious community economic development sector continues to struggle. The Collaborative knows first-hand how many in our project demographic lack the basic conditions needed for participation in the labour market and broader society:

“It has been very exciting to be connected on the national scope to so many agencies, and be a part of some of that collective advocacy. We went today on the Hill, because women’s housing is such a huge thing. We don’t even offer housing. But we were like heck yeah, we need some better things happening in our community. We need someone to deliver it, if we’re not going to—and it’s not our wheelhouse. But please, it’s bleak out there.” (YWCA St. John’s staff)

This research initiative into effective ESE training practices has come far. Phase One witnessed the original exploration of YWCA Toronto’s Sustainable Livelihoods-based asset mapping approach and employment and training model for women participants. In Phase Two, the project evolved to include a national demographic of program participants and nine Collaborator Associations, all testing out the asset-based approach and model in a wide range of contexts; capacity building at program/organizational levels; and an early model for employer engagement. In this third phase, the reach broadened to ten Associations from coast to coast and included an enhanced model for employer and community engagement, and the integration of key YWCA BSF methodological frameworks to build capacity for stronger employment and livelihood outcomes.

With each phase, the perspective has grown increasingly holistic as we have begun to discover more about how these phases of knowledge exchange can build upon each other to enhance participants’ opportunities for success. Meanwhile, COVID-19 has acted as an important reminder of the larger intersecting forces still holding people back. It has shown how urgently that bigger conversation is needed about finding new approaches to funding, and about a sustained collective effort to dismantle the systemic inequalities and injustices that the pandemic laid bare.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: YWCA BSF PHASE THREE COLLABORATORS' PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ESE PROGRAMMING

YWCA Halifax:

Our first **LAUNCH** program pilot was completed in 2006. Along with our Step Ahead program, featured in Phase Two of the YWCA BSF initiative, it has created opportunities for positive support networks through facilitating peer learning, mentor relationships, work placement supervision, and connections to other community organizations and resources. We have supported participants to visit local organizations to become familiar with the services offered and to provide the best training available in the community. Job Junction hosted training sessions in Microsoft Office; we have also supported participants to organize informational interviews with employers/businesses in their area of interest, to discover the talents they already possess and to develop additional skills and learning.

YWCA Hamilton:

We are an experienced organization with employment-specific expertise that includes: Employment Access and Assistance (drop-in resource centre); skills training, including Smart Serve and Safe Food Handling and employment advisement); Bridging Programs that assist Internationally Educated Professionals to upgrade skills and access employment. Outcomes include: participants employed in areas commensurate with their education and previous experience, participants pursuing additional education to increase their employability, and participants pursuing self-employment. We have seen our participants increase their self-confidence, job readiness and job retention skills.

YWCA Hamilton has over 15 years' experience in delivering self-employment programs to the Greater Hamilton Area. As Hamilton is becoming a technical and service sector community, many small businesses are emerging. Self-employment training specific to women will ensure that they are able to stay engaged in the workforce by balancing their personal life with their work life in a way that makes sense for them. Our new Women's Enterprise Centre is building on our previous programs to become the centre and program for women who want to start or grow their business. This initiative helps women understand how goal setting can help them navigate their career path and connect with resources to get them to their end goal, which in this case is to be a self-sustainable business owner. We also offer Reskilling and our Uplift program to help women and gender diverse individuals enter the manufacturing workforce and data science.

YWCA Metro Vancouver:

YWCA Metro Vancouver Employment Services has strong experience in employment programs and employs Case Managers and Employment Counsellors who are certified Essential Skills facilitators. They integrate essential skills into all supports and programming provided to clients. **Focus@Work** helps women assess their skills and strengths, set career goals, and develop job search skills to obtain meaningful employment. We offer flexible directed, group-based programming.

We have a wide range of employment programs to support newcomers, Survivors of Violence (SOV), trauma and abuse (either domestic or work-related), youth programs, 2SLGBTQ+ focus, mental health support programs for those who consider themselves stuck, industry-specific programs (Off the Leash pet care, Heavy Equipment operators) and others. Since **Focus@Work** is an employment program developed for women with a variety of needs, at times women will join the program after completing other specialized pre-employment programs.

