



ASPECT BC
ASSOCIATION OF SERVICE PROVIDERS
FOR EMPLOYABILITY & CAREER TRAINING

ASPECT BC

Refocusing the Urban Lens for Rural and Remote Employment Services

Results of a Community Engagement Process
November 2022

Disclaimer

The Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training (ASPECT BC) prepared this report. It represents the opinions and experiences of employment service providers in BC who participated in a community engagement process between January and June 2022. ASPECT BC believes that these service providers because they are working directly with the clients requiring services, are the experts in what they do. They are a collective voice. We have made every effort to verify the contents of this report.

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Self-Assessment for the Reader of this Report

Dear Reader:

The following questions will help you understand the context of living in an urban versus a rural or remote community, identifying some aspects of daily life.

1. Do you have access to high-speed Internet in your home?
2. Do you have a stable electrical network? Do brownouts and blackouts occur where you live?
3. Do you have cell service in all areas where you carry out your day-to-day activities?
4. Do you have access to reliable public transportation that meets your needs in getting to work and meeting your daily living needs?
5. Are winter tires required by law where you live and work?
6. Are there government services within one hour of your home?
7. Can you access medical specialist appointments, box stores, or receive next-day Amazon delivery in your community?

Urban biases can make one forget that the conveniences and necessities available in urban areas are not always available to those living in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. However, many contracts and funded programs are designed with the urban context in mind and without addressing the challenges of service delivery in rural and remote communities.

What is the issue?	Why is it important?	What can be done?
Contract funding for employment services is inequitable to rural and rural service providers.	It's an issue of social justice delivery when rural and remote service providers must find ways to subsidize the delivery of employment services to their clients by using their resources of time and money or those of other community organizations.	Recognizing the inequities and creating a rural and remote lens from which to view current and future service contracts.

Recommendations At-A-Glance

Each section of this report has a list of recommendations that are specific to that thematic section. As well, there are detailed recommendations at the end of this report. Below is a summary of the numerous recommendations and reflects the commonality across sections and recommendations:

1

Acknowledge that urban-based service delivery models do not easily work in rural and remote communities and add a rural and remote lens in program design, program assessment, and employment services procurement for rural and remote communities

2

Funders should recognize that administration costs represent 25% versus the 10% offered by many contracts, and in the case of WorkBC¹, significantly more than the fixed operating fees currently provided to account for additional administrative and logistical requirements in rural and remote communities.

Increase contract administration from 10% to 25% to accommodate the higher costs of providing equitable services to clients in rural and remote communities. These additional costs include attracting, recruiting, and retaining staff, higher transportation costs, lack of other wrap-around services for clients from other service providers, and lack of other professional services in the community. Higher administration and fixed fees in service delivery contracts will help provide equitable, needs-based funding to support fair service delivery.

3

Remove cost limits to client financial supports to reflect the additional costs of leaving the community for support; accountability can be a demonstration of efforts and clear rationales.

4

Shift outcomes away from job placements to job pathway milestones that align with rural and remote clients' unique needs. Outcomes that reflect the continuum of client successes as they proceed toward employment are more reflective of rural, seasonal-based economies, sporadic in-community skills training, rural community demographics, and the prevalence of small and medium-sized businesses as the primary employers within the community

5

Design flexibility into project reporting so the Employment Service Providers (ESPs) can focus on client needs instead of administration.

6

Be accessible, trusting, and communicative with ESPs to ask questions, have discussions and gather feedback from ESPs and clients regularly. This includes seeking evidence of genuine partnerships and community buy-in for proposed programs and services to ensure community support for funded initiatives—nothing about us without us.

¹ Since 2012, WorkBC is the largest funding contract for employment services and supports in the province of British Columbia. WorkBC contract delivery is unique to other employment contracts and for the purpose of this report, we have endeavoured to provide a snapshot of employment service contracts in general rather than focusing on one in particular.

Executive Summary

Employment service providers in rural and remote locations have lived with the inequities of workforce development funding for many years. Service providers gathered to discuss their challenges during the ASPECT annual conference in November 2021. They found their colleagues shared many of the same issues. No longer were they the “lone voice in the wilderness,” as one participant described. While there are undoubtedly challenges in delivering employment services in urban communities, the level of conversation and concern about the challenges in rural and remote communities warranted further study of this topic.

As a result, it was decided that ASPECT members would meet to explore the challenges and successes they were experiencing with current employment services program funding in rural and remote communities. The goal of these meetings, and this report, is to make recommendations to funders. The advisory committee members wish to ensure that clients in rural and remote communities have equitable access to the same supports as those living in urban areas through equitable funding for service delivery, and that the rural lens is applied to program funding, development, design, and procurement.

The findings in this report were developed based on qualitative research methods using a review of both academic articles and grey literature publications. Because of the lack of research directly related to our topic of rural and remote employment services, we reviewed publications addressing the broader context of social services in general and the intersection of employment services with health, mental health, community availability, and the practice of social work. Our literature review also investigated the relationship between the government and contracted social services as it applies to the delivery of services.

Our qualitative data was gathered through a community-based approach in which we relied on the experts within the community delivering employment services and supports to determine the areas of investigation and discussion. Participants were recruited through ASPECT’s member database, our weekly Aspectives newsletter, and all ASPECT social media accounts, drawing on our 100 community-based member organizations. Although these meetings were limited to ASPECT members, there are instances of service providers who are not members participating in the discussions. The ASPECT Rural & Remote Advisory Committee is made up of service providers representing all rural and remote locations throughout BC as defined by the Government of BC’s economic development regions: Cariboo, Kootenay, Mainland/Southwest, North Coast & Nechako, Northeast, Thompson-Okanagan, and Vancouver Island/Coast.

ASPECT conducted a series of six-monthly virtual meetings over Zoom between January and June 2022. The discussions in the meetings shed light on the complexity of providing services to rural and remote communities, the challenges of delivering employment services that are designed based on an urban service delivery model and the challenges of being heard and having an impact on these issues. Experiences are as varied and unique as the communities in which ESPs deliver services, but commonalities and clear themes emerged.



Our research confirmed four key themes under which the issues identified could be grouped:

1. Distance – we cover large geographic areas
2. Recruitment and Retention – we cannot compete with the government, post-secondary institutions, and the private sector
3. Connectivity – we often lack reliable, affordable internet and cell coverage
4. Contract Concerns – we lack flexibility and work within inadequate budgets

The overall impact of delivering employment services is increased time, effort, cost, and a resulting inequity in providing services for clients who do not live in an urban community. These four themes are discussed in detail in sections 1 to 4 of this report. Some of the same impacting issues are common across the four key categories. So that each section can stand alone and be read as a collective report, there is an intentional duplication between the key categories. We have included this duplication as we felt it was important that each section reflect the comments that we heard.

While these issues are often seen as concerns to be addressed only by the government department(s) that fund employment services contracts, these are all government issues. Every area of government and government department is impacted if rural and remote communities do not have equitable employment service delivery. All aspects of government have a vested interest in rural and remote communities having an appropriately skilled and thriving workforce. It is essential whether it is in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, tourism or administration, as rural and remote communities are a vital part of a thriving economy, innovation, and overall success of our province.

Employment services are at the intersections of multiple areas of social health, including socioeconomic factors. These areas are

essential to client success, although many are outside of employment services' scope. Wraparound support services are often missing in rural and remote communities, and as a result, employment services become the place where these service gaps are filled to improve clients' access to employment.

A shortage of other services in rural communities creates significant issues in accessing and delivering employment programs, influencing both clients and staff members. These services include medical services, mental health services, transportation, work clothing and supplies, basic and professional training, disability support services, professional development, housing, childcare, senior care, technology, disability-accessible spaces and services, and sometimes essential living resources.

The lack of government offices in rural and remote areas is also a barrier to supporting clients seeking employment. For example, clients who need to visit Service Canada or apply for Income Assistance may not be able to access these offices, which are often unavailable locally. Instead, they visit an employment service office to get help accessing these government services virtually by phone or online. As a result, employment centres become the wraparound support for clients due to the lack of local government services. However, this work is not a part of their employment service contracts and costs time and resources to deliver.

Further compounding service delivery issues is the widespread labour market shortages in social services, which is critical in rural and remote communities as there is a smaller pool of qualified potential candidates. The lack of local training options makes it harder to onboard or upskill staff members who may not have all the skills required for the positions. Further, because many employment service contracts lack flexibility and adequate funding, employment service providers cannot compete with other organizations and government entities in their communities seeking workers. The lack of ability

to pay competitive wages, offer benefits and pensions, flexible work schedules, and overall job security make our work less attractive, particularly in rural and remote communities. At the time of writing this report, there have been recent significant wage increases for early childcare educators, teachers, public servants, and doctors in BC. There has been no such increase for those who deliver employment services.

There is a strong consensus among participants that delivering rural and remote employment services is “nothing like providing the same services in urban centres” because access to everything can be different and usually more challenging.

When asked about recommendations for the current contracts, participants advised that funders could use a rural and remote lens when designing programs and making decisions on program policies so that the impacts of those decisions on service providers and clients of employment programs serving rural and remote areas can become more aware and understood before implementation. Many recommendations focus on supporting the localization of employment programs to have adequately

funded flexible, creative solutions. As the committee members reiterated again and again:

The lens of rural and remote services is based on the question of what can be done when expected resources and services are unavailable.

Rural and remote service providers recognize the conditions associated with delivering employment programs in their communities. Many are driven by community loyalty and a desire to enhance the quality of life for all residents. They approach this work with professionalism and compassion, bringing an advocacy role for their clients into this conversation. They seek to deliver programs that serve their clients to address socio-economic conditions, a rapidly changing labour market and a need for equity through a rural and remote lens. Their message is to provide sufficient funding, greater flexibility, and an opportunity to build relationships with their funders. ASPECT hopes that these recommendations will be received in the spirit of delivering excellent and equitable services to clients residing in rural and remote communities.



