

# Alleviating homelessness: Quasi-experimental study

FINAL REPORT

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Work Integration Social Enterprises Initiative

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## FOREWORD

This report has been a long time in the making.

Not just because a longitudinal study requires time. More so because Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) work integration social enterprise (WISE) longitudinal research program represents an important contribution to a long-standing evidence base on the impacts of social enterprise and the social economy in Canada that has lost some momentum – outside of Québec – since the end of the social economy research partnerships that were part of the 2004 federal social economy initiative.

I'd like to express sincere gratitude to Shawn de Raaf and the team at the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) for their flexibility and commitment to community-based research, to Allan Day for coordination of the project throughout, to Anne Jamieson, Alexis Kane Speer, Jessie Khan and the team of community researchers, to our WISE partners who stuck with the research despite the demands of running innovative small businesses during a pandemic; to the participants who shared their personal information, and to ESDC who supported the research over five years in thoughtful and engaging ways.

Everyone who was involved helped make this study successful, which was all the more challenging because of its ambitious approach in several regards. In addition to using a quasi-experimental design, the project:

- was strongly partnership-based and oriented towards sector strengthening by bringing together WISE practitioners, accomplished researchers from SRDC and community researchers with lived experience from the Toronto Enterprise Fund, and sector intermediaries Social Enterprise Toronto and the Canadian Community Economic Development Network;
- aimed to enhance the capacity of WISEs to strengthen their own participant follow-up and evaluation practices; and
- employed community researchers to collect data – people who had lived experiences similar to participants.

Over the five years of research, many adaptations were necessary, including changing the research design when comparison group data could not be obtained through administrative sources, and of course adjusting to the pandemic.

What we found offers an important window into the unique role WISEs play in transforming lives.

As Ashley Mathew of Building Up and Anne Jamieson of the United Way Greater Toronto said at the final meeting of research partners, this study adds to the evidence that successful businesses can be run with integrity and support people in a holistic way.

With social innovation, social finance, social enterprise, and the social and solidarity economy increasingly recognized as effective approaches to improving wellbeing for all people, this research couldn't come at a better time.

Michael Toye  
Executive Director  
Canadian CED Network

## INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the final activities of the Alleviating Homelessness: WISE Research project. The first study of its kind in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), this five-year research study was designed to provide a longitudinal examination of the effectiveness of work integration social enterprises (WISEs) in supporting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The study involved a quasi-experimental design to provide insights into the impact of the of WISEs on outcomes such as employment and housing stabilization, in comparison to other training and employment supports available to this population of job seekers. The project partnered with five WISEs and three community organizations in the GTA to compare employment and training models with the objective of identifying effective practices to support job seekers who currently are, or are at risk of, homelessness.

Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the project was led by the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) in partnership with Allan Day of the Social Enterprise Toronto (SET) and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), which was responsible for designing and conducting the evaluation of this project.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### 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.

The project team partnered with work integration social enterprises (WISEs) in the GTA who train and/or employ individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The WISEs were involved with recruiting participants for the research study among new or current employees. The WISEs provided the participants with training and/or paid employment, as well as connections to other supports or referrals to other services during or after their intervention. The participants were asked to complete an initial survey as well as follow-ups for three years to track a key set of outcomes measuring their employment and housing situation, as well as their overall well-being. The outcomes of the WISE participants were benchmarked against those of a

comparison group of clients with a similar profile who have been recruited from partner community organizations.

## WISE PARTNER DESCRIPTIONS

The project partnered with five organizations operating social enterprises in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).



Building Up is a social enterprise established in Toronto in 2014 which runs a pre-apprenticeship trades training program for individuals with barriers to employment. Building Up has three main areas of work which are (1) water efficiency retrofits in apartment buildings, specifically toilets, showerheads and faucet aerators, (2) general contracting including renovations of bathrooms, kitchens and homes, and (3) general labour. The water efficiency retrofits prevent overconsumption and therefore supports a healthier environment. The enterprise is located at 116 Industry Street, York and the training centre is at 31 Jutland Rd, Etobicoke.

Building Up has trained over 550 people since they started as a WISE eight years ago. As the organization has grown, check-ins and observations have encouraged staff to identify how they can employ and support individuals longer and beyond the training program, recognizing that their participants still faced barriers to maintaining employment even after they started an apprenticeship or gained other employment.

As part of their final interview with the research team, Building Up staff shared that they are increasingly seeking contracts with affordable housing providers in recognition of the effect of the lack of affordable housing in Toronto and surrounding areas on many current and previous program participants. They see the potential implications of this effort as being two-fold; first, it provides an opportunity for participants to develop and use their construction skills in a way that they have identified as meaningful and fulfilling. Second, as participants increase their capacity to build and renovate affordable housing, they are also building their capacity to support themselves and their communities, fostering empowerment, self-determination, and collective action.



