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**Ministry of Community and Social Services
Connecting Communities Initiative:
Final Report**

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Connecting Communities Initiative (CCI) was launched to test the effectiveness of a more personal approach for social assistance clients and employers in order to improve their employment outcomes. Micro-projects (small, highly focused, short-term interventions) aimed at strengthening relationships among stakeholders were designed and implemented in six communities across the province. CCI was designed to test the value of micro-projects on four key points:

- Getting employers more engaged in the employment process;
- Providing new forms of personal guidance for clients through peer support;
- Improving coordination between service providers through community tables; and
- Looking to community tables as an informed source of advice to the Ministry on policy innovation.

The Micro-Project Approach

Micro-projects focus on a range of obstacles to employment known as *awareness and attitude issues* because they negatively affect how a person or organization views their relationship to the system of employment services. These issues can be clustered under three basic themes:

- Lack of information
- Misconceptions
- Confidence and motivation

CCI was launched to test the effectiveness of micro-projects as a new and promising way to address these kinds of issues by linking them to “community planning tables.”

Community Planning Tables

In recent years, many communities in Ontario have been building community networks to support a more collaborative approach to identifying and solving local issues. Community planning tables are collaborative bodies that are jointly owned and managed by their members. Members seek to align their activities in ways that will maximize their collective impact on community issues and contribute to the achievement of shared goals.

While these tables have made real progress on improving employment services, they normally don't count employers or clients among their members. Owners of small-and medium-sized businesses or social assistance clients are not likely to feel they have much to contribute to the ongoing planning discussions at such tables. Nevertheless, it is increasingly clear that real progress on improving employment services requires a new level of engagement from employers and clients.

Employers need to become more aware of the opportunities and benefits that can come with hiring Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works clients; and of the role service providers can play in helping them find appropriate candidates. Clients need to be better

informed on how the employment system works. The question being asked around the planning tables is how best to achieve these goals.

The “micro-projects” tested through CCI are part of the answer. Rather than inviting employers and clients to become permanent members of a planning table, the approach focuses on having the table engage them through a series of short, highly-focused discussions involving person-to-person contact and aimed at addressing these issues one at a time.

The Projects

CCI was launched in early April and six communities undertook a micro-project. Most of the micro-projects consisted of a single event, usually lasting from 2.5 – 3.5 hours and involving approximately 15 – 30 participants. These were mainly clients, employers and service providers depending on the focus of the project. Notwithstanding their differences, the following goals were shared by most if not all of the micro-projects in the two theme areas:

Employer Networks

- To raise awareness within the business community that social assistance clients are ready, willing and able to work;
- To develop the “business case” for why hiring social assistance clients is a good business decision; and
- To show that service providers can provide the assistance employers need to make this work well.

Peer Support and Mentoring

- To gauge the interest and willingness of clients to participate in peer support and mentoring relationships; and
- To test the impact of peer support on motivation for employment.

All six projects met these objectives.

For those projects that focused on employer networks, the micro-projects were an effective way to raise awareness within the business community and to develop the “business case” for why hiring social assistance clients is a good business decision.

Employers’ comments were positive and encouraging and most agreed to engage further in the hiring process, such as having conversations with service providers around hiring or mentoring. A number of employers made firm commitments to use the services offered.

Clients were very clear on the value that peer support can bring. Peer support and mentoring were especially well received. Where these topics were discussed and proposed, clients responded enthusiastically.

Overall, the report lists at least a dozen positive changes that resulted from the micro-projects, ranging from reduced fears or anxieties among clients who participate in peer support programs to increased awareness among employers of the benefits of hiring social assistance clients.

Service providers had their own reasons for calling the micro-projects a success. They said it gave them a glimpse of how much easier their jobs could become if there were an informed and

cohesive network of employers in their community that was aware of the role service providers play and confident of their ability to screen the right employee for them.

When we asked the members of the planning tables whether their table would do more micro-projects, the answer was affirmative or a qualified affirmative in all six cases. They said that having such an approach was extremely useful. It not only allowed them to connect with clients and employers, but to collaborate across their own organizational boundaries in new and constructive ways.

Almost everyone involved in CCI saw the two central themes—peer support and employer engagement—as promising and positive initiatives that could make a significant contribution to strengthening the employment pathway and improving employment outcomes.

Next Steps

Based on the findings of CCI, it is recommended that the Ministry launch a second stage of CCI aimed at more ambitious use of micro-projects by communities to achieve three goals:

- a) Build a series of community-wide employer networks or peer-support programs that could demonstrate the benefits for the delivery of employment supports;
- b) Help transform community service provider networks into more cohesive and effective planning tables; and
- c) Provide a model or roadmap to help other communities achieve these same goals.

Introduction

Over the last 18 months, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) has been engaging clients and stakeholders on ways to reform the social assistance system. The Connecting Communities Initiative (CCI) was launched to test the effectiveness of *micro-projects* as a new and promising way to improve employment services and opportunities for social assistance clients.

For the purposes of this initiative, micro-projects are small, highly focused, short-term interventions aimed at strengthening relationships among stakeholders who provide or use employment services. The concept emerged from two earlier MCSS projects in 2013: The Employment-focused Working Group Roundtables¹ and the Client Discussions on Social Assistance.²

In the Roundtables process, the Ministry held six meetings in Toronto with some 35 service providers, employers and clients to discuss ways to improve employment services and supports.³ A number of proposals for reform emerged from the discussions, including better information sharing, employer engagement and the use of peer support and mentoring.

The Client Discussions were held in the summer of 2013. The Ministry hosted 11 events across the province to hear from clients about their experiences with the social assistance system. Their concerns echoed many of the same things that had also been said in the Roundtables. Participants were unsure how the system worked or how to get the information they needed. They felt alone as they worked their way through the employment pathway and reported having very little contact with actual employers. The experience, said many, was deeply discouraging and eroded their self-confidence.

Micro-projects were advanced as a way to address these issues by implementing some of the proposals from the Roundtables and Client Discussions. CCI was designed to test this approach on four key points:

- Getting employers more engaged in the employment process;
- Providing new forms of personal guidance for clients through peer support;
- Improving coordination between service providers through community tables; and
- Looking to community tables as an informed source of advice to the Ministry on policy innovation.

This report contains the main findings from the Connecting Communities Initiative. It has four main parts: Part I describes the overall approach of CCI. Part II describes how the six micro-projects unfolded.⁴ Part III contains the findings from the projects. Part IV proposes some next steps to be considered by MCSS.

¹ The final report can be found at:

<http://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/EFWG%20Final%20Report%20Sept%2026%202013%20PDF.pdf>

² The final report can be found at:

<http://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/Report%20of%20Client%20Discussions%20on%20Social%20Assistance%20Reform.pdf>

³ These were held in Toronto between January and May 2013.