Introduction

Our rural and remote communities have been the backbone of our resource-based sectors and a significant driver of our provincial economy for decades. These communities contribute significantly to the economic and social fabric of our province and make British Columbia the province it is today. Our rural and remote communities are also communities of innovation as the cycles of resource-based economies ebb and flow, and businesses and residents adapt. Our communities are rich in culture, resources, and strength of people individually and in the community. We are different from our urban neighbours, and we have an immense amount to offer to the ongoing economic growth and success of British Columbia.

Residents live, work, and connect in relationships. These relationships are tied through complex webs, and local people engage one another in myriad ways. These include family, work, volunteering, and social activities. For many, the pace of life is slower. Less traffic, smaller populations, a sense of security and a connection to the land are just a few of the many factors at play in rural and remote communities. Residents appreciate their neighbours, and when they experience difficulties, our community supports us. While not a guarantee, the cost of property can be lower, allowing people to own their homes and land. For rural residents, there is a connection with place and community that sets it apart from urban centres.

However, there can be challenges associated with rural and remote living, especially for those community members dealing with a lack of employment, health issues and social challenges. Distance, the impact of weather conditions, limited goods and service options, and limited access to government and social programs can all be significant issues in rural communities.

Purpose of the Report

Employment service providers in rural and remote locations have lived with the inequities of workforce development funding for many years. Service providers gathered to discuss their challenges during the ASPECT annual conference in November 2021. They found their colleagues shared many of the same issues. No longer were they the “lone voice in the wilderness,” as one participant described. It was decided that ASPECT members would meet to explore the challenges and successes they were experiencing with current program funding. A list of recommendations was generated to ensure that service providers and clients within rural and remote communities had access to the same supports as those living in urban areas.

This report is designed to capture notes from meetings and breakout group discussions between January and June 2022. The participants of ASPECT’s Rural & Remote Advisory Committee contributed to this process through group discussions, writing and editing this report. Most importantly, they shared their expertise in administering and delivering employment programs to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

About ASPECT BC

The Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training (ASPECT) is a membership-based, provincial umbrella organization that provides leadership, education, advocacy, research, and public awareness in support of community-based workforce development service providers. ASPECT works with the government and interested parties to ensure that the needs of those seeking meaningful and sustainable livelihoods are met.

ASPECT's focus is to support community sustainability by using local people who understand the labour market and deliver needed training and services. ASPECT's 100 organizational members representing approximately 5,500 employees providing services to 225 communities throughout BC, are leading experts in delivering employment services and career training programs to support the labour market. Federal, provincial, and local governments, and local economic development trusts, fund most members' employment programs.

Although our members and the clients they serve are our focus, we also represent the interests of all employment service providers in the sector, both provincially and nationally.

Glossary

advisory committee	Those who volunteered their time to participate in the meetings and discussions that inform this report. They are also those who contributed to writing this report. Advisory committee members are also referred to as "participants" and "service providers."
client	Those accessing employment services.
ESP	Employment Service Provider refers to an organization contracted by a funding body, usually the government, to deliver employment services and supports. Refers to both the organizations delivering employment services and the individuals delivering a service.
participants	Those engaged in this process administer and deliver employment programs to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. They are referred to as: "participants," "service providers," or "advisory committee members."

Background

Engagement Process

ASPECT hosted six virtual meetings between January 2022 and June 2022 with its members, specifically those who deliver employment services to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. Each session centred around a thematic section with topics requiring further discussion through breakout groups with notes taken by a group scribe. Building on themes identified at the ASPECT November 2021 conference, we invited all ASPECT members to participate. In January, 42 members attended the first meeting. See Appendix A for more information regarding the methodology.

It is important to note that all those who participated volunteered their time to benefit their clients and communities. We estimate that 176 community-based employment practitioners donated 232 hours to this project. The thematic sections are as follows:

<p>Distance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Costs○ Logistics/Access○ Services/Training○ Transportation	<p>Recruitment & Retention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Staff○ Partners○ Clients
<p>Connectivity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Broadband Infrastructure○ Digital Access○ Digital Literacy	<p>Contract Concerns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Identifying the Challenges○ Current Funding to Address Challenges○ Suggestions for improvement

Each Rural & Remote meeting followed a similar format: participants broke out into groups to discuss a theme relating to rural and remote delivery. Within each section, each group discussed specific topics and answered the following three questions:

1. Identify the challenges related to the topic.
2. Identify funding currently in place to address these challenges.
3. Provide suggestions to improve the situation.

One volunteer in each breakout group took notes for their group, reported them during the reflective plenary session, and sent their notes to ASPECT to be included in this report.

Before the publication of this report, a small group of rural and remote employment service providers reviewed it to verify that it accurately describes their community-based experiences.

About the Literature Review

Once the advisory committee identified the themes for future discussion, ASPECT conducted a literature review of both academic and grey publications and found little written about employment services in rural and remote areas. Our literature review considers research and articles on social services, health care, and the economy. We included Australian articles because of the similarity of colonization history and cultural contexts (Bryant, L. et al. 2018, p6).

Lastly, literature before March 2020 did not account for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic, social, communal, and individual changes and needs. However, due to this project's scope and the limited availability of publications, these impacts may not be highlighted and analyzed for each topic.

The shaded text boxes throughout this report represent references from the literature review and may be helpful to those developing new policies.

Limitations & Considerations

Employment service funding and programs are as diverse as the clients they serve. For example, finding supports for client transportation to a job interview may be easy to attain under one contract and administratively laborious under another. We have tried to look at the larger picture of employment service funding without focusing too closely on challenges specifically related to the WorkBC contracts.

Employment services are at the intersection of many community services. While challenges within these factors may be inherited within a community, they can significantly impact the qualities and outcomes of employment services.

As mentioned above, very little academic and grey literature is written about employment services, but the issues related to delivering social services in rural and remote areas are similar. In our discussion, we struggled with defining remoteness. Some communities may have larger populations but experience remoteness in terms of singularity in the labour market, lack of services, and distance from larger centres. Another layer to the complexity is ESPs covering large catchments, including some urban areas and some remote. This includes scenarios where employment service staff in Kamloops support clients in Kelowna. Both are large communities, but services such as transportation, mental health, and wrap-around supports are unavailable.

The following quote from G.G. Schmidt (2012, p.4) describes it best:

"It is fair to say that the concept of remoteness generally applies to communities that are removed from major population and service centres. For purposes of this discussion, it is assumed that remote communities don't have a full range of services that people in urban centres take for granted."

With the complexity of definition, we could argue that applying a rural and remote lens during program design benefits all because we can become remote clients with even small changes in circumstances. These may include natural disasters, power outages, new family needs, car problems, lack of public transit, or employer relocation.

With the current trend to larger contracts covering larger areas, accessing information about community resources is challenging for both ESPs and their clients. It can be unique to the various communities and employment service providers. We have attempted to include this complex information in this report.



Section 1: Distance

Distance was identified as a primary factor contributing to challenges in providing employment services in rural and remote areas. Based on this definition, distance has implications for employment, ESPs, clients, and service delivery. Specifically, distance in this context includes two categories: the extent of geographic separation between employment ESPs, service providers, and clients (Bedouin, 2016; Browne, 2010); and the physical distance between remote communities and their closest service centres (Schmidt, 2012).

1.1 Costs

Travel is expensive in rural and remote communities. Clients must travel to access in-person services, or service providers must travel to deliver services in remote locations. Higher costs for basic needs include fuel, flights and ferries, meals, accommodation, staff wages, and additional costs associated with unpredictability due to power outages, natural disasters, and winter travel conditions. With limits to financial support throughout the province, these extra costs affect both service providers and clients. "People coming from long distances to the centres, transportation costs are higher and often hard to provide the right amount," said one participant.

Other costs associated with operating in rural and remote areas include staff and technology costs; staff must leave the office to provide services to a remote community; supervising staff at remote sites; bringing in specialists due to lack of local resources; increased technology costs (due to lack of local or existing technological infrastructure for phone and internet). These costs make it challenging to provide a "one-stop-shop" for service in the community demanded by the funder. Further, wages do not reflect the high cost of living and transportation. As described by a service provider:

Operational expenses of satellite offices and staffing coverage force you to add a significant cost to the budget not recognized by funders. For example, there are substantial, added, ongoing costs associated with supervision and training of satellite staff, such as travel, food and accommodation, and time - every time you send management out to satellite offices.

While these issues may seem to be challenges for service providers, they ultimately affect clients who are already economically and socially disadvantaged.

Despite these extra costs, service providers continue to support rural and remote communities; however, their work may not be visible because these communities have lower client volumes.

"Low client volumes make it [the services] resource-heavy and sometimes reflects poorly to funders, yet funders expect you to provide the same level of service without factoring in the extra costs," added one participant. Fixed or administration costs within program contracts do not reflect the additional financial costs associated with business and operational continuity in rural and remote communities. These underfunded expenses pose significant challenges to ESPs who struggle between

helping clients in need and maintaining financial stability to keep their centres open.

Service providers must pay to bring specialists to their communities. As one service provider stated, “costs of bringing specialists into the community or supporting travel out of the community are impacted by support maximums and limited options for transportation.”

Similar to challenges related to staffing, there are significant costs associated with supporting clients to access job interviews. One service provider described a situation where there was no public transportation between communities, and they had to pay \$150 to send a client in a taxi for a job interview. ESPs resort to creative solutions and find ways to help their clients. When using technology is not an option, service providers expend significant time and resources assisting clients in applying for funding from other sources. They cobble together funding to cover extra costs, negotiate shared costs with other rural and remote service providers, and rely on a patchwork of funding from multiple sources to meet client needs for essential employability support. Although similar challenges may exist in urban settings, the challenge is compounded and more costly to address within rural and remote environments. The literature supports our findings:

Dyck and Hardy show that distance can cause travel costs and barriers to accessing services (2013). Further, limitations of care services in mental health care pose overwhelming challenges in rural communities, including wait time, specialty areas, costs, and travel, to residents seeking care (Boydell et al., 2006).