YWCA Moncton:

We developed Women on the Move, our pilot program for Phase Two of the project, at our Moncton location: a six-week pre-employment program to promote employment-related goal setting that used the Life Skills model, integrated volunteerism, and offered financial literacy training. **YWCA Moncton** employability programs aim to integrate all nine essential skills into every available program.

YWCA Montreal/Y des femmes de Montréal:

YWCA Montreal has been providing employment programs since its inception in 1875. Over the years, we have offered a panoply of programs in both French and English addressing various needs, including the **Women's Work Integration Program (Femmes vers l'emploi)** (since 1996), but also Orientation and Services for Employment (since 1993), a program offering individual accompaniment in orientation and job searching; and Fringues (since 1998), a paid six-month semi-specialized training program in retail sales and customer service combined with work experience at our thrift-boutique.

YWCA Muskoka:

We have 25 years of collective experience in offering programs that move youth and women toward their employment goals. Some of these programs have been introduced within the past eight years, as new funding became available. Among our offerings are: Women and Business, our women's entrepreneurship program; workshops and programs on life skills, wellness/social inclusion, and financial literacy; job coaching, individual referrals and system navigation; wraparound supports and financial aid; and youth programs and services such as career days.

YWCA Saskatoon:

As an organization, we have experience working with clients who need to increase their essential skills. We have built a reputation for expertise in offering programs and supports that can equip clients with the skills and confidence needed to succeed in obtaining and sustaining employment. We provide employment services funded for the most part through the provincial government: a Job Search Program (JSP); Career Moves (targeted initiative to support career transitions for the 55-64 age group); our **Trade Journey** program, featured as our pilot for Phase Three; and Women Shifting Gears (trucking and transportation entry-level training program). We also offer Upstander, a program that builds knowledge and helps develop skills to become an active ally in reducing gender-based violence in our community; and Mindfulness, which provides the building blocks for a psychologically safe workplace, helping employees to navigate stress, regulate emotions, and learn conflict-management tools.

YWCA St. John's:

YWCA St. John's has previously been involved in supporting women's economic security through entrepreneurship. We also wanted to ensure that we explored the accessibility of entrepreneurship with our **LAUNCH Atlantic** participants. As newcomers to employment-focused programming, our participation in the YWCA BSF Collaborative has given staff access to a range of informed practices and resources that have helped shape the programming. The YWCA BSF Employer Engagement Framework has significantly shaped our employment engagement strategy. We are currently building an employer network with a focus on nurturing connections and building partnerships across diverse employment sectors, to foster inclusive spaces for participants.

YWCA Thompson:

We sponsor the Employment Links initiative, which is comprised of two programs: **Steps to Success** provides adult literacy and workplace essential skills training, and our Assessment Centre provides academic assessments and career counselling. The majority of program participants are Indigenous peoples from Northern communities who need to upgrade their education levels and/or are lacking on-the-job skills. Manitoba Tourism Education Council (MTEC) provides job-specific training (front desk agent, line cook, sales associate, food and beverage server, or housekeeping room attendant). Participants can also receive other certifications, such as WHMIS, Food Safe and First Aid.

YWCA Toronto:

See Appendix 2 for a history of our employment training programs and our current offerings at the **YWCA Toronto** Skills Development Centre.

APPENDIX 2: YWCA TORONTO'S EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING PROGRAMS AND CURRENT OFFERINGS AT THE YWCA TORONTO SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

Overview

Founded in 1873, **YWCA Toronto** is a member of a national and global federation of YWCAs with the current mission to serve women, girls and gender diverse people. It has a long history with, and a deep understanding of the issues that have affected the well-being of systemically marginalized women, girls, gender diverse people and their families, and has taken a leadership role in helping them to transform their lives.

Since 1884, **YWCA Toronto** has been responding to the changing needs in our community by designing and specializing in no-cost and affordable quality employment training and professional development programs. By the early 1960s, we had already launched programs providing: vocational assessment, career planning, life skills and employability skills training, and academic upgrading. From the 1970s to the 1990s, we added to our menu of women-focused programs and services with a pre-bridging program, a General Education Diploma (GED) program, and a program to support women to prepare for, obtain and maintain employment.