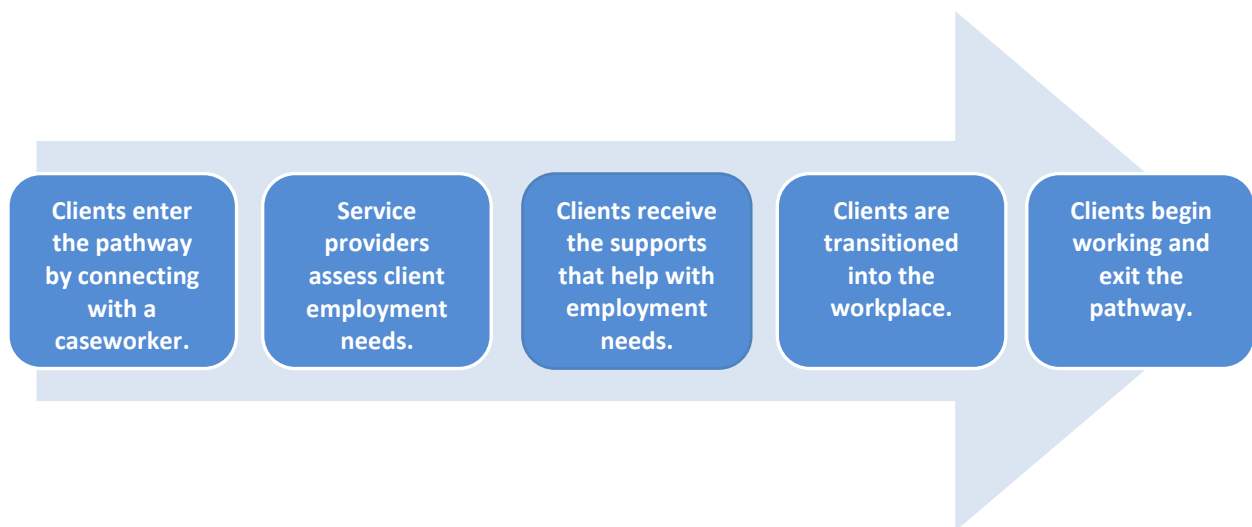
⁴ Summaries of the six projects can be found in Appendix 1.

Part I: Micro-Projects and Planning Tables

The Employment Pathway

In the Client Discussions, the social assistance employment system was presented to clients as a “pathway” that begins when they first connect with someone from social assistance—usually a case worker. Following contact, clients proceed along the pathway through several stages that provide services and supports. Ideally, the journey terminates with employment that fits the client’s skills and circumstances. Helping clients realize employment earnings while on social assistance is also viewed as important to their livelihoods. The pathway to employment is depicted in the diagram below and includes five basic stages, including:

1. Clients enter the pathway by connecting with an ODSP caseworker either by applying for Employment Supports directly or through the support of an agency that provides services to people with disabilities
2. Employment Supports service provider assess clients’ employment needs to which may include help applying for jobs, training, transportation, etc.
3. Clients receive the appropriate services and support that address their employment needs
4. Clients are transitioned to the workplace with additional supports, such as providing advice on job opportunities, job placement support, assistance with job accommodations, career building volunteer opportunities, etc.
5. Client begin work, receiving earnings and, potentially, exits the pathway.



While the participants in our discussions liked the idea of an employment pathway, most felt it didn’t reflect their experience very well. In their view, the various stages are blurred, the key tasks are not always performed well—if at all—and the roles and responsibilities of the various players, including the client, are confused and unclear.

Resolving these issues will require work at all five stages. The demonstration projects undertaken through CCI could make a significant contribution to this. They were designed to link and test two innovative practices: **community planning tables** and **micro-projects**.

Community Planning Tables

In recent years, many communities in Ontario have been building community networks to support a more collaborative approach to identifying and solving local issues. An increasingly popular strategy is to establish **community planning tables** in key service areas. A “planning table” is a multi-stakeholder body whose members meet regularly to discuss issues in their area from the viewpoint of their community and explore ways they can work together to solve them.

For example, in 2005 the City of Hamilton created the Skills Development Flagship, a multi-stakeholder forum designed to identify and solve issues in three priority areas: children and families; housing; and skills development. The Flagship includes about 30 stakeholders who meet regularly to share information and work on the priority areas. It is led by two co-chairs, one from the City and one from a community organization.

The Community Employment Resource Partnerships (CERP) is another example of this approach. CERP is a table that brings together employment and training organizations that are committed to enhancing services to individuals, businesses and the community as-a-whole. Through CERP, members focus on “improving connections between job-ready persons and employers, supporting processes to help individuals become job ready and improving existing services by reducing unnecessary duplication.”⁵

The CERP framework has been implemented in the City of Kawartha Lakes, County of Haliburton, City of Peterborough and Northumberland County, where it provides stakeholders with a forum to explore issues, improve coordination and cooperation in service delivery, and create solutions relating to employment strategies in each of the CERP service areas.

Community planning tables like these are collaborative bodies that are jointly owned and managed by their members. Each member has a different set of tools, knowledge, skills and relationships, which it brings to the table voluntarily. Members seek to align their activities in ways that will maximize their collective impact on community issues and contribute to the achievement of shared goals.

Now while the Hamilton and CERP tables have made real progress on improving employment services, they normally don’t count employers or clients among their members. Owners of small- and medium-sized businesses or social assistance clients are not likely to feel they have much to contribute to the ongoing planning discussions at such tables.

Nevertheless, it is increasingly clear that real progress on improving the employment pathway requires a new level of engagement from employers and clients. Employers need to become more aware of the opportunities and benefits that can come with hiring ODSP and Ontario Works clients; and of the role service providers can play in helping them find appropriate candidates. Clients need to be better informed on how the employment system works. They also need supports that will help them build self-confidence, including opportunities to connect

⁵ Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (2008), *Peterborough: Community Employment Resource Partnership*. Accessed online at: <http://www.omssa.com/human-services/human-services-integration/hsi-additional-resources/Peterborough%20Example%20final.pdf>

directly with prospective employers. The question being asked around the planning tables is how best to achieve these goals.

The “micro-projects” tested through CCI are part of the answer. Rather than inviting employers and clients to become permanent members of a planning table, the approach focuses on having the table engage them through a series of short, highly-focused discussions aimed at addressing these issues one at a time.

The Micro-Project Approach

During the Roundtables project and the Client Discussions, participants identified a range of obstacles to employment that we can call *awareness and attitude issues* because they negatively affect how a person or organization views their relationship to the employment pathway. These issues can be clustered under three basic themes:

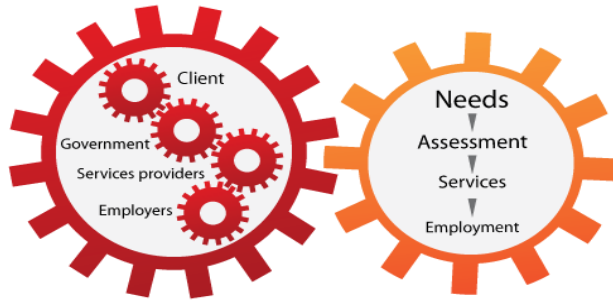
- Lack of information
- Misconceptions
- Confidence and motivation

Lack of Information: A common theme at every stage of the pathway is the lack of access to reliable, relevant information. The consequences range from clients missing important training opportunities to employers not knowing that services and supports exist to offset costs associated with hiring social assistance clients. Participants felt that making information more accessible should be a critical part of any plan to improve employment outcomes.

Employer Misconceptions: These are beliefs that may have started as information issues, but have now hardened into “myths” within the community about “how things are.” For example, there is a common misconception among employers that employees with disabilities increase business costs and risk, even though studies show this to be false. Participants felt such myths could be dispelled through a dialogue between employers who have hired people with disabilities or Ontario Works clients and those who have not.