These services also include specialized assessments, as mentioned by members during the consultation, on mental health conditions and disabilities that job search clients may require to move toward employment.

1.2 Logistics/Access

Generally, public funders of program delivery expect all ESPs across British Columbia to deliver the same services to clients despite their distances, locations, and local resources. However, funders develop employment service programs with an urban lens, resulting in a mismatch between program policies and the realities of rural and remote communities. It creates issues that unintentionally impact clients, ESPs, and service delivery.

There is a lack of local access to specialized services to support clients seeking employment, especially in the areas of disability support and specialized assessments. This draws on financial and time resources for both clients and staff, which is not considered in program policy. As one WorkBC service provider explains:

Funding is capped at \$175 for hotel and transportation services for specialized assessments. This is a huge issue as we must pay the difference [and it] makes an unfair disadvantage for rural/remote service providers. Hours of extra staff time is [also] lost in finding adequate funding [elsewhere].

Staff must spend time and source alternate support and funding for clients to cover shortfalls when policy does not support client needs. In addition, there is a lack of local training providers; as a result, clients seeking skills improvement and certifications for employment have limited options for essential training providers, and many do not have access to professional training beyond basic certificates.

Weather and natural disasters are other factors that affect access to and delivery of adequate employment services. As one service provider describes, “some communities are inaccessible in the winter both through roads and through

digital services. The only way to service those clients is by phone." They add that "service providers struggle to find accommodation in inaccessible communities when trying to provide their clients' services."

The literature confirms their experiences:

"Residents of a community that are able to access a major population centre within a couple of hours by car might not be regarded as living in a remote or isolated community in the summer when driving conditions are good. However, during the months of winter when weather can restrict movement, residents of the same community may feel very isolated and cut off from the rest of the world." (Schmidt, 2012, p.4)

In extreme natural conditions, sudden interruptions of services result in negative client experiences and can cause difficulties. Creative solutions need to be applied so that service delivery can occur.

When clients can work through environmental conditions: funding limits, higher costs, and unpredictable conditions create challenges for clients to access training outside the local area. Consultation group participants provided an example of what it could look like:

Under the current WorkBC contract, funding hasn't been amended or updated since 2012. We're still at 25¢/km² for mileage, and the caps for accommodation and total caps do not reflect current living expenses. Many clients are left out of pocket if no alternative funding source can be secured....one client stayed overnight at a homeless shelter so as to access training.

² On October 17, 2022, this amount was finally increased to 55¢/km. At the time of writing this report, the [Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat rate](#) for 2022 is 61¢/km for the first 5,000 kms.

Each time a client leaves the community for training, the Employment Service Provider (ESP) must consider how the client will get there and what financial and logistical supports are needed. ESPs estimate that 60-90% of their clients must access occupational skills, such as first aid and specialized assessments, outside of their community. The administration undertaking for this work is laborious, and travel arrangements can be more expensive than the courses.

The Market Basket Measure³ basis for calculating financial support of government programs is outdated, especially for costs in rural and remote areas. With limited or no access to local public transportation, the high-cost alternative options exceed the transportation's financial support limit. In some cases, service providers reported that staff had to drive clients to the food bank before travelling to ensure clients had necessary meals during training. Gas costs are also higher, as are the costs of work clothing and tools, if available. Based on all these factors and the high cost of living in rural and remote areas, a living support rate of \$200 - \$638 per week, depending on the contract, is insufficient to support clients in long-term interventions such as Self-Employment, Job Creation Partnerships and Skills Training.

All these factors impact clients pursuing sustainable employment. Participants also reported accessing other funding sources and programs, including work experience opportunities grants, Community Living BC, the Federation of Community Social Services of BC, local homeless shelters, and food banks.

³ [Statistics Canada website](#) defines this as "The Market Basket Measure (MBM) establishes poverty thresholds based on the cost of a basket of food, clothing, shelter, transportation and other items for a family of four that reflects a modest, basic standard of living."

ESP requests for policy exceptions put demands on programming administration. This means extra administrative steps, additional time, and sometimes excessive planning and coordination with clients and service providers. Applying for a policy exception or finding this extra funding takes staff away from client services and is not always possible despite the staff's best efforts. Since current program policies lack flexibility and do not meet clients' needs in rural and remote areas, applying exceptions may constantly occur during client services, costing additional resources without guaranteeing results. Consequently, support that is time sensitive leads to clients missing training or employment opportunities due to delays caused by administrative demands and a lack of local access to resources.

Logistic issues contribute to the risk of negative client experience. Large geographic catchments can mean as much as more than 200 kilometres between offices. Apart from the large physical size of a catchment area, unclear catchment for in-between remote communities creates confusion for clients as to which centre they should access. While employment service centres should provide the same services, each centre has its own history, partnerships, expertise, and experience in the local community, which can affect clients' successes in employment and self-employment.

Another logistic challenge identified is that client participation in service expectations is unrealistic in rural communities. Employment services are heavily focused on outcomes and do not consider milestones specific to rural and remote communities, such as seasonal employment. For example, WorkBC concentrates heavily on people who can stay engaged and committed to 52 weeks of employment sustainment. This is usually regular full or part-time employment during which clients do not need to access Employment Insurance (EI). Meanwhile, seasonal employment, with regular off seasons when clients utilize EI, can be the main form of employment in rural and remote areas. Even

when this form of employment is sustainable for clients, the ESPs do not qualify for Sustainable Outcome Fees (SOFs). Due to the same policy limitation, it is also complicated to support clients seeking funding for training who will gain seasonal employment.

Program challenges can impede progress if clients live or work in rural and remote areas and cannot access technology or medical and mental health support in their community. Furthermore, clients must possess a high level of engagement to maintain their commitment to services. Participants reported that clients specifically asked ESPs not to contact them after they said they were employed; however, ESPs are required to have the client to provide complete documentation for the ESP to receive payment for their services. The post-employment contact requirement is a barrier for both clients and employment service providers.

The literature confirms that, with the nature of the mandates for service agencies, it is a common challenge for ESPs and their staff serving rural and remote communities to balance between government requirements and those of community needs, including the need to continuously challenge and evolve policies (Graham et al., 2008). Depending on the funding models, interventions can be offered only over short periods (Shera & Bogo, 2001) within contract periods and with rigid and formal processes to deliver services (Hardina et al., 2007), placing limitations on practitioners as they determine the needs of diverse clients and communities.

Socio-economic conditions are another factor in research that presents underlining challenges to employment services in rural and remote areas. Research has shown that poverty in rural areas affects access (Allard, 2004). Moreover, the lack of diversity in local industries and labour market, economic changes, and infrastructure can limit the capacity of a rural/remote community to provide services and support locally (Hanlon & Halseth, 2005).

Poor socio-economic conditions include addictions, mental health, and decreased preventive service use (Smith, Humphreys, & Wilson, 2008). Lastly, the contract cycle and funding process may negatively influence employment services in rural and remote areas. While Caxaj (2016) focuses on mental health services, this decreased cycle could also happen to employment services in rural and remote communities.

The lack of services drives people out of a community, and as a result, there is a decrease in service use, causing decreased funding and further reduced services. Thus, programs targeting concentrated populations may further disadvantage clients living in rural and remote areas.

1.3 Services/Training

A shortage of other services in rural communities creates significant issues in accessing employment programs. Influencing both clients and staff members, these include medical services, mental health services, transportation, work clothing and supplies, basic and professional training, disability support services, professional development, housing, childcare, senior care, technology, disability-accessible spaces and services, and sometimes essential living resources.

Participants highlighted the lack of government offices in rural and remote areas as barriers to supporting clients seeking employment. Clients who need to visit Service Canada or apply for

Income Assistance may not be able to access these offices, which are often unavailable locally. Instead, they visit an employment service provider's office to get help accessing these government services virtually by phone or online. One service provider adds [that these are] "a multitude of services that may not be directly job-related but really do connect to get people to a place of job readiness." These employment centres become the wraparound support for clients due to the lack of local government services, although this work is not a part of their employment service contracts.

Another significant barrier is the insufficiency of disability and mental health resources in rural and remote areas. Specialized assessments, if available, can be challenging to arrange as service providers may cover a large geographic area with waitlists and constant travel. The same situation also occurs with mental health support. With the limited options, specialized services such as counselling, when they exist, can be costly and have long waiting lists. Furthermore, if a client requires in-person services, the options would be further limited, while the more available video call or phone delivery channels may not meet client needs or be accessible to them.

The pressing and distinctive needs for mental health services in rural and remote areas are confirmed in the literature:

"What actually exists is an array of often under-funded programs and services that have been developed at different times and at every level of government; straddle numerous ministries, departments, and agencies; and involve the private, community, and voluntary sectors. In northern, rural, remote and other under-served areas of the country, these challenges are often compounded by isolation, higher cost of service provision, complex social and jurisdictional issues, and cultural diversity." (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2009, p.69)

With the COVID-19 pandemic, many existing community service providers have closed or changed scope while new providers begin to provide new services. ESPs noted that employment service centres have become “the catch-all” support for rural and remote communities. It is difficult for clients to maintain current knowledge of all the services, so they are accessing employment centres for information and support.

The availability of local skills training is another significant barrier contributing to “limited options for community referrals and local training” and “more staff time to support service delivery” in training. For example, there are little to no driving instruction services with few test dates available within a reasonable timeline. The issues are compounded when clients travel outside the area to attend training. They will likely encounter issues described in the other sections: funding limits, access, and the significant time commitment to travel. Service parity for occupational training can be a barrier for clients with seasonal employment: employment is technically available for their current qualifications, but it is seasonal, and they cannot access training because they have certification. At the same time, they need training they cannot afford with seasonal income to move beyond seasonal employment. Clients are “stuck in a loop,” as a service provider described, as they attempt to achieve more sustainable employment.