In 2000, we opened our holistic, one-stop Employment Resource Centre in Scarborough to offer practical job-search workshops, computer and IT facilities, individual coaching, employer contacts, and other resources. In 2004, we began to incubate the **YWCA Toronto Skills Development Centre (SDC)** as an enterprise designed to serve both a social and a financial purpose (see below for more detail). In 2006, we began a career-planning program with a focus on sole-support mothers, and another comprehensive training program that gives priority to women who have experienced or are at risk of domestic violence; and in 2008, we designed a program to help newcomer women overcome barriers to employment in Canada and begin to build sustainable

futures. We continue to innovate and fine tune our employment programming, products and services to meet emerging community needs. We now have three employment and training sites across Toronto that work collaboratively to offer multiple programs to help equip women and gender diverse individuals with training to advance their futures.

YWCA Toronto Employment & Training Programs

YWCA Toronto currently offers programs and services at three main centres in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). For details on these programs and services, please see below or visit www.ywcatoronto.org/employment.

Located at 222 Dixon Road, Etobicoke, ON

English Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC): Provides no-cost English classes to newcomer women and gender diverse people, to improve their language skills, enable them to better function in all areas of life in Canada, and fully engage in and contribute to Canadian society.

YWCA Toronto JUMP (Join, Unify, Motivate and Participate) Etobicoke: An immigrant Settlement Program focused on providing newcomer women, gender diverse people, and girls 13 and older with Labour Market Access, through a variety of essential settlement and employment training services. Participants are required to be pre-registered with JUMP and provide documentation of their record of landing.

Mobile Application and Azure Cloud Developer Training Program: Provides women and gender diverse individuals with the opportunity to advance their skills in the information technology field. The program focuses on learning iOS and Android Mobile Application Development, and Azure Cloud Development over 29 weeks. Successful participants will receive a Recognition of Achievement Certificate from Seneca College, ATC Android Certification, and an AZ-900 Microsoft Azure Fundamentals Certification. In addition, participants have an opportunity to complete Scrum training and receive their Scrum Master's Certificate.

Cybersecurity Fundamentals Reskilling Program:

Provides women and gender diverse individuals with the opportunity to advance their skills in the information technology field. The program focuses on learning about Cybersecurity Fundamentals with a CompTIA Security+ certification and CISSP training. Successful participants will receive a Recognition of Achievement Cybersecurity certificate from Seneca College.

Pre-Apprenticeship Skilled Trades: Provides pre-apprenticeship training programs for women and gender diverse individuals on becoming a commercial painter-decorator or terrazzo tile and marble setter. Both programs offer academic upgrading in Math, English and Essential Skills for the trade; safety training, Level 1 certification, Job Readiness training, and up to eight weeks of placement experience are offered after the training is completed.

STAR 4-Women: Skilled Trades Awareness and Readiness Program: Provides women and gender diverse individuals with a comprehensive eight-week program where participants are introduced to skilled trades as a long-term sustainable career choice. It includes vocational assessment, access to health and safety certifications, career exploration, hands-on experience with tools and equipment, and networking opportunities with employers, unions, colleges and trainers.

Located at 2425 Eglinton Avenue East, Scarborough, ON

YWCA Employment Centre: Provides free employment services for persons who require assistance in job searching and for employers. Operates as a one-stop service where job seekers and employers can access resources, including financial incentives and support, and receive assistance from qualified employment specialists. As part of the program, special incentives and interventions are offered to youth who are 29 years and under, to help them get a job or return to school to advance their education and career prospects.

Located at 3090 Kingston Road, Scarborough, ON

YWCA Family Support Centre: Provides a range of free programs and valuable resources on parenting and child development. They offer Parenting Programs, Child Care Services and a Teen Mothers' Program. The Centre is a valuable resource for parents and caregivers whether they are looking for parenting information and services or struggling with serious issues.

YWCA Girls' Centre: Provides a drop-in centre where girls, young women and gender diverse people from nine to 18 years of age can try new activities, develop skills and discuss topics in a safe place. Participants build leadership skills, enhance their self-esteem, learn to live safely in their communities, make new friends, and learn to understand and challenge the world around them. Girls, young women, and gender diverse people receive support on difficult issues, share ideas, express creativity, explore interests and plan their futures.