Confidence and Motivation: When traveling through the employment pathway, many clients say they feel confused and lost. They don’t know where the process is heading, what their role is or how they can make the most of opportunities that arise. Others talk about living with the stigma of being on social assistance and how it leaves them feeling depressed and powerless. Many clients say they would benefit greatly from having access to someone who could provide personal advice, encouragement and support. The idea of building a peer-support and mentorship network to provide such help was universally endorsed.

CCI was launched to test the effectiveness of micro-projects as a new and promising way to address these kinds of awareness and attitude issues. A micro-project is a highly-focused, short-term dialogue. The following diagram illustrates how they are supposed to work:



The orange gearwheel represents the employment pathway, with its various stages. The red gearwheel contains the various stakeholder groups that exist and interact along the pathway. They include clients, service providers, government officials and employers.

The micro-project is an approach to improve the quality of these relationships. A person-to-person exchange is believed to strengthen motivation, change behavior and improve how the pathway (orange gearwheel) works. Micro-projects improve movement along the pathway by resolving tensions in the relationships that result from lack of information, employer misconceptions and low motivation.

We already mentioned how these could be used to dispel employer myths. Some of our CCI projects tested this. They identified employers who have hired employees with disabilities and who could speak authoritatively about the benefits. We then brought these “champion employers” together with employers who had no such experience for a short, highly focused discussion of the issue.

The change in attitude was often striking. Hearing from the champion employers—and the Ontario Works or ODSP clients they had hired—was enough to convince many employers that they too should experiment with hiring persons with disabilities or Ontario Works clients. This, in turn, is supposed to make the red and orange gearwheels in the diagram mesh better, thus improving the employment pathway.

In our CCI discussions we took this one step further by considering ways to leverage this kind of success. We discussed what would happen if a community planning table—represented by the green gearwheel below—took responsibility for launching a series of micro-projects, say, to build a community-wide network of employers.

As the micro-projects progressed, we reasoned, more and more employers would become aware of the benefits of hiring social assistance clients. As their numbers grew, a network of employers would begin to form who were connected to the employment pathway through their participation in the micro-projects. The network members would naturally look to the planning table to manage their relationship with this new-found labour pool of Ontario Works and ODSP clients. As a result, the relationship between all three stakeholders—employers, clients and service providers—would be strengthened through the work of the planning table. The red and orange gearwheels, in turn, would mesh better.



In this model, the community planning table thus becomes the permanent host or “hub” for an ongoing series of micro-projects within the community. The planning table uses these projects to build a community network of employers who are informed and engaged, and which the table ultimately manages. We’ll return to this idea in Part Four of this report.

Part II: The Demonstration Projects

Overview of the Project

CCI was launched in early April and the evaluations of the micro-projects were completed by the end of July. Don Lenihan, Senior Associate from the Public Policy Forum, was the project facilitator and report writer; and Suzanne Gagnon, Director, Employment Community Dialogues and Micro Projects, acted as Project Manager. The project also benefited from the support and participation of several Ministry officials.⁶ We’ll refer to the group as a whole as “the Ministry team.”

When the project first began, seven communities agreed to participate, each of which was to undertake its own micro-project.⁷ These communities were approached because a number of the service providers and officials had also participated in the Roundtables process and were part of an already-formed planning table or had developed a strong network of service providers around employment services for social assistance clients.

The number eventually fell from seven to six, as Timmins was obliged to withdraw. Although the initial meeting with officials, service providers and employers seemed promising, the summer months proved too difficult a time to complete the project.

Each project began with an initial meeting between the Ministry team and the members of the table or network. The team outlined the ideas for the project, explained the concept of a micro-project, and then explored the level of interest among participants in launching one of their own.

⁶ This group included three staff members from the Strategic Policy & Outreach Unit, Ontario Disability Support Program Branch: Patti Redmond, Director; Morag York, Manager; and Abby Yadav, Senior Policy Advisor.

⁷ The communities were Toronto (Lawrence), Timmins, Peel, Hamilton, Peterborough, Kingston and Ottawa.

Each community was encouraged to focus on either employer networks or peer support networks. The facilitator then led a brainstorming session where ideas for a micro-project were proposed and discussed until an appropriate one was selected. The tables were asked to create a small working group of 4 – 6 people to lead their micro-project.

Although the design and format of each micro-project was different, there were important similarities between them. Apart from the planning and evaluation sessions, most of the micro-projects consisted of a single event,⁸ usually lasting from 2.5 – 3.5 hours and involving approximately 15 – 30 participants. These were mainly clients, employers and service providers depending on the focus of the project.

Project formats varied, but most included a combination of presentations by employers and/or clients and various forms of dialogue around the presentations, such as breakout groups, Q&A and facilitated plenary sessions. Notwithstanding their differences, the following goals were shared by most if not all of the micro-projects in the two theme areas:

Employer Networks

- To raise awareness within the business community that social assistance clients are ready, willing and able to work;
- To develop the “business case” for why hiring social assistance clients is a good business decision; and
- To show that service providers can provide the assistance employers need to make this work well.

Peer Support and Mentoring

- To gauge the interest and willingness of clients to participate in peer support and mentoring relationships;
- To test the impact of peer support on motivation; and
- To encourage clients to develop meaningful relationships with peers.

Each micro-project concluded with a two-part evaluation meeting. Part 1 included only the members of the working group. The facilitator led the discussion, guided by a list of questions that had been formulated by the Ministry team (see Appendix 2). Part 2 was open to anyone who attended the initial meeting. While for some of these meetings much of the network was reassembled, in others, only a few people participated.

The session began with a briefing on the project’s results by the working group. The facilitator then led a general discussion of what the table as a whole felt it could learn from the experience, how it might build on the project and whether there was a readiness to propose any next steps.

Part III: The Findings

This brings us to the findings from the micro-projects. Before beginning, we should note that Appendix 1 at the end of this report includes short summaries of each of the six micro-projects. We draw freely on them to support and illustrate the findings in this section. The bolded

⁸ Peterborough, which held three separate events, was an exception. See the project summary in the appendices.

questions are based on the evaluation questions used in the meetings. The original version of this list can be found in Appendix 2.

- **Did the micro-projects accomplish their objectives?**

With the exception of the Timmins group, which withdrew from the project for the reasons already given, we can say confidently that all six of the remaining projects met the project objectives described in Part Two.

For those that focused on employer networks, the micro-projects were an effective way to raise awareness within the business community and to develop the “business case” for why hiring clients is a good business decision. And, as we saw in the Peel session, employers were quick to recognize the benefits of working with the service providers, once they learned about the benefits this could bring.

On peer support and mentoring, the micro-projects left little doubt that most clients support the idea and would participate in such a program. Clients in the Kingston session made it very clear that motivation was a key concern. And when we met with a group of Ontario Works clients in Toronto who had been meeting as a support group for two years, they showed us the value that peer support can bring. In Peel we found that employers can quickly be drawn into a discussion of how mentoring programs can benefit their own organizations.

- **How much effort and what resources were required from working group members?**

Most working group members reported that their micro-project required a significant commitment of time, but also agreed that it was well worth the investment. There was also general agreement that the first time is the hardest. Once a project has been completed, it becomes a template for others so that the process is easier and faster the next time.

The Peterborough project was especially instructive here. The Working Group developed a set of four presentations, but then used them like a “road show” by giving the same presentations at three separate events, which worked very well.