1.4 Transportation

Transportation in rural and remote areas also reflects the themes of cost and access. Staff require transportation to deliver services; for clients, transportation is essential to access employment services, training, medical services, treatment centres, public service and government offices, and other community services, affecting client engagement and success in employment services. The lack of affordable and robust public transportation and

the exclusion of a wide range of necessary transportation seriously impacts this.

According to the literature, transportation, as a necessary form of infrastructure (Hanson et al., 2021), has been a persistent challenge in rural and remote communities (Hansen et al., 2020; Litman, 2003).

There is little-to-no bus service in many rural and remote communities. In some places, there is only a bus travelling out of town a few times per day or week. There are times when clients “have to drive 70 km to the next town” to access the support they need, an action committee member mentioned. Although there may be taxi services, the cost of a taxi usually exceeds the maximum allowance for transportation support.

These challenges are incredibly impactful to people unable to have self-transportation, especially for marginalized individuals, such as people with disabilities, low income, and/or health barriers.

Participants highlighted that current policies do not support clients who need various means of transportation and multiple transfers within one trip due to the remoteness of the location. A committee member describes this situation:

There is not a lot of flexibility to bill for or accommodate the range of transportation modes sometimes used in remote communities – travel by personal watercraft, ferry or water taxi, logging roads requiring the rental of heavy-duty vehicles because personal vehicles won't be safe. [There is] no consideration for those clients needing to take multiple means of transport, such as boats and planes, to access services.

1.5 Recommendations: Distance

Regarding distance in service delivery, many recommendations from the committee focus on recognition and flexibility in program funding and processes. Committee participants prioritized "recognition, flexibility and additional funding for the extra costs of service delivery." They recommend that "staffing and travel should be factored in for those regions serving rural and remote communities."

More specifically, these additional costs must be considered when providing the administrative costs, fixed funds and outcome fees while building flexibility within program processes to accommodate clients' unique needs in rural and remote areas. These aspects are essential to ensure the same access and equitable services are provided to rural and remote areas as urban centres.

To provide better employment services, program policies and funding must consider the demographic of clients in rural and remote areas and the unique challenges in employment service delivery to protect equal access to employment and related services.

Committee members urged funders to review the current maximum allowance for individual services in employment programs in rural and remote settings.

- Program policies must consider inflation, local economy, client needs, and local access to resources affecting employment when determining these funding amounts.
- Funders should create more flexibility that allows ESPs to provide financial support based on the local economy and client needs.
- Funding should not be based on delayed data such as the Market Basket Measure that cannot reflect the rapid changes and uniqueness in rural and remote areas.

The action committee suggested ideas to address access to transportation and, thereby, to service providers and increase client volume.

- Funding for staff education in specialized assessment and disability support would be welcome. This may encourage more providers to work with ESPs serving clients in these areas.
- Lobbying local councils and public transportation providers to support client employment may help interested parties expand their understanding of transportation needs and requirements.

And finally, a recommendation related more to location challenges than distance:

- Allow ESPs to create their own content and deliver it in a timely manner. Give ESPs more flexibility in branding their programs on local social media such as Facebook groups, community boards, Instagram, and other newer media.

Section 2: Recruitment & Retention

Employment services are a people-focused profession; therefore, a crucial part of successful employment programs is to recruit and retain staff, community partners, and clients, working together to meet employment needs and resolve problems by joining resources and strengths.

2.1 Staff

Widespread labour market shortages in social services are significantly more critical in rural and remote communities as there is a smaller pool of qualified potential candidates. These areas' lack of training options makes it harder to onboard or upskill staff members who do not have the full qualifications for the position. Further, because many employment contracts either lack flexibility in how much a service provider can pay staff or are not funded adequately to pay competitive wages, agencies cannot compete with other organizations and government entities operating within their community seeking workers.

Recruiting Qualified Staff

Under some funding contracts, ESPs are required to hire job applicants who meet all the minimum qualifications of education, skills and work experience specified in the contract. These job requirements limit the pool of qualified applicants and finding qualified staff to run and deliver employment programs is already challenging before considering the rural and remote factors. As a result, ESPs must resort to hiring based on transferable skills and personal suitability to the work, when possible, or leave the roles unfilled and the team understaffed. Committee participants identified a skills gap between applicants with direct and relatable work experience and those requirements.

Qualified candidates are more likely to come from central and urban areas than remote and rural parts of Canada. Even when qualified

candidates are available, there are challenges to moving forward with these candidates in hiring. When a candidate requires moving to work in a remote site, there are expenses and unpredictability around transportation, moving, housing, childcare, senior care, healthcare, access to cultural communities, and other basic living needs that contribute to the shortage of financial and support resources, both with a contractor as an employer and in the local area. These are all dis-incentives to moving to work in a rural and remote community.

Concerning distance, but also impacting staff recruitment, staff must regularly travel to provide employment services in rural and remote communities. This becomes a significant expense for ESPs, as travel can take 2+ hours each way. Additionally, this can include overnight stays and the risks involved in travel, such as weather and road conditions, personal health and safety, and mental fatigue.

Competing for Candidates Over Wages & Benefits

The action committee reported that ESPs have difficulties filling vacancies. This is primarily due to not being able to offer competitive wages, benefits, and flexibility with work conditions based on current funding and contract constraints. While ESPs desire to hire staff with the qualifications and specialty to provide equitable employment services, contract funding does not allow the flexibility or adequate funding to afford benefits, such as the Municipal Pension Plan, and wages compatible with employers

such as governments, the private sector, post-secondary institutions and crown corporations. For example, one contractor had been actively recruiting for more than ten months for an administrative/reception position as they had been unable to find qualified applicants, "requirements whittled down further and further," and there was little to no response from job applicants.

The lack of benefits and the wage disparity between ESPs and government organizations doing similar work drive qualified workers to leave employment services, causing significant issues with staff recruitment and retention. Committee participants reported that staff turnover has become a major issue for their organizations. They estimated a 50% increase in staff turnover compared to the year before. Some ESPs felt they have become the training grounds for government employers as their staff started with employment services and left to work in related government offices shortly after.

This transient tendency of staffing can significantly impact client experiences, affecting the quality and continuity of employment services. This will only worsen as inflation continues to rise and the costs of everything from housing to groceries are increasing.

Nature of Work & Living

Rural and remote living can be a challenge when ESPs seek to attract talent as the amenities of an urban centre are already unavailable. Apart from a higher cost of living, the shortage of services in rural and remote areas affects clients and staff as they must travel out of the area for basic needs. Factors mentioned in other sections of this report, such as weather conditions, isolation, mental health support, transportation, and socio-economic issues, can also disadvantage the recruitment and retention of staff in rural and remote employment service offices.

Additionally, there can be a certain precarity of employment for rural and remote ESPs. With the limited length of service provider contracts, positions in employment services may appear less secure than other community employment opportunities. "Applicants aren't drawn to it, but rather fall into it," one action committee participant described. Besides, part-time employment service centres in rural and remote areas can barely provide sustainable employment to organizational staff; thus, ESPs operating in these centres have an additional risk of losing staff to more sustainable employment opportunities, directly affecting client services.

Many services are provided virtually because clients may be far from the employment service staff. While it may be beneficial to have virtual services as an option, staff must have the skills to utilize multiple technical tools appropriately to provide effective services. This becomes another skill requirement that may be added to the list of qualifications and increase the challenge of hiring. ESPs with the abovementioned recruitment difficulties often face the dilemma between having a trained virtual staff member and meeting contract requirements.

Rural employment service workers need to be generalists. Action committee participants identified that staff could be the "employment counsellors, data entry, [and sometimes] become actual counsellors to people for complex barriers due to lack of wrap-around services" in their community. Finding that unicorn staff member with the right mix of skills is even harder to recruit in a small community.

The literature supports the committee's findings: employment service staff may need to have "an exceptional knowledge of available resources and means to acquire them" (Graham et al., 2008, p.401) and "be flexible and creative in providing services" (Graham et al., 2008, p.401) as a multi-trained professional.

The lack of anonymity and dual relationships seem to be a unique issue for rural and remote services (Brownlee et al., 2010; Schmidt G 2012) despite technological advances and the availability of virtual services. This factor can influence the lives of the staff who live and work in rural and remote communities because "...people know the location of your personal residence leads to a sense of always being 'on call' as leaving the place of work does not mean leaving work" (Schmidt, 2012, p.8).

Staff must support clients and their access to employment services while protecting their personal privacy (Caxaj, 2016; Halverson & Brownlee, 2010), navigating the social and cultural dynamics (Caxaj, 2016), and managing boundaries and personal image to clients and the community (Graham et al., 2008). This issue can be especially challenging for staff with experience or training focusing on urban contexts.

Access to Staff Training & Support

Because of the lack of qualified candidates in rural and remote communities, hiring those with transferable skills, backgrounds, and personal suitability has become common among many ESPs. Therefore, staff training and ongoing support are essential to ensure the success of program delivery, effective client services, as well as retention of staff.

Training includes basic onboarding and workplace orientations, systems training, policy training, place-based local knowledge, bringing transferable skills into employment services, and adaptation and changes to practices over time. Ongoing support includes changes in processes due to policy updates, navigating programs for specific client scenarios, professional development, connections with local and remote professionals, social and team building, adoption

of, and training in, best practices, and emergency responses to a client's personal situations. Thus, ESPs must provide extensive training to new staff to ensure effective employment services and compliance with program requirements.

Action committee participants reported that, on average, it takes one year to onboard and fully train an employment advisor to adequately perform their work within an employment program contract. Costs associated with the training include recruitment, corporate or staff trainer providing onboarding and training, staff wages, travel costs, and mentoring and supervision time, before considering all the previously mentioned challenges.