Hawthorne Food & Drink was a social enterprise that was operated by the Hospitality Workers Training Centre (HWTC), a non-profit organization that is based on a sectoral workforce development approach. The enterprise was located at 60 Richmond Street East in Toronto. The restaurant served food using local, seasonal and sustainable ingredients, and the menus took inspiration from Ontario farms

and Toronto neighbourhoods. The enterprise provided hands-on training to individuals with social barriers to employment to prepare them for entry level hospitality sector positions, primarily within restaurants and hotels. The training was based off a model from a workplace development training centre for the hospitality industry.

Through follow-up interviews with the research team, participants shared that their training and work experience with Hawthorne gave them the experience of working in a fast-paced environment, provided them with valuable skills, such as problem-solving and communication, that are transferable to other industries and sectors, and bolstered their confidence to continue their employment journeys in diverse areas.



#### **LINENS & DISPOSAL SERVICES**

Gateway Linens and Disposal Services (“Gateway Linens”) is a fee-for-service industrial laundry facility affiliated with the organization The Salvation Army, providing an employment retraining program for individuals experiencing barriers to employment, notably homelessness or living in precarious, non-permanent housing. The enterprise is located at 312 Broadview Avenue in Toronto. Gateway Linens primarily operates laundry services, including picking up linens from organizations, sorting and laundering, then packaging and delivering them back to customer locations. A secondary aspect of the enterprise is a garbage-disposals service for select customers. The program began in 2007, expanded in 2010 and has demonstrated consistent, planned growth over subsequent years. It is focused on supporting participants to attain transferable skills that can be used to secure long-term employment and independent living, free from reliance on income supports or other public services.

Through interviews with the research team, Gateway participants shared how the stability at Gateway has provided them with the opportunity to gain work experience while building their sense of responsibility and commitment. Unlike a traditional employment environment, Gateway also offers support or flexibility for participants who are participating in recovery programs or addictions treatment. Gateway’s flexible work environment recognizes that participants are often coming from precarious housing and personal situations that can lead to uncertain work availability. Participants can, therefore, adjust their shifts on short notice, if needed and without significant consequences. While this approach can present operational challenges, as staffing can sometimes be unpredictable, it gives participants the flexibility and stability they need to manage their day-to-day circumstances.



Services and Housing in the Province (SHIP) is an organization with a mission to increase quality of life through health services and housing supports that promote mental health, physical health, and wellness. SHIP is located at 969 Derry Road East in Mississauga, which is in the Greater Toronto Area, west of

Toronto. SHIP operates social enterprises in Peel and Dufferin providing clients with employment opportunities that are flexible and supportive. This includes the Social Coffee Bean (formerly known as Destination Café), which is located in Port Credit (Mississauga), and DC Cleaning, which operates across the Region of Peel and West Toronto.

Social Coffee Bean's café operations were mostly shut down during the pandemic, with the focus shifting to roasting coffee beans, filling bulk beans orders, and providing coffee and catering services to new partners. Despite the closures due to the pandemic, the Social Coffee Bean team shared that this new focus provided an additional source of revenue that enabled some of the staff to maintain their employment. More recently, the café has begun to open back at reduced hours, with the team reporting that they have pop-up operations in the works to increase the awareness and demand for Social Coffee Bean's goods and services.

DC Cleaning was able to expand its services during the pandemic, gaining new contracts for cleaning services and also introducing enhanced cleaning measures in response to clients' COVID-19 concerns. Staff shared with the research team how this increased business enabled the organization to retrain some employees from Social Coffee Bean to work at DC Cleaning in order to maintain employees' income and employment experience. They also shared their plans to sustain both of these areas of growth beyond the pandemic to continue building the social enterprise.

## LOFT Kitchen

LOFT Kitchen is a social enterprise within Christie Ossington Community Centre (CONC) that provides café and catering services, sells re-packaged meals (e.g., Sunday brunch, Friday lunch and dinner), and operates a weekend farmer's market for local clientele. The social enterprise also operates a culinary employment training program for youth experiencing barriers to employment, particularly youth who identify within 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. When the enterprise opened in 2014, it was operating at 850 Bloor West; in 2019 it moved to CONC's George Chuvalo Community Centre. This community space has both café and catering facilities, and the broader community hub offers youth and family community programs, including drop-ins. LOFT Kitchen operates within the larger CONC umbrella of community supports and is sustained through its business revenues along with grant funding and youth wage supports, although more recently it has been able to increase its revenue from the café and catering to cover an increasing portion of operational costs.