Regarding resources, the projects are not costly. Other than staff time, the main resources required are relatively small. Working groups need a room in which to meet and to hold the event. They may wish to provide lunch or coffee to the participants and there may be some small transportation and child care costs for participants. From a business perspective, micro-projects provide a tangible increase in motivation that is likely to last for a significant period of time. It is a very good return on investment.

- **Was it important to have had a facilitator?**

Participants, working group members and the members of the planning tables agreed on the need for a facilitator at all stages of the process. At the initial meeting, which involved an introduction to the project and a brainstorming session to identify a micro-project, the facilitator helped the group understand the project, recognize project opportunities, and quickly turn the opportunities into a project concept. At the events, facilitation helped ensure the various parts of

the program were combined into a coherent whole that achieved one or two clear objectives. At the evaluation sessions, the facilitator focused attention on key questions and brought the learnings from other discussions to the table to help ensure that an overall plan was emerging on some of the key questions, such as whether micro-projects could be used more strategically by the planning tables in the future.

- **What important indicators from your project suggest that a more wide-scale use of micro-projects would lead to positive change?**

Appendix 2 contains a list of over a dozen such “positive changes,” ranging from reduced fears or anxieties among clients who participate in peer support programs to increased awareness among employers of the benefits of hiring social assistance clients. The micro-project summaries in Appendix 1 provide many examples of comments, commitments and actions that show such changes were common in the projects. These range from the participant testimonials in Toronto to commitments from employers in Ottawa to hire social assistance clients.

- **Overall, what evidence did you see in your micro-project that would suggest that a more ambitious use of micro-projects would lead to better employment outcomes?**

The strongest evidence of this comes from the clients and employers. Employers’ comments were positive and encouraging and most agreed to engage further in the hiring process, such as having a private conversation with service providers around hiring or mentoring. A number made firm commitments to hire.

Employers also praised the sessions for bringing their misconceptions to light and helping to correct them. Recognizing these misconceptions made them uncomfortable and they wanted to move beyond them.

Perhaps the most striking example of the impact these sessions had was the owner of Coffee Culture in Hamilton, who was transformed from a skeptical employer into a willing and eager client of an ODSP employment service agency in one meeting.

Employers were also appreciative of how much information they could receive about the employment system in just a few hours. In Hamilton, one expressed surprise when she heard that service providers with high levels of expertise were available to help her find the right employee to match her organization’s needs. The workshops in the Ottawa session introduced employers to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

Social assistance clients also learned things that changed their perspective. After listening to a presentation on how earnings from part-time work affects ODSP benefits, clients at the Kingston session noted in their evaluation forms that they felt far more informed because of the session.

Peer support and mentoring were especially well received. Where these topics were discussed and proposed, clients responded enthusiastically. At the Lighthouse session in Peterborough, they told the presenters that this kind of event that brought them together with peers and potential mentors made them feel that they “were not alone.” When the group of ODSP clients in Toronto heard how committed the members of the Ontario Works group were to one another and how deeply they had bonded, the ODSP

clients declared that they wanted a group of their own that would provide them with similar peer support.

Service providers had their own reasons for calling the micro-projects a success. At the evaluation meeting in Hamilton, they said it gave them a glimpse of how much easier their jobs could become if there were an informed and cohesive network of employers in their community that was aware of the role service providers play and confident of their ability to find the right employee for them.

When we asked the members of the planning tables, whether their Table would do more micro-projects, the answer was affirmative or a qualified affirmative in all six cases. In Peterborough and Kingston, for example, they said that having a tool like this was extremely useful. It not only allowed them to connect with clients and employers, but to collaborate across their own organizational boundaries in new and constructive ways.

- **Did your planning table exist before CCI or were the people at the first CCI meeting brought together for that purpose?**

Most of the communities in the project did have formally constituted planning tables including service providers funded through Employment Ontario, OW and ODSP whose members were meeting regularly before CCI was launched.

- **Do you think your table should/will continue to meet now that the micro-project is over?**

All the communities reported that their planning table would continue meeting. Members were interested in linking the approach of micro-projects to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' (MTCU) Local Employment Planning Councils.

- **Has your planning table used the micro-project approach in the past?**

Although the micro-project concept is a simple enough, the planning tables tended to receive it as novel and experimental. Some reported having held job fairs and information sessions or experimented with mentoring, but the idea of using person-to-person dialogue to focus strategically on "information and attitudinal" issues seemed to add something new.

The small number of people involved in micro-projects and the open dialogue format for a kind of personal rapport to develop between the participants and even personal bonding. For service providers, this is extremely important. When it comes to getting employers to take a chance on hiring a client, this kind of personal contact can make the difference between success and failure.

The Peel event was a good illustration. The group was small enough—about 25 people—that when champion employers offered heartfelt testimonies about their experiences as mentors, the employers who were hearing this for the first time were genuinely moved by the discussion and became personally engaged in the dialogue. As a result, there was a real openness to getting more involved with the service providers.

- **Did the micro-projects contribute to greater collaboration between service providers in your community?**

Virtually all the working groups noted that the project required them to engage other organizations from their planning table and their community more directly and constructively than they usually do. They also saw this as a very positive experience. In Kingston, a working group member reported receiving one of the biggest personal benefits from her participation in the project. In Peterborough, the table members said they plan to use the findings from the micro-projects to develop a plan to guide more collaborative work with community partners.

- **Does your planning table view micro-projects as a potentially important tool for the future and, if so, for what purposes?**

In the evaluation sessions, this question was discussed at length. Firstly, working group members agreed that micro-projects are an important tool. Their strength is that they concentrate effort on a specific set of issues and participants, remain disciplined in their approach and yield quick results. But there is potentially a much bigger picture.

Almost everyone involved in CCI saw its two central themes—peer support and employer engagement—as promising and positive initiatives that could make a significant contribution to strengthening the employment pathway and improving employment outcomes. So why not use micro-projects to build a community-wide peer support program or employer network?

The idea seemed like a natural to everyone, but it also raised challenges. This would be a major undertaking for any major community and almost certainly couldn't be carried out by a single organization. A collective effort would be needed.

One option discussed was that a planning table as a whole should take this on and all of its members should work on the project together as a team. While there were questions about how this would work, the idea was endorsed in principle by almost everyone who participated in the evaluation sessions. The benefits were clear.

The existence of peer support activities would help ensure that clients are better informed on how the system works. It would also build morale and motivate them to make their way along the various stages of the employment pathway.

As employers talked to one another about the benefits of hiring social assistance clients, the myths around hiring clients would be dissolved and employers would inform one another of the helpful role played by service providers. A service provider network made up of MTCU- and MCSS-funded agencies where employers could post jobs and receive a list of qualified candidates within a few business days would save them time and money.

With a larger network of employers to draw from, there would be a greater diversity of opportunities and greater likelihood of finding a position that would fit such clients. We'll return to this below.

Several challenges around building and maintaining such a network were raised. One focused on how the Ministry currently funds training and job searches and how service providers report on what they do.

Suppose a client is registered with a particular service provider who provides training and helps the client search for a job, but eventually concludes that he/she cannot find an appropriate employment opportunity for the client. Ideally, the service provider would hand the client off to another organization that has other networks that might contain the right opportunity.