In smaller employment service centres, staff may be required to perform the entire tasks as the small number of staff may not allow specializations; this then multiplies the time and costs of training, especially when the demands keep changing due to policy updates, labour market shifts, and dynamic client needs. However, there is a common lack of support from funders to provide financial latitude and system or policy training to ESPs and their staff. Current program contracts do not allow business closure and transition time for staff training, and the current funding does not consider these situations and challenges.



The limitations of small rural and remote employment service offices also could not support new staff with a gradual introduction of new tasks and challenges. "A new staff member cannot learn the job in 2 weeks but will need to be working with a client caseload when a staff member leaves," while "staff are cross-trained and have multiple hats to meet these needs and contract requirements," as committee participants noted.

The literature confirms that smaller organizations with fewer employers in the community and limited access to specialized resources are more likely to expose new employees to difficult tasks early on in a position (Schmidt, 2012). This is another risk factor for staff burnout and attrition.

Besides the time and financial commitment to training new staff, ongoing staff support can also be challenging in rural and remote areas. Many action committee participants stated that finding subject matter experts in employment services or accessing professional development for staff is difficult. Employment advisors in rural and remote areas usually work alone or with a small team and sometimes work as multiple professionals due to diverse client needs and limited local professionals for other related services. Training is typically provided internally. As a result, managers and supervisors have had to become subject matter experts and spend a significant amount of their time training staff.

The literature also attests that supervisors in rural and remote service centres must support staff with service delivery and professional consultations due to a lack of access to other professionals; therefore, the relationships between staff and supervisors must be well maintained (Graham et al., 2008). Working to meet demands beyond capacity, staff lack support locally (Bodor, 2009; Caxaj, 2016) and have limited access to professional development (Schmidt, 2012), which contributes to challenges in recruitment and retention.

While staff and ESPs are required to be flexible when providing employment services, the lack of flexibility in program contracts can discourage staff.

The logistic challenges described in the previous section, working beyond capacity to meet demands, managing social and cultural relationships, the lack of professional support while working in a small team or alone, and the changes in jobs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic can be sources of mental burnout for staff. Committee participants reported staff burnout as a common occurrence at their workplace, with staff questioning the effectiveness and perceptions of their work in employment services.

Finally, although childcare shortages are present across the province, the scarcity can be acute in rural and remote communities. For example, in one community, there are only nine licensed spaces for over 180 children under the age of 3. Thus, staff and clients cannot find childcare and ESPs must either create childcare or seek creative alternatives. Both ESP staff and their clients are limited in the work they can do.

Current Solutions

To fulfil contracts and provide employment services to clients, ESPs have resorted to creative means of problem-solving without being sufficiently compensated by their contracts. Some utilized COVID-19-related funding and benefits and some employer training grants to help with hiring and new staff training, but this hasn't been enough. To retain staff, some ESPs offer leadership development and internal professional development, which may allow those interested in moving up in the organization or within the field. Other benefits, such as a 4-day work week, flexible work schedule, or health and wellness benefits, are also reported as attempts to attract and retain staff when they are financially possible. Some employment organizations were able to utilize the pool of candidates from nurses and employment and

assistance workers who burned out and left their previous jobs.

2.2 Partners

Partnerships between ESPs and other service providers, non-profit organizations, and employers are critical to attracting additional resources and providing integrated support to clients. For rural and remote communities, partnerships are influential in improving employment services yet are harder to establish and maintain since sometimes there are few or no partner organizations available in these areas. When there are available organizations, they may also serve a largely rural and remote catchment area, experiencing similar challenges and trying to maintain continuity of services. Communicating information about other funded programs in large geographic areas can also be less effective. Thus, it is rare to create new partnerships due to the time needed to start these partnerships and make them work effectively. It takes years of work.

It can be difficult to consistently meet partner expectations, impacting partners' recruitment and retention. One participant explained that they organized a large job fair with eight employers, but only 40 clients showed up. While attendance is outside the control of ESPs, it is difficult to maintain relationships when access to clients is limited. It is harder to carve jobs for customized employment when employers are smaller with limited resources, staff capacity, training, and experience to support clients with multiple barriers.

The mismatch between policy and community employment needs also influences the recruitment and retention of partnerships in rural and remote areas. While ESPs are tasked to support employers in recruitment, most employers can only provide seasonal employment. A participant noted,

“Seasonal employment is definitely the backbone for most of our rural communities. Usually, our clients have jobs for both the summer and winter seasons with shoulder seasons in between. EI [employment insurance] is part of the sustainability of these seasonal positions.”

ESPs may support these employers by promoting their positions or providing wage subsidies, but the jobs they can offer may not be deemed sustainable by program policy.

Despite these challenges, ESPs persist in working with other organizations and exploring different service styles and options. Some try to utilize service providers who offer specialized programs and employment services. One contractor switched to a more café-style program, where clients could drop in to meet with a staff member and discuss their employment needs before connecting to the appropriate employment support programs. While this approach requires more staff and is resource-heavy, it increased client volume as they were accessible for in-person conversations.

2.3 Clients

Client needs are very different in rural and remote areas and are harder to recruit to access service and retain in service delivery models. Rural areas have different labour market needs than urban settings. There is often a limited variety of employment options, predominantly with small and medium-sized businesses, because of the lack of large employers in rural and remote areas. Many employment opportunities are resource-based, tourism-based, and gig economies, such as hotels and resorts, natural resources, environmental and forestry work, trades, and basic food and retail services. These occupations may not meet client employment needs, and many of the jobs are seasonal and depend on weather, resources and market needs.

While these industries can be the economic anchors for rural and remote communities, these employers may not be able to provide sustainable employment opportunities to clients.

Smaller populations in rural and remote areas are dispersed across large geographical areas. As a result, employment service centres reach fewer clients, with considerable variations between peak and shoulder seasons. Outreach and cohort training are less feasible for ESPs in these areas. Suitable cohorts for clients' employment needs may be outside of catchments. One participant provided an example of a Traffic Control Training program where clients have to travel to Kamloops because a similar cohort is not offered in their nearest employment service centre, even though traffic control training is suitable for client needs and was in high demand across British Columbia, including rural and remote areas.

Client Needs

Traditionally, employment service providers work with a wide range of clients, from those ready to work immediately without long-term interventions to others with multiple barriers requiring extensive support before and during employment.

An increasing number of clients with multiple barriers are moving into rural and remote communities, and these clients are harder to recruit and retain. These clients require employment services, additional resources, and access to various supports. Without local support and resources, "many barriers such as transportation, internet, housing, and daycare cannot be easily removed," said one action committee participant. Under these circumstances, clients may be unable to access a laptop or a quiet room to attend a virtual meeting with staff.

Access to specialized support and assessments may be limited. Even when barriers can be addressed, multi-barriered clients also require

accommodations and more support during employment preparation, job search, and job sustainment, which employment program policies may not support. Participants observed a general lack of funding and time considerations in current program policies to allow ESPs to support multi-barriered clients.

The current policies and processes for accessing funding can be seen as a barrier. The same paperwork and administrative demand for a \$1000 financial support apply to a \$150 financial support. Clients may have negative experiences with employment service programs because of paperwork. Participants witnessed clients leaving programs because there are "too many hoops to go through," especially for clients with multiple barriers who do not have the same capacity to persist through paperwork and processes to receive support. ESPs noted that the programs can gain a bad reputation through word of mouth preventing clients from participating and staying engaged in employment services, including job sustainment follow-up. Consequently, ESPs found it challenging to compete with other programs where there is more flexibility for clients to access a wider variety of supports with fewer administrative requirements. One participant adds:

When we consider the challenges with staffing in smaller remote communities, we are at risk of sacrificing the extensive holistic services that our multi-barriered clients require; we resort to using virtual services because of the cost of staffing these rural sites. There is simply not enough money in these contracts to provide the comprehensive services needed.

Rural providers are called upon to address community needs, including housing, childcare, homelessness, economic issues, and various supports to employers far beyond employment contract requirements. These rural problems

impact employers, employment opportunities, and our contracts. In some rural communities, there is no chance of finding housing, shelter, or childcare, which affects everyone.

Cultural & Social Challenges

Cultural and social environments can differ between urban and rural settings. Some examples include close social relations and proximity of spaces, dual relationships, various cultural practices, inter-family tensions, intercultural community differences, and a history of conflicts. Participants in the advisory committee, supported by the literature, reported the challenges that come with the diversity of client populations and the mismatch between clients' social and cultural needs and program designs, all of which impact the recruitment and retention of clients in employment service programs.

In small communities, inevitably, staff may have levels of personal relationships and connections with clients. This may also mean that the policy of arm's length may not be possible in rural and remote areas or that clients will not come to an ESP to access services.

Research shows that there is a general lack or decreased levels of anonymity in rural and remote areas, affecting privacy and access (Boydell et al., 2006; Caxaj, 2016; Halverson & Brownlee, 2010) to employment services. Action committee participants also mentioned stigma within small communities, which may become a barrier as clients navigate the cultural and social dynamics during services, as Caxaj (2016) also summarized. Issues with dual or multiple relationships and boundaries are common in rural and remote communities due to the nature of geographic and social limitations and may not be addressed using technological tools (Brownlee et al, 2010).

Regarding Indigenous populations, participants stated that a higher percentage of Indigenous clients in rural and remote areas access employment services. Indigenous clients may choose to access Indigenous employment services if available. Other employment programs do not necessarily consider Indigenous cultures and practices. Virtual appointments may not be culturally appropriate or accessible. Current policies do not support Indigenous relationship building and maintenance. An action committee participant provided an example of the program's financial support mismatching Indigenous cultural practices:

A \$5 lunch⁴ that we offer for those in training [can be seen as] atrocious. Culturally speaking, Indigenous peoples [in the area I serve] hold food and its sharing, offering, and consumption as a way to welcome and give respect to the recipient. I am mortified to suggest this service to a client or organization. It is much bigger than just economics.

This example shows that employment program policies, even seemingly small items, can potentially affect significant relationships and partnerships with Indigenous peoples and the effectiveness of employment services. There are tremendous costs to rural ESPs who are spending time and resources to foster these critical relationships.