YWCA Employment Centre: Provides free employment services for persons who require assistance in job searching and for employers. Operates as a one-stop service where job seekers and employers can access resources, including financial incentives or supports, and receive assistance from qualified employment specialists.

YWCA Toronto JUMP (Join, Unify, Motivate and Participate) Scarborough: An immigrant Settlement Program focused on providing newcomer women, girls, and gender diverse people aged 13 and older with Labour Market Access through a variety of essential settlement and employment training services. Participants are required to be pre-registered with JUMP and provide documentation of their record of landing.

Education and Training Institute: YWCA Toronto's Education and Training Institute fulfills women's and gender diverse people's need for high-quality, current, and affordable vocational programs. A vocational college registered with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, it offers two certified programs: Administrative Clerk Certificate and Office Administrator Diploma. The program provides fully sponsored seats or bursaries for those who qualify.

Moving on to Success: A free employment training program for low-income women and gender diverse people, some of whom may experience domestic violence or are at risk of abuse. The program provides women and gender diverse people with support and tools to reclaim their self-esteem, develop skills, take control of their careers, and achieve economic security. This program integrates the five core and optional YWCA BSF model components.

Skills Development Centre (SDC): Provides vocational and non-vocational strengths-based programs, and offers a wide range of products and services both locally and nationally to individuals and organizations. All programs are open to women and gender diverse people; some are open to men. The SDC offers a unique range of affordable or no-cost products and services that promote personal and professional growth; instructor-led training programs for job seekers and professionals at both local and national levels; individualized career development plans to support the short- and long-term goals of participants; job-search support; and job coaching and mentoring. The SDC integrates the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) model into its programming through its five components. See details below.

Essential Skills for Employment (ESE) Project: This national project was developed through the Skills Development Centre (SDC), to contribute to building a skilled and inclusive workforce by integrating foundational building asset-based essential skills training into employment training programs. The YWCA Building Sustainable Futures model was developed and refined through this project.

Digital Skills for the Workplace (DSW): A pilot program with the aim to increase digital literacy and the employability of women and gender diverse individuals, focusing on systemically marginalized communities across Canada. Based on the newly developed Skills for Success, this individually curated five-week program supports participants to increase their digital literacy and confidence to enter or advance in the workforce.

The YWCA Toronto Skills Development Centre

We began the YWCA Skills Development Centre (SDC) in 2004 as a response to a recognized need for employment training services in our community, particularly among low-income women facing a range of challenges in their lives. At the same time, we were exploring newer approaches to sustainable programming through a community economic development (CED) approach to employment training that included social enterprise development. After conducting research into a range of other models in Canada and internationally, we started to develop a holistic, gender-focused program approach that would serve both our social and financial sustainability purposes, involving input from the women we work with as well as our staff, employers and partners across our community. Our goal was to establish an enterprise run by women, for women, that could build sustainability through a combination of free and means-based fee-for-service products and services. We also wanted to be bolder in researching and testing new approaches to workforce and socio-economic development challenges.

With a 2004 seed grant from the Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF), we incubated the SDC as an evolving program and positioned it as a social enterprise. From 2004-2009, through participating in the CWF's Economic Development Collaborative Fund, we were also able to receive training in the strengths-based Sustainable Livelihoods approach and asset mapping methodology, and integrate them into the SDC and its program evaluation tools. From 2004 onwards, we have been able to strengthen our Centre and build its capacity by coordinating it with our other employment and training programs co-located at our 3090 Kingston Road location (see above).

We Offer More Than Jobs... We Help Build Futures

Building sustainability through a combination of free and means-based fee-for-service products and services that range from Career Management to Leadership programs.