However, as a number of service providers noted, in at least some cases the first organization would lose any credit for the work already performed and the full credit would go to the second organization. Where this is the case—and there was some uncertainty how broadly this applies—the reporting and funding practices may deter real collaboration.

There was wide agreement that, where this is the rule, it needs to be revisited and revised to allow the credit to be shared. **Ministries could review their funding and reporting practices to ensure that they do not act as disincentives or barriers to collaboration among service providers at the community level.**

Another issue was the need for some kind of single-window approach. In the Hamilton micro-project event, the invited employers were pleased to learn about the role service providers could play to identify appropriate candidates for employment. But when the employers asked who they should call on for the service, there was an awkward silence.

A number of not-for-profit and for-profit organizations are in the field. Are some better than others? How would the employers know? Who gets to say? **This led to a discussion of the need for some kind of “single window” approach that would give employers a single point of contact with all service providers.**

A third issue involved the use of and access to a service provider network. Suppose the members of a planning table agreed to collaborate to build a community-wide network. Would any member of the group be free to draw on the network at any time and for any purpose? If so, might some organizations take unfair advantage of the resource, perhaps benefiting from it in a way that is disproportionate to the effort they invested in helping to build it?

During some of the evaluation sessions, this third issue led the discussion back to the single-window option. If there were a single-window approach, some kind of office or secretariat would be needed to manage its operations. Who would take this on? One suggestion was that the planning table could create such an office and hire someone to perform these services on its behalf. Hamilton’s AbleWorks is a good example of effective employment service provider network. The table would then act as a kind of board of directors for this office.

Moreover, this “centralized” unit could also be a “gatekeeper” so that individual service providers would have to pass through it to access the network. This would help ensure that such access conformed to protocols. Finally, to return to the discussion of “hard cases,” this office would be much better positioned than any single service provider to match hard cases with real employment opportunities.

As these reflections suggest, the task of building community-wide peer-support activities or a community-wide service provider network would require a new level of organization and collaboration. This, in turn, would likely involve formalizing membership in the planning table

and possibly even incorporating it as a body able to create a single-window office and to provide oversight and accountability for it.

Notwithstanding the challenges, all of the evaluation sessions expressed strong support for the idea of using the community tables and micro-dialogues to build community-wide employer networks and peer-support programs.

Part IV: Next Steps

A Second Stage of CCI

The findings from the CCI suggest a number of recommendations that would allow the Ministry to build on the project's successes and continue to advance the work it has started.

The CCI showed that micro-projects can be a highly effective and affordable way to encourage employer engagement in the recruitment and hiring of people with disabilities and to provide motivational support for clients of the system.

- 1. It is recommended that the Ministry continue to support the use of micro-projects for these purposes in communities across the province.**

The experience in the six communities further suggests that the benefits of these micro-projects could be significantly leveraged through the development of *community-wide* employer networks and peer support programs. The building of these networks and programs could be initiated through a second phase of the CCI, which would involve six communities in multi-year demonstration projects to achieve three primary goals:

- a) Build a series of community-wide employer networks or peer-support programs that could demonstrate the benefits for the delivery of employment supports;*
- b) Help transform participating service provider networks into more cohesive and effective planning tables; and*
- c) Provide a model or roadmap to help other communities achieve these same goals.*

- 2. It is recommended that a second stage of CCI be considered to test the effectiveness of micro-projects as tools to build community-wide employer and peer-support and mentorship programs.**

The pilot suggests that micro-projects can help service-provider networks strengthen and/or formalize their associations within individual communities. Building a community-wide network or program would involve them in an intense effort at joint planning and action, which could greatly strengthen their capacity for collaboration.

- 3. It is recommended that the proposed second stage of CCI also use the demonstration projects to transform community networks/tables into more cohesive and effective planning tables.**

In our discussions with the planning tables/networks, it was recognized that building a community-wide program is a far more challenging task than carrying out individual micro-projects, as was the case in CCI. This second stage of CCI would raise a range of new issues, such as how to sort roles and responsibilities or how to design a single-window access point for

a community-wide employment network or peer-support program. The demonstration projects would allow the six communities to work through these issues together and to capture the learning from their experiences in a “roadmap” that could be used by other communities in the future.

- 4. It is recommended that the second stage of CCI also aim to produce a roadmap to guide other networks/tables in the planning and development of community-wide initiatives.**

A Preliminary Planning Phase

When the idea of a second stage for CCI was discussed during the evaluation sessions, the participants talked about the need for a **planning framework** to serve as a guide for developing plans for demonstration projects. Such a framework would help ensure consistency across communities in the nature of the projects and the funding requests submitted to the Ontario government. It was widely agreed that the province should consider providing support for a second phase; and that this phase be preceded by a **preliminary planning phase** to create such a framework.

If supported, the next phase could include four of the communities involved in the initial stage of CCI to ensure the learning from these experiences is fully integrated into the project. In addition, two new communities could be added to broaden its scope.

The framework would provide participating communities with guidelines to develop a project proposal that reflects their circumstances. At the same time, it would allow the Ministry to clarify its objectives and requirements for approval and funding.

- 5. It is recommended that the Ministry provide funding for this preliminary planning phase to develop a planning framework to help communities conceive and design possible projects for the proposed second stage.**

Conclusion

The Connecting Communities Initiative shows that dialogue focused on a narrow set of issues, with a small number of people, can yield quick results. The first conclusion of this report is thus that **micro-projects should be used as a standard tool to help communities solve certain kinds of issues.**

In addition, we believe that, when combined with planning tables, the micro-project approach can be leveraged to achieve bigger goals. For example, it can be used to build community-wide employer networks, peer-support programs or enhance cohesion of community planning tables. The second conclusion is therefore that **micro-projects have a strategic potential that is largely unrecognized, let alone exploited.**

Finally, a recurring theme in our discussion was how micro-projects might even transform planning tables into an instrument that would provide special value to the Ministry as a policy development tool. Although this was not tested by the Connecting Communities Initiative, the reasoning behind it is not hard to see.

Such planning tables could become more cohesive and effective planning bodies that address community-based issues and, in the process, become skilled at serving as clearing houses of ideas, strategies, needs and options in their areas of expertise.

This would make these tables an authoritative and influential voice on their community's needs, priorities, capacity and opportunities. As such, they could serve as a critical channel for informed, bottom-up policy advice to the Ministry that could help enhance service alignment—and that, in turn, would be a huge benefit if it were expanded across the province.

Appendix 1: Summaries of the Micro-Projects List cities by alphabetical order

Hamilton

The main event for the Hamilton micro-project was held on July 24th and lasted three hours. The topic was Employer Networking. About 20 people participated. Three “champion employers” who had hired social assistance clients shared their experiences with other “invited employers,” that is, those who had no such experience.

In addition, two service providers explained how their organizations help a prospective employer find a candidate that will meet their needs and expectations, as well as providing other kinds of support and information.

Champion employers included Money Mart, LaPiazza and Orlick. Invited employers included Homewood Suites, Coffee Cultures and Bank of Montreal. Other participants included municipal and provincial officials and service providers.

The event opened with a video presentation that interviewed a champion employer and employees who were ODSP clients. The video was well received. Each of the three champion employers then spoke for a few minutes about their experiences. This was followed by Q&A from the invited employers. Lastly, there was a facilitated roundtable discussion, which went on for an hour.