The literature recognizes the importance of staff understanding familial ties and cultural roots with which the community was formed and the existing power dynamics along with their own power positions in the communities (Graham et al, 2008). The cultural incompatibility and lifestyle differences between ESPs and clients, without recognition and support, can be a vital cause of service breakdowns (Boydell et al., 2006).

⁴ As of October 17, 2022, this amount was increased to \$15.

Survivors of violence and abuse are also affected by the social situation in rural and remote areas. Participants reported a decreased comfort level and concerns about privacy and anonymity among survivors in these communities. These clients rely on the initiatives of ESPs to respond to their trauma-related needs as it is somewhat more anonymous or the only service provider available. In many cases, abusers have moved the family to more remote locations, thus affecting a higher rate of family violence in rural communities.

"...the dynamics related to community framework, cultural make-up, and the nature of service within an isolated context present a unique environment in which agencies must continually reflect on—and modify regularly—not only their policies, but also the roles of staff members, their relationship with the community, and their responsiveness to the cultural needs of community members." (Graham et al., 2008, p. 403-404)

Survivors of violence and abuse are also affected by the social situation in rural and remote areas. With the lack of specialized programs or outreach for clients with trauma and diverse cultures, these clients currently rely on initiatives of employment service providers and resources from other local organizations or nearby service centres to get support for their personal and employment needs. Participants reported a decreased comfort level and concerns about privacy and anonymity among survivors in these communities.

Other groups dealing with challenges in rural communities include women, newcomers (both Canadian and international), LGBTQ2S + people, people with disabilities, and others with social and economic challenges.

2.4 Recommendations: Recruitment & Retention

Participants indicated a strong need for recognition, flexibility, and additional funding for the extra costs of service delivery including sufficient staffing, operation of programs, and adequate client support for rural and remote employment services. Funders need to recognize the uniqueness of rural and remote services, and it is a dynamic process of learning:

Recommendations from participants and other research are both included for consideration.

Participants suggested that funders may:

- consider funding for comparable wages with universities, government offices, and crown corporations, including benefits, such as the municipal pension plan, to support ESPs to attract and retain skilled employees and potentially provide incentives for these talents
- provide flexibility and funding to ESPs to address client needs and engagement challenges
- develop a coordinated effort to support basic living needs, such as food and water security and accessible transportation options, so that clients can stay engaged and focus on improving their employability
- offer online and paper options for clients to access employment services due to the variety of accessibility challenges rural and remote clients may have

Concerning managing the ubiquitous dual and multiple relationships in rural and remote services, research encourages staff to work with the situation carefully considering the type of service and situation, client needs and expectations, and impacts of the dual/multiple relationships (Halverson & Brownlee, 2010).

Additional training and support to work with these complex situations could benefit staff and clients, as many training programs may not include the rural and remote context as part of their curriculum (Halverson & Brownlee, 2010). Schmidt (2012) also added that staff should be able to leave the community regularly to take breaks from constant involvement, which can cause mental exhaustion and burnout.

technology.

Section 3: Connectivity

3.1 Broadband Infrastructure

While accessing high-quality telecommunication and broadband infrastructure may be available in rural areas, the persistent barrier is that “someone still has to support the last mile aspect of getting it to the actual houses on every street” as one participant pointed out. The community of Enderby, like many others, faces connectivity challenges. Located between two larger cities, the community is almost equidistant from the existing infrastructures in both cities but does not have the infrastructure to support connectivity within the community. The shortage of financial resources and communications providers prevents rural and remote ESPs and clients from accessing telecommunication

Canada has no coordinated, coherent plan for improving technological infrastructures. Many connectivity initiatives are funded by public investments within short periods, usually for individual projects focusing on specific sites or areas and completed by private telecommunication providers. Hence, new networks of telecommunication can be disconnected from existing infrastructures (Weeden & Kelly, 2021).

With digital services becoming more prominent in various services since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for telecommunication technology grew substantially, and so did the “rural-urban digital divide” (Weeden & Kelly, 2021, p. 215).

The history of individualized improvement projects and the pressure of supply and demand affect clients residing in rural and remote areas. These clients have reduced access to quality broadband (Hambly & Rajabiun, 2021), and advisory committee participants also concurred that there might only be one telecommunication provider in a rural or remote area as opposed to the norm of multiple providers competing in the urban or suburban settings. Moreover, effective speeds and service quality also tend to fall below the government targets (Hambly & Rajabiun, 2021) in rural and remote areas. For the same level of broadband services, rural residents tend to pay significantly more than their urban counterparts, in addition to the considerably higher monthly fees and almost doubled installation fees (Worden & Hambly, 2022).

The higher demands, as well as better efficiency of resources and financial returns, have been drawing telecommunication providers toward more central populated areas, and single larger providers remain dominant in rural and remote places.



3.2 Digital Access

Affordability and limited access have been the primary concern among advisory committee participants regarding digital access. However, the abovementioned issues increase the costs of purchasing and maintaining technology, posing obstacles to clients seeking employment, especially when they must choose between paying for the technology and being able to afford essential needs such as a home and food. Cell phone coverage and publicly accessible internet are limited or sometimes unavailable, driving clients to expensive private options.

Digital access also includes access and affordability to adequate devices for telecommunication, such as cell phones, smartphones, and computers, without which clients cannot access virtual employment services or any virtual and technical components during services. These factors become especially problematic for clients who rely on digital services due to distance and travel costs. When digital participation or electronic documents are expected, clients have to rely heavily on financial support from ESPs to connect with an employment service office and access the technology.

Even when technology purchases are financially feasible for clients or provided by the ESP, human resources and mismatch of technology can result in challenging and unstable access. With the various technologies from different improvement projects, a participant reported that “even though there is connectivity available, there is no technology available with which to access the internet.” Also, technicians are not always available in rural communities. As a result, the initial setup of technology through home visits or guiding customers through equipment use is arduous because of the limited number of technicians available to rural communities. Clients may have to resort to public access points to the internet, sometimes unsecured and with poor bandwidth. Access to the internet and cell phone connections are essential for

employers to reach job-seeking clients. These factors become detrimental to clients' employment services, training, and job search.

The internet and digital devices have become everyday tools in business, education, and personal lives; there can be significant setbacks when they are inaccessible. At times clients cannot participate in virtual employment services that require digital tools, nor can they attend online training or connect with employers virtually. One participant witnessed a client withdraw from services because of the lack of a reliable device and funding to cover the cost of the internet.

Some current funding and programs are attempting to improve digital access. These programs mainly focus on individuals and families with low income and residents in certain remote geographic areas by offering devices and internet with low to no costs, such as the [TELUS for Good](#) initiatives, [Columbia-Basin Trust Funding for Connectivity](#), [Connected Coast Program](#), and the [Access to Technology \(A2T\)](#) program. Some funders support specific demographics, such as faith-based associations, private donors, and mobility providers offering programs to low-income families. Still, these programs may not be helpful for remote families who already lack access. A recent project that provided ten clients with smartphones saw three immediately gain employment because of access to connectivity. Rural service providers must take the time to make these connections for clients, which, as mentioned in other sections, increases the costs of delivering services.

3.3 Digital Literacy

The challenge of technological literacy compounds the struggle of accessing hardware and connection. Digitization of employment services happened quickly compared to compatible access and skills to use technology, which contributed to difficulties for clients using these services.

Some feel that technology use was imposed rather than practice-led (Bryant et al., 2018): meaning the decision to use technology was not made by clients and staff who chose to use it for specific needs, but instead, they were required to use it by management or policy.

Clients may not be able to learn technical skills for various reasons, such as lack of access or limited learning capacity and time; some participants observed that learning digital skills can be particularly challenging for mature workers, older trades workers, and persons with disabilities, which affect their access to employment services and job opportunities, as well as limit their ability to maintain employment. Some clients do not have a cell phone or an email address and have no desire to change this. Others cannot access technology for religious reasons, which is expected in some rural communities. In addition, those who live in rural and remote communities for a simpler or more off-the-grid lifestyle can resist the use of technology.

There are no sufficient resources for clients who wish to learn digital skills to support their learning. Access to digital literacy training is limited, with few training providers and offerings. In rural and remote areas, places with technological access, such as public libraries or employment service centres, usually have limited hours. The lack of access to technology poses additional hardships to learning as practice and regular use are the key to acquiring digital skills; clients may be unable to retain their newly discovered digital skills without consistent access. If clients have learning disabilities, literacy challenges, or English as their additional language, the challenge to improve digital skills can further compound. Unfortunately, funding for digital learning is limited because it does not meet the requirements of training policies.

ESPs carry the additional burden of providing this Digital training and support for clients who want to access services. One ESP commented: "Rural

providers estimate that their staff spend between 30-70% of their client interaction time supporting clients to utilize funder technological systems."

3.4 Recommendations: Connectivity

Inevitably, more flexibility and additional funding would improve access to technology and related skills.

It was well summarized by Carson (2013) that "...even success in terms of broadband availability means little unless it is both adopted by rural communities and has a meaningful social and economic impact" (p. 1).

To achieve the goals of meaningful social and economic impacts and to better accommodate diverse client needs, funders need to consider the following:

- o supporting and improving access to digital tools and skills in rural and remote areas
- o developing purposeful employment program designs with the use of technological tools
- o supporting a variety of flexible options in program processes, including digital and traditional approaches
- o supporting employment and learning needs of clients while avoiding the creation of unintentional barriers during services
- o expanding access to technology for clients who need technology for job search
- o recognizing that in many rural communities, a hands-on approach will be needed and that many rural clients will be unable to fully participate in service – continued advancement of virtual services puts additional strains on rural ESPs who must also provide support to clients accessing this technology

Section 4: Contract Concerns

4.1 Identifying the Challenges

Employment services are at the intersections of multiple areas of social health, including socioeconomic factors. These areas are essential to client success, although many are outside of employment services' scope. Wraparound support and services are often missing in rural and remote communities. As a result, employment services become the place where the service gaps are filled to improve clients' access to employment. Participants note an overall shortage of budgets and funding for program operation and service delivery in rural and remote areas as they struggle to meet the diverse needs of communities. Some of these challenges have been mentioned in other sections of this report, as they can be both practical and contract issues.