Eligibility criteria apply for each product and/or service below.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT & CAREER MANAGEMENT SERVICES

- Career Planning and Employability Skills
 - Career Assessment and Planning (individualized service)
 - YWCA Building Sustainable Futures model that can be customized for different groups
 - Customized Career Management Services (individualized or group services)
- www.ywcatoronto.org/sdc

ESSENTIAL SKILLS & EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS TRAINING

- Digital Skills and Computer Training
 - Computer Training Series: MS Office
 - Intermediate and Advanced Workshops
 - Computer Training for Employment
 - Customized Digital Skills and Computer Training Series (including online courses)

www.ywcatoronto.org/computertraining
 - Occupational Skills Training
 - Administrative Clerk Certificate*

www.ywcatoronto.org/eti
 - Professional Business Communications/Administration
 - Professional Office Administration Series

www.ywcatoronto.org/poa
 - Customized Professional Business
 - Communications Course
 - Customer Service Training
- www.ywcatoronto.org/customerservice

**Our Administrative Clerk Certificate is offered through the Education and Training Institute and approved under the Private Career Colleges Act, 2005 by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, Ontario.*

JOB READINESS & PLACEMENT SERVICES

- Job Search and Networking workshops and events
 - Recruitment and Placement services
 - Job coaching, Mentoring, and “On-the-Job Training” services
- www.ywcatoronto.org/sdc

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

- Life Skills Coach Certificate—train-the-trainer
- www.ywcatoronto.org/lifeskills
- Personality Dimensions™ Level 1 Training—train-the-trainer
- www.ywcatoronto.org/pd
- Leadership through Facilitation Series
- www.ywcatoronto.org/leadership101
- Discovering Life Skills Manuals—English (Volumes 1 to 9)
 - Discovering Life Skills Manuals—French (Volumes 1, 5, 6, 7, 8)
- www.ywcatoronto.org/publications

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS SERVICES

- Customized Training and Solutions for Teams and Organizations
 - Entrepreneur Training and Support Services
 - Program Development and Consultation
- www.ywcatoronto.org/sdc

For more information, contact 416.269.0091 ext. 231 or ywcatrainingcentre@ywcatoronto.org

APPENDIX 3: YWCA BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES PROJECT RESOURCES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

Project Resources:

YWCA BSF Project Publications: Phase Two

English

2019 YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Compendium

https://www.ywcatoronto.org/Assets/YWCA/Documents/Our Programs/Employment and Training/ESE/BSF-Phase 1-3/ESE_Compndium_DIGITAL.pdf

2019 YWCA Building Sustainable Futures Toolkit

https://www.ywcatoronto.org/Assets/YWCA/Documents/Our Programs/Employment and Training/ESE/BSF-Phase 1-3/ESE_Toolkit_DIGITAL.pdf

French

Contains select content from the 2019 Compendium and Toolkit above:

YWCA Construire des avenir durables résumé et trousse

https://www.ywcatoronto.org/Assets/YWCA/Documents/Our Programs/Employment and Training/ESE/BSF-Phase 1-3/ESE_French_DIGITAL.pdf

Phase One

2010 Compendium of Best Practices in Employment Programming

https://www.ywcatoronto.org/Assets/YWCA/Documents/Our Programs/Employment and Training/ESE/ESE_Compndium_Complete_Spread_view.pdf

Select Resources Referenced for Some of the Key Phase Three YWCA BSF Frameworks:

YWCA BSF Asset Mapping and Adaptation of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach:

<https://www.canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PDF-Beyond-Survival-Report-FINAL-EN.pdf>

<https://slcanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/SL-Backgrounder-Nov-2021.pdf>

Skills for Success:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success/new-model.html>

<https://www.srdc.org/media/553148/sfs-srdc-final-report-en.pdf>

The YWCA Toronto Life Skills Model and Training:

<https://www.ywcatoronto.org/OurPrograms/employmentandtraining/iwanttobealifeskillcoach>

<https://www.ywcatoronto.org/ourprograms/employmentandtraining/iwanttobealifeskillcoach/lifeskillspublications>

The YWCA BSF Leadership Training:

<https://www.mindfultherapies.org.uk/what-is-the-difference-between-mindfulness-and-meditation/>

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Co-Active Coaching; Changing Business Transforming Lives., Henry Kimsey-House, Karen Kimsey-House, Phillip Sandahl, and Laura Whitworth, 2011

Mindful Leadership, Maria Gonzalez, 2012
www.tarabrach.com/rain/

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YWCA Metro Vancouver

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<https://ywcavan.org>

535 Hornby Street
Vancouver, BC V6C 2E8

YWCA Moncton

506-855-4349

<https://www.ywcamoncton.com>

135 Kendra Street
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YWCA Montreal / Y des femmes de Montréal

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<https://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org>

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