During these exchanges, Money Mart told the invited employers how important it was to understand the services/supports that are available to businesses who are considering hiring a social assistance client. Most businesses are unaware of the level of expertise that is available, as well as other supports, such as wage subsidies. The representative had hired three social assistance clients in the last six months.

The owner of LaPiazza (a high end restaurant) was an enthusiastic advocate who said the business case for hiring clients was very strong. He used to use regular recruitment methods but now that he uses ODSP clients, he relies on the service providers to find the right candidates for him. As a result, he saves lots of time and money when hiring, his training costs are lower and staff turn-over is way down. There has also been a very positive impact on the work culture. Other employees work very well with the ODSP recruits and, indeed, have been inspired by them. He has now hired 5 people through one of the service providers.

Coffee Culture is a small firm with 19 employees. The owner described his difficulties in finding reliable people and retaining them. He uses typical recruitment practices: resumes, interviews, reference checks, and so on. He has a high turn-over and has concerns about his employees' public relations skills.

The service providers said they could work with him to identify his needs and then help him with recruitment by pre-screening candidates. At first, the employer was skeptical, but as the

discussion proceeded, the champion employers talked to him about their experiences and the service providers explained how they work with clients.

This turned out to be a remarkable demonstration of the value of micro-projects. Because there was a small number of people in the room, it was possible to explore his concerns in some detail, explain how they could be addressed, and slowly bring him along on the idea of experimenting with an ODSP employee. Encouragement and testimony from the champion employers was a critical factor. In the end, the employer agreed to enter into further discussions with the service providers and said he was willing to try this approach.

In the end, three employers said they were ready to place job orders through the job developers at the meeting that day.

Kingston

Peer support and mentoring was the topic for the Kingston micro-project. The main event was held on May 1st from 1:00pm – 2:30 pm and involved about 25 people, including 14 ODSP participants, two peer mentors and several service providers and case workers. There was also a facilitator.

Participants were recruited through a flyer prepared by the working group and circulated by case workers. It invited clients to attend the session and hear from peers about the kind of supports available to clients; and from a case worker on the rules around working and be on ODSP at the same time. The response from clients was very encouraging.

Once they arrived, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form before the event and another one after it so the Working Group could assess the difference between participants' expectations and how they felt the event actually went.

The facilitator opened the meeting by discussing the purpose and role of a *mentor* and of *peer* relationships between clients.

A case worker followed with a presentation on the rules around part-time work while receiving ODSP benefits. Clients were remarkably attentive during the presentation and reported on their evaluation forms that they appreciated hearing about the details around the subject and felt encouraged to learn that they couldn't make less by working.

Participants then broke into two groups for discussion. Each group was led by a mentor and a service provider. At the end of the table discussions, the two mentors reported back to the whole group on the discussions at their tables. Their reports included the following points:

Table 1: The discussion focused mainly on motivation and supports. People talked about the importance of positive thinking and keeping a good attitude, even though this can be hard. It is important to find ways to support this. Working with the service providers was seen as a big help. The idea of a peer support network was also warmly received. Developing and maintaining self-esteem, said the participants, is essential, and this could really help.

Table 2: Table 2 discussed several issues of concern to clients, including the importance of choosing the right service provider and maintaining motivation. Like Table 1, having the right service providers was seen as essential. Volunteering was discussed as a good way of easing

back into employment, taking the first steps. Participants strongly endorsed the proposal for peer support and mentoring opportunities.

In wrapping up, the facilitator noted that in last summer's client discussions participants said they weren't motivated, something in the system was not helping them; one of most important things was the chance to talk to peers who have been through it.

A participant responded that this was the first time she attended a government meeting that didn't try to instill fear into her. In coming to the meeting she said she realized that it's not just a matter of "do it or lose it." "You're offering us help and hope at the right time—when I'm ready."

Comparison of the pre/post-evaluation forms clearly showed that participants felt their knowledge of employment services and mentorship improved. They indicated a high level of motivation to find work and a willingness to take advantage of peer opportunities.

Peel

The Peel micro-project focused on mentorship in the workplace. The main event was held on June 11, from 9:00 - 11:00 a.m. The session opened with a video of the Honourable David C. Onley on hiring people with a disability.⁹

The video was followed by presentations from employers who have identified a staff person to act as a mentor and their mentees. The plan was to give the invited participants an opportunity to meet business leaders who have experience hiring people with disabilities and to hear about the positive business case of such a model. It reduces recruitment and training cost while building leadership skills in another employee.

The group then engaged in a facilitated discussion around the topic and presentations.

About 25 people attended the event, including:

- Five Invited Employers: Princess Auto, BUP Security Services, Dean & Associate Accounting, Pam Ten Creative minds, Green, Meikle & Smith Chartered Accountants
- Three Employer Mentors and Mentees: Harvey's, Sodexo General Manager, Dependable IT Manager,
- Several community agencies, MCSS and the facilitator

Overview of Mentorship Matters Program

People with disabilities are often overlooked in the fierce competition for career opportunities due to negative self-image, community stereotypes and general negative beliefs or assumptions about their abilities.

Mentoring has a proven track record of success, especially for young people considered to be at-risk. Mentoring has helped at-risk or vulnerable people improve outcomes related to job skills, motivation and self-esteem, friendship, communication and assertiveness skills, problem solving and decision making, conflict resolution and resiliency.

⁹ The video can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRHnlyJl0dg>.

Community Living Burlington's Mentoring Matters program promoted personal and professional skills that lead to paid employment for three participants who have a developmental disability over the course of just six months. In partnership with 5 community employers, 5 mentorship relationships were created tracking more than 450 mentorship hours.

Harvey's rep and mentee spoke about the benefits of mentoring in the workplace. Having a mentor in the workplace instills acceptance of the new hire from the start of employment. It doesn't take more time to mentor. The general manager has indicated that the mentorship program is working very well and is interested in hiring more individuals under this model. The program helps the business because the client takes pride in what they do and in doing a good job.

Employer Testimonial

The mentor from Sodexo said he began hiring persons with disabilities because he thought it was the "right thing" to do. He quickly realized that it also makes good business sense. People with disabilities are top performers within the company. They take up less of the employer's time because compared with other employees, they always show up on time, never call in sick, have no attitude problems, and create no dramas. Their strong work ethic also spreads to other employees and all staff members feel more engaged.

The ODSP client who works for Sodexo described how happy he was with his job and indicated he does a great job and takes pride in his work. Approximately 10% of employees working at Sodexo have a disability.

An employer spoke about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, especially with the assistance of an ODSP Employment Supports service provider. The service provider understands the profile of the person the company requires and connects the employer with the right individual. Sometimes training or assistive devices may be necessary in order to properly set the client up with the tools they need to succeed in the job. In such cases, the service provider helps ensure the client and employer have what they need and the placement is successful.

Hiring people with disabilities is not just about good corporate citizenship but it makes good business sense to building a better, more inclusive workplace. Employers are not hiring these types of individuals because they have a disability but because they are dependable and positive.

A discussion question was posed by the facilitator: As a result of the presentations, do you now feel more inclined to hire someone with a disability? The following are highlights from the responses:

- very informative session
- this has been an eye opener
- good to hear from other employers
- see this as a huge transition for our company
- first introduction to the idea, never thought of this before
- learned so many things I did not know before
- concern around how much it will cost
- as employers, we need to change our mindset
- very educational session, speaks volumes to you as a company

- would like to see more proactive promoting of this to employers because many are not aware of this

A second question was posed: Are any of the employers in the room prepared to take the next step and have service providers connect with you to discuss your hiring needs? Two employers replied as follows:

- Yes, our company will move to the next stage.
- As a company that is growing, I'm now asking myself, 'Why not try this?' So, yes, we'll have the discussion.