Many employment service programs are designed with the assumption that clients have access to resources and services they require for daily living, which is often not the case for clients in rural and remote areas. As a result, funding limits and services provided are inadequate to address challenges in rural and remote employment services. For example, a 25 km journey differs in rural communities from urban ones. In rural and remote areas, it is much *further* than in urban settings because of a lack of transportation alternatives, road conditions, and transportation infrastructure. The same principle applies or even multiplies in many other factors such as access, recruitment and retention, and connectivity. Current policies and funding do not allow ESPs to provide equal services to clients in rural and remote areas, as they do not consider these circumstances; instead, they contribute to barriers when clients try to access employment services.

Another significant challenge in employment program delivery contracts is the assumption that ESPs can scale up and down based on demand. Current service funding is mostly based on the population in each catchment, or the number of clients served in previous contracts, meaning rural and remote areas always have less funding. ESPs must maintain operations, partnerships with service providers and employers, recruitment and retention of staff and clients, and their office and online resources all year round despite the seasonal nature in rural and remote communities. With the low percentages of administrative or fixed costs based on the already low population-based funding, ESPs in rural and remote areas do not have enough funding to maintain equal and sustainable employment services without relying on other funding sources such as personal donations and local community grants. This financial concern not only demotivates staff but also impacts the equitable delivery of employment services in rural and remote areas.

While preferable to single-year contracts, multi-year contracts compound many of the funding issues identified in this report as they generally do not reflect the increasing costs with each subsequent year of the contract. Multi-year agreements must reflect the increases in costs year over year and that operating with year one funds in years two to five of a five-year contract is equivalent to a cut in funding each year of the contract. While funders often default to "it is the responsibility of the service providers to factor this into their budgets," it is impossible to do so when the year one budget is inadequate to start with. By year five, six or nine, it is an impossible budget to deliver already underfunded services.

Program design policy has led to large catchment areas that often include communities of different sizes and characteristics. These large catchments fail to recognize the unique characteristics of communities within a catchment. "This uniqueness gets lost when added to a larger catchment that is very different," explained by one advisory committee participant. Program style, marketing needs, and client barriers are very different across these catchments. Larger service delivery areas are also often funded based on the notion of economies of scale in combining service delivery areas into one. In contrast, the opposite is true; it results in additional time and resources to supervise, train and support staff over larger areas.

This lack of consideration in program design creates complications when staff apply program policies to client scenarios, resulting in heavy coordination and administrative demands.

A client requiring financial support to purchase a pair of work boots and a first aid certificate may be a good example. The client must travel to an employment service office or access digital services, which are both challenging in rural and remote areas. To find the right size and type of boots, clients may have to travel outside their area due to limited supplies and varieties in rural areas. Meanwhile, staff must also find an available first aid training provider and make arrangements for the client to get to and complete the training; while ensuring all the documents and billing are in place before the training and purchase. If any costs are above the funding limits, staff must help find alternative funding to cover the expenses when little is available in the local community. All these steps must be completed before the client's employment start date, which can come up as quickly as one or two days. When the support cannot be provided in a timely manner, the client may lose the work opportunity.

The flexibility of access to funding can vary among different programs and government

fundors. Competition with other funded programs within the area can be challenging with the limitations of policies and processes mentioned in other sections of this report. In a small community, a small number of unfortunate incidents or client experiences with a complex process, despite the best effort of staff and the client, can reflect poorly on the program and contribute to a negative reputation in the community. This reputation, in turn, can contribute to client recruitment and retention difficulties, local partnerships, and community engagement that ESPs rely on to generate revenues.

Lastly, some ESPs identified the divide between a community-centred annual business plan and an immediate outcome-based funding model. Community development efforts take time and continuity to take effect. Before the results are visible, ESPs must complete the work upfront to execute the business plan. When major changes happen, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the current labour shortage, ESPs may not have enough margin to leverage a response and support clients if the organizations are already operating on a tight budget and resources.

4.2 Current Funding to Address Challenges

Utilization of various funding sources is common among ESPs for better client support. Examples include the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training, the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program, local charities, service provider discounts, and individual and organizational donations. Staff must work together to design a process that utilizes support and resources from organizations involved to provide wraparound support when available. This also means that staff must coordinate efforts and set up plans to ensure the effective use of funds and a smooth client experience. Adequate funding for the delivery of employment services in rural and remote communities would address these issues.

4.3 Recommendations: Contract Concerns

As one participant explained, a “standard level of service is about justice and equity, but it doesn't mean equal dollars.” Equal services can vary depending on local cultures, socioeconomic situations, and client needs.

Employment services in rural and remote areas are significantly different than in urban settings; thus, effective urban service models should not be imposed on services in rural and remote environments. Funders must consider the following:

- adequate budget, support, and flexibility for both foreseeable and unforeseeable client circumstances
- technology should not be imposed on clients and staff with no alternatives
- support for creative solutions to address diverse and unique needs in each rural and remote community, including extra flexibility and funding
- including a process in an employment program where requests for exceptions can be easily submitted, reviewed with a solution-focus lens, talked about, and considered to be approved quickly when there is a reasonable rationale.
- consultation with those who deliver employment services in rural and remote communities on an ongoing basis to better understand the issues and impacts
- designate clients who live in rural and remote communities as a specialized population, just as clients with disabilities or multi-barriered clients are considered to need more and different support
- establish a rural and remote committee comprised of people with experience delivering excellent employment services in rural and remote communities that informs program design in advance of public procurement when it is often too late to make the necessary changes
- consider funding for community development roles within ESPs that may be incorporated into rural service delivery models to address barriers for clients (emerging issues coordinator), so ESPs don't need to self-fund these needed roles

In addition, due to the precarious nature of service and employment in rural and remote areas, the committee calls for a higher percentage of guaranteed funding, administrative fees and fixed fees while reducing the reliance on performance fees. This will:

- support ESPs to maintain employment services despite service volumes and guarantee equitable client access to employment services
- financially support circumstances where staff must travel or provide creative solutions to meet client needs
- increase client access to funding for employment-related needs with systems and processes that are less of an administrative burden to staff – this will help decrease time and costs for administration and allow more time for staff to focus on direct client support resulting in better client experiences and outcomes and an improved program reputation



Conclusion

Rural and remote service providers recognize the conditions associated with delivering employment programs in their communities. Many are driven by community loyalty and a desire to enhance the quality of life for all residents. They approach this work with professionalism and compassion, bringing an advocacy role for their clients into this conversation. They seek to deliver programs that serve their clients to address socio-economic conditions, a rapidly changing labour market, and a need for social justice through a rural and remote lens. Their message is to provide sufficient funding, greater flexibility, and an opportunity to build a productive relationship with their funders. ASPECT hopes these recommendations will be received in the spirit of delivering excellent services to clients in rural and remote communities.



Project Recommendations

There is a strong consensus among participants that rural and remote employment services are “nothing like providing the same services in urban centres” because access to everything can be different and usually more challenging. When asked about recommendations for the current contracts, participants advised that funders could use a rural and remote lens when designing programs and making decisions on program policies. This lens could help funders anticipate the impacts of their policy decisions on ESP clients in rural and remote areas by becoming more aware *before* implementation. Many recommendations focus on supporting the localization of employment programs to have flexible, creative solutions that are adequately funded. The lens of rural and remote services could be based on the question of what can be done when expected resources and services are unavailable.

Having demonstrated the context and challenges of providing employment services in rural and remote areas through the previous sections, there are policy considerations and recommendations to better support clients, ESPs, staff, and service providers. The recommendations focus on supporting these missing elements through financial considerations, flexibility to meet the diverse and changing needs of clients and ESPs, and stronger dialogue and advocacy between funders and ESPs.

Financial Decisions

The advisory committee advises removing the cost limits for funding, such as transportation and accommodation supports, and increase maximums and flexibility as considerations for rural and remote clients. Funding should move away from population-based targets and focus on the realities of delivering services. A standard level of service provided to clients is about social

justice and equity and not about equal dollar amounts despite diverse needs.

The costs of delivering employment services in rural and remote communities are not more affordable. Assumptions of lower costs due to smaller populations can damage the clients in those areas who already lack resources and support. Instead, additional funding is needed to acknowledge and support staff who must work to address these challenges.

ESPs require the amount of funding that allows them to provide effective services in the way they need to be delivered according to the local context and needs, including filling in service gaps and going the extra mile to support clients toward employment. Unpredictable changes with the COVID-19 pandemic, national and local economic changes, inflation, and natural disasters affect program delivery. The low percentage of administrative and fixed costs and out-come based funding models can lead to unintended consequences of understaffing and underpaying further encouraging a system where good services rely on workers -- who are predominantly female -- to be more “giving.” Overall and annual increases in funding to ESPs would be an effective way to tackle the challenges caused by anticipated cost increases and unforeseen events.

Funding for employer services and community partnerships, room rental for service providers travelling to provide clients training, adapting training for specific groups and communities, and subsidies to bring in service providers should be added to the funding to ensure equal access to employment services and training for clients residing in rural and remote areas.

The literature supports that additional funding is a key to better serving the needs of rural and remote residents, including training professionals and developing appropriate programs because programs cannot simply scale up and down due to the distinctive needs and characteristics of the socio-economic situations and the external environment (Bull et al, 2001).

While the situations and costs may vary, utilizing an adequate budget flexibly and reassigning funds to higher costs and areas of need could also potentially increase the service capacity. Funders must be conscious of ESPs' local knowledge rather than awarding contracts to the lowest bidding proposals.

