



# Alleviating Homelessness: WISE Research Summary

# Introduction

The Alleviating Homelessness: WISE Research project, funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), is being led by the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet), in partnership with Social Enterprise Toronto (SET) and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). Appendix A provides further details on the partners involved and their key roles in the planning and implementation of this project. This document provides a brief summary of the project's overall objectives and design. The project's full evaluation framework is available on request.

## Project background

### Need for Research

Although a substantial amount of literature has examined separately effective practices in addressing homelessness and effective practices among social enterprises, there is an emerging body of international literature that is exploring the emerging role that social enterprises can play in providing individuals with complex needs with employment opportunities.

Aligning with this evidence, a body of research has emerged with respect to the ways in which social enterprises can be tailored to support homeless populations (see Teasdale 2010). For example, a 2013 study by Social Impact Consulting surveying 53 work integration social enterprises (WISEs) supporting homeless individuals into employment in the United Kingdom indicated that WISEs may provide a promising means to sustainably support homeless individuals with complex needs into employment. However, there is still currently relatively little rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of social enterprises for homeless populations and on which models are most effective.

This project aims to provide important evidence on the role that WISEs can play in alleviating homelessness by directly estimating the impact of a variety of social enterprise models among a group of participants who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness in terms of their employment, housing, and well-being, as well as its impact on the relationships between these outcomes.

**What is a social enterprise?** Social enterprises are organizations that produce goods and services for the market economy and that manage their operations and redirect their surpluses to achieve social and environmental goals. Social enterprise activity gives public benefit organizations an alternate source of funds to better fulfill their mandates (SEOntario).

**What is a WISE?** A work integration social enterprise or WISE is regarded as a subset of social enterprises that have a social mission to directly support vulnerable community members who are facing exclusion from the labour market (ESDC). WISEs will involve these individuals in producing and selling goods or services, most often in a paid capacity with the objective of supporting their integration into the work environment and society. WISEs generally have one of two long-term goals: to provide individuals with secure, stable employment within the organization or to support them in being employed in the labour market. (O'Connor & Meinhard, 2014).

## Purpose of the study

The Alleviating Homelessness: WISE Research is the first study of its kind in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Its main purpose is to provide longitudinal data to identify the effectiveness of WISEs and compare them with other interventions for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It will identify the impact of WISEs on outcomes such as employment and housing stabilization, as well as the returns for government investment in these types of WISEs. Finally, it will identify effective practices to maximize impacts for several models of training under various circumstances.

**How is homelessness defined?** Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012).

**What does at risk of homelessness mean?**

Although not technically homeless, this includes individuals or families whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, and so are considered to be at risk of homelessness. They are living in housing that is intended for permanent human habitation. However, as a result of external hardship, poverty, personal crisis, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, insecurity of tenure and / or the inappropriateness of their current housing residents may be 'at risk' of homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012).

The five-year study will involve a selection of WISEs in the GTA who train and/or employ individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The WISEs will be involved with recruiting participants, providing them with training and/or paid employment, and provide them with other supports or referrals to other services during or after their intervention. Participants will be asked to complete survey and interviews for up to three years after the WISE intervention to track the impact that their participation had on a key set of outcomes measuring their employment and housing situation, as well as their overall well-being. Participant outcomes will be benchmarked against those of a comparison group of clients with a similar profile who will be recruited from partner community organizations.

## Project partners

**The Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet)** is a national member-led organization committed to strengthening Canadian communities. CCEDNet-Ontario brings considerable experience leading province-wide social enterprise research (2012 & 2015) and a history of infrastructure support linking SE intermediaries and sharing SE resources through SEontario.org. As project lead, CCEDNet will be responsible for managing the overall work plan and deliverables. This includes establishing agreements with organizations involved in the research, assembling the reference group, organizing reference group meetings and liaising with ESDC.

**Social Enterprise Toronto (SET)** is a member-led network of Work integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) for people who face barriers to employment in the Greater Toronto Area. Since 2006, SET has provided peer-to-peer learning and professional development opportunities, marketing support, research and policy engagement with government and sector stakeholders. SET will be supporting CCEDNet in project management as well engaging and supporting WISE partners in the research.

**Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC)** is recognized as a national leader in social research and experimentation. SRDC has a two-decade track record building a knowledge base and learning what works in social policy through the testing of new and innovative policy ideas in “real-world” settings. SRDC’s has a particular focus on evaluating new program ideas through pilot approaches before they become policy and/or are implemented on a broader scale.

**Toronto Enterprise Fund (TEF)** is a unique funding partnership of United Way Toronto and all three levels of government to provide annual operating grants to a portfolio of existing WISEs and seed funding to several start-ups each year. The SRDC research team is consulting with TEF about engaging their team of experienced community-based researchers to conduct the in-person interviews with participants.

**WISE Partners** The project will be establishing partnerships with five WISEs located in the Greater Toronto Area that support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness: Building Up, Gateway Linens, Destination Café, Hawthorne Food and Drink, and Loft Kitchen. WISE partners will recruit participants to engage in WISE training and/or employment. The research team will consult with the WISEs about their interested and capacity to engage in data collection activities during the course of the project, including engaging with participants who have left their organizations during the follow-up period. They will also provide feedback at all stages of the project through their involvement in the Reference Advisory Group, including the design of the research study, identification of data collection tools and ongoing engagement with participants.



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