Peterborough

Peterborough's micro-project focused on providing peer support and mentoring. First, the working group assembled four peer support workers who were willing to share their stories before groups of clients, followed by a Q&A period. Unlike the other projects, the working group decided to repeat the presentations for three separate groups at three different locations, including:

- The Youth Emergency Shelter on June 18th with homeless youth.
- Brock Mission on June 24th with about 30 homeless men
- The Lighthouse on June 25th with 18 social assistance recipients

The sessions opened with a brief introduction to frame the conversation: The purpose of the event was to share stories about successes and challenges, local labour market challenges, and navigating the social assistance system. In the Q&A, the mentors said they wanted to hear from the clients about the barriers they face in the system when trying to find employment. The mentors then told their stories, with the following highlights:

The first speaker said he went on ODSP because he had become ill. He talked about the challenges he faced in navigating the system and how it inspired him to pursue a career in human services. "Sometimes a problem shared is a problem solved," he said.

The second mentor said he'd used volunteering to help with his recovery and noted that one placement turned into a part-time job. He described the various employment-related social assistance benefits available to clients and shared stories about the joys of working: it gave him purpose, helped with his social network, and his personal development/growth.

A third mentor talked about how commitment to life-long learning helped with problems around self-esteem, mental health management and stress. The first step was getting healthy and talking to doctors. He got into peer support to help shift societal views on mental health. He attended a workshop on building interview skills and then began volunteering for the host organization. The volunteer position turned into a relief position, which then turned into much more work.

The final mentor described how she reached out for help when she suspected mental illness but didn't get the help she needed. As a result, she decided to enter human services to help make sure other people never feel the way she did when she asked for help. Working has built confidence in the system. We need a great support system to succeed, she said. "Be the change you want to see in the world."

In the Q&A that followed, the mentors asked the clients at the three different sessions about the barriers they face in getting a job. The following bullets are highlights from these sessions.

Youth Emergency Shelter Session

- When moving towards employment or school many factors/barriers were brought up in this session:
 - Affordable childcare
 - Housing
 - Transition from work to college
 - Family unstable due to requirement of having child living in the house or else their social support gets reduced; brought up when recipient spoke about moving away to pursue education (feelings of being trapped by the system)
 - Criminal record checks- expensive to remove
 - Credit checks (affects employment as well as schooling)
 - Fear of debts- Lack of knowledge surrounding this area could be causing some alarm
 - Life situation affecting amount of money received by loan (OSAP) even if person in the situation has no intention to contribute any money towards recipient's schooling payments
 - Literacy levels
 - Transportation
 - Resume issues regarding sending them out via internet
 - Lack of self-marketing skills
 - Shorter workshops to accommodate people who move around a lot
- Problems (housing, addiction, financial, etc.) with being secure enough to benefit from utilizing employment services
- Lack of space in safe beds voiced
- Barriers regarding getting out to services
- Working up confidence
- Financial issues
- Traveling
- Basic needs not met to feel secure enough to approach services
- People with different goals connecting to live together (combining ODSP/Ontario Works income)
- Perpetuating the cycle of encountering barriers, e.g. parties, substance use, hoarders, etc.
- The need for a transitional peer network involving housing arrangements was briefly discussed
- Benefits of having a rent-to-own accommodation and affordable housing directed at people in transitional stages of life were discussed
- Location was a hot topic that came up. Not having access to jobs and social services can be a large barrier in finding employment or seeking education
- Minimum wage was brought up as an issue. Participant hypothetically stated “am I going to be better off staying on social assistance?” when speaking to the minimum wage in Ontario.
- Lack of meaningful work opportunities is a source of hopelessness
- Central information hub could be beneficial to help navigate systems (Peer network could advocate on their behalf and speak to the navigation of systems)

- Handling stress from current situation or circumstance can hinder ability to navigate systems

Brock Mission Session

At the Mission, homeless men also talked about barriers they faced when seeking employment, including these ones:

- Making phone calls and receiving messages
- Limited access to computers (for resumé's, emails and job searches)
- Stigma of being homeless and living in a shelter makes employers very reluctant to hire
- Shelter services can be counter-productive in regards to recovery if mixed in with active users
- Wait times for psychiatric counseling is an issue. Stuck in the cycle of using-quitting and repeating this without ever getting to the root of the problem.

The Lighthouse Session

- Burn out was an issue. Burning out while on the job and losing employment, then not bouncing back quick enough to return to previous position. Loss of hope in the system stemming from this breakdown in employee management.
- Not being heard was brought up from the perspective of a service provider. Asking for help but not being responded to when voicing concerns was a recurring theme. Peer outreach was briefly suggested and participants spoke positively about the potential of a peer support implementation in this regard
- Stigma in the work place. Being let go for becoming unwell, or being judged by a diagnosis
- Transportation. Bus schedules conflict with job start times.
- Access to companies simply willing to give a break to someone who may have made some mistakes in the past. Resume gaps, dated education, lack of references, etc.
- Overwhelming response that the type of work we did that day (peer to peer) as well as a future possibility of continued contact through peer support would be beneficial in moving forward

When participants were asked whether the presentation helped them, they offered the following comments:

- We are not alone
- Jobs can happen
- Confidence boost
- Good info exchange
- Never giving up when seeking a job
- Hearing the peer stories was a source of hope and inspiration
- Everybody needs respect
- Appreciative of the real and honest approach regarding presentation
- Knowing that peers care
- Hope regarding stigma and awareness of the barriers and how to overcome them
- Informative and gave ideas for personal use
- Put your mind to it
- Helps to keep spirits up

- Happy to be heard by people who are involved in the system

Ottawa

The Ottawa micro-project brought employers and clients together for an exchange of views and an opportunity to pose questions about hiring practices and opportunities. It was also used to inform employers on their responsibilities under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and to provide some practical training for clients in presenting themselves to employers. The main event was on June 19th and had two main parts:

- Part A included two separate learning events: one for employers and one for ODSP clients
- Part B allowed for client–employer conversations.

Part A: The AODA Learning Session for Employers

Employers received a presentation on AODA, which seeks to create an accessible Ontario by 2025. Accessibility standards have been developed for five key areas of daily living: customer service, information and communications, employment, transportation and built environment. Employers were introduced to the **Accessibility Compliance Wizard, a voluntary and anonymous online tool that tells employers what they have to do to comply with Ontario's accessibility law.** They also received a demonstration of the AODA wizard (online) and how easy it is to use. The goal was to give employers a list and timelines for what they need to do to comply with the AODA

Part A: Creating Your Personal Brand: A workshop for ODSP clients

Clients heard about the importance and how to create a personal brand to look for work.

Part B: The Client–Employer Conversations

This session allowed representatives from four businesses—Delta Hotels, the City of Ottawa, Scotiabank, Enterprise Holdings and the Public Service Commission Government of Canada—to interact with clients. The format was modeled on World Café.