Needs & Flexibilities

Apart from additional and more flexible funding, the advisory committee also called for increased flexibility in program design and policy to accommodate the known unique and changing needs and the unknown, including severe weather and natural disasters.

The committee calls for employment service programs that have flexibility built into the policies and processes so that these programs can hold space for community learning, community integration and localization. "We are a diverse province and need a funding model that reflects that," one advisory committee participant stated. As a result, employment services can be more relevant, efficient, and integrated into the development of local communities, where community members can also be active contributors to programs.

As the literature confirms, supporting rural and remote clients requires an emphasis on the necessity of flexibility when situations are less than ideal and when contractors must be creative in providing services (Graham et al, 2008).

Supporting Clients

Supporting equitable access to wraparound services and employment support is one of the main themes in the recommendations. These services and supports include options of in-person and virtual services, internet and phone, support for seasonal employment, and culturally appropriate options and methods during service processes such as registration and completion of paperwork.

One participant reminded us we must consider "cultural differences, especially for Indigenous cultures and their connections to their land." The use of technical tools should be more intentional, and it can only supplement but not replace in-person services.

Employment support, such as wage subsidies and financial support for clients to start employment, should be accessible despite the types of employment they can obtain, i.e., full-time, part-time, or seasonal. This will prevent clients from becoming dependent on employment services for long periods due to being caught in program limitations.

The advisory committee recommends that more resources are needed to focus on the pre-employment needs of individuals with significant barriers to employment. Community services are needed to help barriered clients before employment services and job search strategies begin enabling ESPs to "meet people where they are at" and improve employment readiness.

Participants highlighted the challenges with catchment boundaries being considered during program design and decision-making. When a catchment becomes larger, it requires more staff, funding, and resources to support and manage because of issues regarding access, as noted in previous sections. Additionally, conglomerating catchments can also be challenging due to vastly different needs requiring more diverse ways of service and operation. Communities with unique characteristics need to be funded at a level that acknowledges those unique characteristics. Programming needs to offer employment services creatively based on local client needs. These may include mobile offices and pop-up shops to provide easier access for rural and remote clients when possible, with flexible service delivery hours.

Supporting ESPs

Policies and funding must allow for staff training. This will enable ESPs to deal with a limited labour pool by promoting staff members into new positions and training them in-house. Training can also include professional development activities led by funders within work hours; topics may consist of program administration and policies, funder systems, as well as workshops on best practices and industry updates for Career Development Practitioners (CDPs) to address specific challenges and skill gaps between staff and program expectations. The training support will make it possible to hire and retain staff and ensure the consistency of service quality across ESPs; it is also an effective way to support ESPs to build capacity and stay informed by hearing from the staff at the frontline of employment services.

Staff in employment services often must serve as a general practitioner supporting clients with additional needs to achieve employment outcomes. They require higher pay and better support to sustain themselves working in employment services as skilled professionals. Part-time centres mean ESPs cannot offer full-

time employment to all staff. This limits the ability to retain quality staff. Future contracts should build flexibility and allow ESPs to close the office for staff training, offer various work hours, work from home, and fair wages and benefits. Programs need to reflect wages, benefits, hours, and support these skilled professionals are entitled to in government and other public settings.

Simplified administrative processes and flexibility to accommodate diverse clients and unexpected circumstances are strongly called for because of the rapidly changing labour market, client needs and the nature of rural and remote living. Simplified administration will allow more time for staff to focus on client needs and employment support, increasing their capacity to serve more clients. It also supports staff to focus on serving clients instead of burning out from the administrative demand that comes with the job.

To support access to services and training, funders must consider providing incentives to entice service providers to serve rural and remote communities. Some ideas include tax breaks, opportunities for community service providers to pay bonuses, and waiving student loans for these practitioners. Better advertising of these roles in rural and remote areas is also crucial to improve the accessibility of wraparound services and education for service providers to support communities.

Dialogues, Considerations & Advocacy

The advisory committee agrees that the general lack of trust between funders and ESPs can harm service quality and potentially clients; thus, it is recommended that there should be more open dialogues, broader considerations, and more active advocacy to respond to changing situations and client needs, build trust and improve working relationships between funders and ESPs.

A system that supports ongoing, timely communications is essential to ensure employment programs are responsive to current challenges and client needs while providing adequate support to ESPs. ESPs and funders need a mechanism to initiate conversations easily and in a timely manner as part of program design. Funders may utilize ESPs and their staff as sources of input based on frontline experience and client scenarios to revise and update program policies effectively.

The ministry could assign a deputy minister to rural and remote client needs as their advocate. Regular conversations could be held with advisory groups made up of ESPs and those experienced in delivering services in rural and remote communities, together with supportive and solution-focused funder representatives. Feedback could come from funded organizations that can conduct focus groups and research projects, such as the community engagement process that informed this report.

Future contracts must consider the rural and remote lens as part of program design and bidding processes. Local community service providers must be prioritized in bidding when they have existing partnerships with local employers and relationships with the local communities and support services agencies.

Other than the location of bidding organizations, funders must also consider local resources and services and how they interact with other services and resources. This consideration is essential to ensure equal access to employment services across BC and should not be affected by proposed costs; the key is to respect the uniqueness and diverse needs of local rural and remote communities.

ESPs can be stewards of quality employment services, given opportunities for creative solutions and regular dialogues with funders. Future contracts for employment services must reflect the level of agency and stewardship (Van Slyke, 2007) of ESPs, providing flexibility to support diverse clients while building trust.

In conclusion, employment service programs must involve local and contractor participation in their development, design, and delivery, with a broader understanding of the socioeconomic, cultural-historical, and political contexts of rural and remote clients, especially regarding equal access and the right to self-manage own affairs for Indigenous clients. Ongoing dialogues and collaborations among rural and remote communities, funders, and ESPs are critical to ensure employment services remain relevant and effective, tailored to the needs of clients and operations for successful service outcomes.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Methodology

The findings in this report were developed based on qualitative research methods using a review of both academic articles and grey literature publications. Because of the lack of research directly related to our topic of rural and remote employment services, we reviewed publications addressing the broader context of social services in general and the intersection of employment services with health, mental health, community availability, and the practice of social work. Our literature review also investigated the relationship between government and contracted social services as it applies to the delivery of services.

Our qualitative data was gathered through a community-based approach in which we rely on the experts within the community delivering employment services and support to determine the areas of investigation and discussion. Participants were recruited through ASPECT's member database, our weekly Aspectives newsletter, and through all ASPECT social media accounts, drawing on our 100 community-based member organizations. Although these meetings were limited to ASPECT members, there are instances of service providers who are not members participating in the discussions. Service providers represented all rural and remote locations throughout BC as defined by the Government of BC's economic development regions: Cariboo, Kootenay, Mainland/Southwest, North Coast & Nechako, Northeast, Thompson-Okanagan, and Vancouver Island/Coast.

ASPECT conducted a series of six monthly virtual meetings over Zoom between January and June 2022. Throughout these meetings and the creation of this report, there were 232 volunteer hours contributed by 176 employment service providers. Each meeting followed a similar format: participants were asked to break out into groups to discuss a theme relating to rural and remote delivery. Within each theme, each breakout group discussed specific topics and answered the following three questions:

1. Identify the challenges related to the topic.
2. Identify funding currently in place to address these challenges.
3. Provide suggestions to improve the situation.

One volunteer in each breakout group took notes for their group, reported them during the reflective plenary session, and sent their notes to ASPECT to be included in this report. The themes in this report were identified by reviewing the qualitative data and comparing it with the literature.

ASPECT, with help from a volunteer career practitioner from one of the ASPECT member organizations, meeting participants were given the opportunity to review a draft of this report and verify that it accurately describes their community-based experiences.

Rural & Remote Advisory Committee Terms of Reference

Name

ASPECT Rural & Remote Advisory Committee, a.k.a. Refocusing the Urban Lens for Employment Programs

Committee Membership

The Committee will consist of ASPECT members who administer and deliver employment programs to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

Goals

1. Discuss and record the challenges related to delivering employment programs to rural, remote, and Indigenous communities
2. Create content for a white paper to inform the government about future employment program design

Deliverables

- Identify common themes related to employment program delivery in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities
- Record issues and challenges
- Assist ASPECT in creating a white paper to share with the BC Government's Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training, and Employment and Social Development Canada

Scope / Jurisdiction

- Committee members will be responsible for sharing their experiences, providing direction, and reviewing the white paper.
- The committee chair will be responsible for facilitating the discussions and directing the topics of note.
- ASPECT staff will administer the meeting schedule, take notes, and write the white paper.

This committee will meet virtually six times on the first Thursday of every month between January and June 2022 and will take place at 10 am.

Meeting Date	Purpose	Attendance
Jan 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review Terms of Reference Determine Themes Determine sub-committees if needed 	All committee members
Feb 3	Theme 1 – Distance: costs, logistics, available services, training, & transportation	Committee members with interest in theme 1
Mar 3	Theme 2 – Recruitment & Retention: staff, partners, clients	Committee members with interest in theme 2
Apr 7	Theme 3 – Connectivity: broadband infrastructure, digital access, digital literacy	Committee members with interest in theme 3
May 5	Theme 4 – Contract Challenges: funding suggestions, unique considerations, client types	Committee members with interest in theme 4
June 2	Review Recommendations	All committee members

Resources and Budget

ASPECT will be responsible for administrative expenses associated with meeting scheduling, zoom platform, collaborative tools, note taking, and writing the final white paper.

Committee members will be asked to volunteer their time for this initiative, which is estimated to be between 2 and 6 hours of work.

Governance

The committee members will be responsible for directing the topic of discussion. ASPECT will take responsibility for the creation and content of the white paper.

Additional Notes

- Unless otherwise directed, all comments made during committee meetings and within the white paper will be anonymous.
- Topics discussed, and content produced at this committee will be shared with the ASPECT board of directors and ASPECT members.
- Communications outside of the meetings will be conducted by email.