Groups of three to five employers were seated at three separate tables. Groups of clients rotated from table to table. The topic at each table was:

- ODSP – changes that affect you where ODSP case workers presented the financial supports available and impact of earnings on the monthly ODSP financial assistance,
- You Asked –We'll Answer: employers provided candid response on any topics clients wanted to be addressed, and:
- Creating Your Self-Brand: clients applied the learnings from the workshop on Creating Your Brand and met with an employer to discuss and receive comments on their brand.

Clients and employers alike were very positive about the impact of the micro-project. Clients felt their job searching skills had been enhanced. Concrete feed-back were given on their branding, contacts with employer had been made; they were more at ease with applying for a job on-line. Overall, clients left hopeful and encouraged.

Employers had a positive experience. It was good for them to hear of the clients' challenges. An employer shared that they judge if their time is well invested in an event if at least 10% of the

individuals/clients seen convert into. They appreciated the concept of micro-project because it is easier to be away for a short period of time and provide the opportunity to build relationship.

Micro-project was an approach that the Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN) would add to their regular activities. It would have specific focus such as training opportunities, employment in the private sector, in the public and non-profit sector, etc.

Toronto

A group of 8 Ontario Works clients participating in an Advisory Group (CAG) for the last 2 years met with ODSP clients to discuss their experience with CAG as well as the benefit this peer activity has had in their life and employment search. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years of age. Some were single, married, had children, no children, were Caucasians or from different ethnic groups, had postsecondary education or a high school diploma. The members of the group had different interests. The ODSP clients had indicated an interest in establishing a similar peer group.

CAG participants used a PowerPoint presentation to pose questions where one or more of them would give a very honest and heartfelt response of their impression. None of the responses had been scripted ahead of time. The CAG members demonstrated an amazing cohesion as a group. They were candid on sharing the strength in their diversity, how they had learned from each other and how they could share their learning with their broader community. They managed a few difficult conversations in a very respectful way.

Originally, CAG was established to give customer feedback on the services provided at their Ontario Works location. They were soon impressed that their ideas were implemented. They would learn about different topics of interest to be shared with their broader community. Four management staff (supervisors) facilitated the discussions and established in collaboration with the participants some guidelines such as to respect diversity, maintain confidentiality, open and welcome all comments, and evaluate on a yearly basis.

CAG provided an alternative to their worker. Participants received information on the OW program and topic such as child care, nutrition, Alzheimer, pension, etc. This provided them with a greater sense of control over their situation. They learned to listen without judging. CAG participants had many of the "soft skills" employers are looking for.

After the presentation, an ODSP Manager facilitated a conversation with the ODSP clients to gauge their interest in coming to a subsequent meeting to discuss establishing a peer group. All of the nine ODSP clients signed up for the next meeting.

Appendix 2: Evaluation Framework for the Connecting Communities Initiative (CCI)

Overview of the Project and its Objectives

The Connecting Communities Initiative was launched to test the effectiveness of *micro-projects* as a way to improve employment outcomes for social assistance clients, especially persons with disabilities.

Micro-projects are small, highly focused, short-term interventions. The concept emerged from two earlier MCSS projects in 2013: The Employment-focused Working Group Roundtables and the Client Discussions on Social Assistance. In both projects, stakeholders suggested that focused dialogue sessions between different combinations of players from the employment pathway—i.e. employers, clients, employment and community service providers and government/municipal officials—could strengthen relationships in ways that would quickly and significantly improve motivation to generate employment outcomes.

The CCI was designed to test this idea. It began with seven communities, each of which planned to undertake its own micro-project. This number has now fallen to six, as one community withdrew.

Each project began with an initial meeting of employment service providers and officials from the community. These groups were asked to choose between one of two “relationship-building strategies” for their project: **peer support** and **employer networks**. They were then asked to create a small working group of 4 – 6 people to lead their micro-project.

The seven projects in CCI will test the effectiveness of micro-projects on four key points:

- Engaging employers in providing employment opportunities through **employer networks**;
- Providing new forms of personal support for clients on the pathway through **peer support**;
- Improving coordination between service providers through **community tables**; and
- Looking to community tables as an informed source of advice to the Ministry on **policy innovation**.

The CCI will conclude with a final report written by the facilitator that will consolidate the learnings from the project and evaluate its success with respect to these four objectives.

Evaluation Methodology

Using micro-projects to reform the Social Assistance system in ways that will significantly improve employment opportunities would be a major undertaking. Given the small number of projects in the CCI and the short timelines to carry it out, expectations for the project are modest. Principally, we are looking for early indicators that the approach improved collaboration, attitudes about employment, hiring social assistance clients, and/or employment outcomes for social assistance clients.

For each of the six micro-projects, four basic approaches will be used to gather information to evaluate individual micro-projects, as well as the CCI as a whole, which include:

1. Observations by the facilitator over the course of the project
2. Notes from all the sessions
3. A questionnaire to be filled out by working group members and participants
4. A final three-hour evaluation meeting in each of the communities that will be divided in two parts: 1) a session with working group members; and 2) a session with members of the original group of service providers and officials who attended the first meeting

The discussions and questionnaires will be based on the following framework of indicators and questions:

Framework of Discussion Questions and Indicators

Questions about the Micro-Project for the Working Groups

- Did the micro-project accomplish its objectives?
- How much effort was required from working group members?
- What resources were needed?
- Was it important to have had a facilitator?
- Can you cite any important indicators from your project that suggest that a more wide-scale use of micro-projects would lead to the following changes:
 - For Clients:
 - Increased awareness of social assistance programs and services
 - Increased desire to seek and use information on employment programs and services
 - Reduced fear or anxiety through peer support programs
 - Increased motivation to seek out employment opportunities
 - Increased willingness among clients to support one another in preparing for and finding employment
 - Increased numbers of clients with jobs *they* regard as quality employment
 - For Employers:
 - Increased awareness of the benefits of hiring SA clients
 - A more open attitude to hiring ODSP or OW clients
 - Increased awareness of the support programs available to employers who engage SA clients
 - Increased interest in or willingness to engage with service providers who can help employers identify clients that meet their employment needs
 - Increased awareness of the employment pathway and employers' role in making it work
 - Increased awareness of the existence of the community network/table of service providers and officials
 - Increased willingness to act as advocates to encourage other employers to hire SA clients

- Overall, what evidence did you see in your micro-project that would suggest that a more ambitious use of micro-projects would lead to better employment outcomes?
- Do you feel that the investment/effort for the micro-project was worth it? Why or why not?

Questions for the Table/Network

- Did your community network/table exist before CCI or were the people at the first CCI meeting brought together for that purpose?
- Do you think this network should/will continue to meet now that the micro-project is over?
- Has your community network/table used the micro-project approach in the past?
- How does the table/network view the results of the initiative?
- As members of the network/table, do you regard micro-projects as a potentially important tool to:
 - strengthen your network; and/or
 - engage clients and employers in ways that will lead to a better employment outcomes?
- Is there any evidence that micro-projects would contribute to greater collaboration between service providers in your community?
- What changes could be made at the policy level to encourage this?
- How, if at all, might the existence of this table be used to improve your working relationship with the Ministry?

Questions to Assess the Value of Community Networks/Tables for Policy Innovation

- Should the ministry continue to support micro-projects?
- What role could they play in the ministry's overall plans to transform social assistance?
- What steps could the ministry take to support the development of community tables/networks?
- Could the approach/model be exported to other communities?
 - If yes, how would this happen?