## COMPARISON GROUP PARTNERS

As detailed in the interim report, the original research design for the project anticipated that the project team would recruit a comparison group of up to 300 income assistance clients through

partner community organizations. The expectation was that this longitudinal client data would enable SRDC researchers to construct a sizeable comparison group against which WISE participant outcomes could be compared. Due to early challenges securing such data-sharing agreements, the project team had to pursue alternative approaches to assembling a comparison group through direct recruitment of clients of community organizations and/or government agencies that serve job seekers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and have a similar profile to project participants.

Through the work of Allan Day, the project team was able to partner with three community organizations in the Greater Toronto Area us to engage clients or participants in their programs to participate in the study: Working for Change, Parkdale Activity – Recreation Centre (PARC), Peel Youth Village, as well as Services and Housing in the Province (SHIP). Each of the partners operates one or more social enterprises, and offers drop-in space, support or pre-employment programming to individuals with similar characteristics. The three organizations offered space and computer hardware and provided opportunities for the project team to invite their participants or clients to join the study, which they understood would involve completing the same set of intake and follow-up surveys as participants recruited through the WISE partners. All research participants were provided honoraria in the form of gift cards for completing research activities.

## EVALUATION APPROACH

The SRDC research team utilized a participatory approach to guide the evaluation design and activities to involve the project's partners and other stakeholders in the design, data collection, analysis, and reporting stages to ensure quality and usefulness in both the process and outcomes of the evaluation. This approach enabled the research team to be reflexive and action-oriented, as it provides opportunity to make improvements to the evaluation throughout the process. It also aimed to support the evaluation capacity among the WISE partners. While the research data collection tools serve to assess the impact of the WISE interventions on participant outcomes, the collaborative development process with the WISE partners was intended to contribute to ongoing WISE interest and ability to measure their social impact. Specifically, participation in the research provided partner WISEs with a comprehensive framework for measuring outcomes which are important for their employees or trainees, tools to measure these outcomes going forward, and a set of strategies to follow up with employees or program trainees over the long term.

## COMMUNITY RESEARCHERS

As discussed in the interim report, the project team identified early on that there would be a strong likelihood that some participants would not remain engaged in the study for the full three years, particularly with large gaps in engagement between the annual follow-up surveys or other engagement activities. This attrition was expected to be caused by various factors including prospective participants' housing instability, employment status or change in social and/or health supports over the study years. The challenges of maintaining engagement with participants became particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, as in-person activities were suspended, many workers were laid off—notably those working in entry-level positions and/or the hospitality sector that were especially hard-hit by the shutdowns, and participants faced heightened physical and health risks and challenges.

The project was also guided by the idea that those who are affected by research should also help shape how the research is conducted. Therefore, the involvement of individuals with lived experience in a peer-based approach to research and evaluation through the Community Researcher Team was a priority for the project team. As described in previous reports, the Community Researcher Team included individuals who have lived experience and enterprise experience that could better position them to engage with participants. The team was originally created by the United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) in 2009 to support the Toronto Enterprise Fund (TEF) in a multi-year participatory evaluation process by gathering longitudinal data.

The original plan for the Community Researcher Team was to support the completion of in-person interviews with participants alongside the survey follow-ups to help ensure the evaluation process was respectful of and attentive to their needs and circumstances. As it became clear that further supports were needed to maintain contact with participants to complete their follow-up surveys over the course of the study, the Community Researcher Team played a more central role in leading participant research activities after the initial stages of data collection, providing tremendous value through their efforts to connect with participants and facilitate survey completions. In several instances Community Researchers were able to track down participants with whom the WISE or comparison group partners had lost contact, and the level of response to the follow-up research activities would not have been achieved without their efforts.

Given the connection and trust built between Community Researchers and participants, it made sense for their role to expand in the final year of the project to support the qualitative research component of the project. With guidance and training from the SRDC research team, Community Researchers undertook a number of additional research activities, including recruiting participants for semi-structured interviews and digital stories, scheduling and coordinating interviews and digital story meetings, providing feedback on the interview protocol and digital story process, conducting the semi-structured interviews, and facilitating communication between participants and the research team. Members of the Community Researcher Team conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with participants and supported the development of three digital stories.

While the Community Researchers had previous training and experience in survey research methods through TEF's evaluation process, they had fewer opportunities to engage with semi-structured interview research methods. In the final phase of the project, the Community Researchers substantially contributed to the qualitative research component with WISE participants and, in alignment with the co-learning and capacity building principles of a participatory approach, were able to further develop their research skills through training and practical experience.

## KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research study was designed to test a primary hypothesis that investments made by WISEs can produce a substantial positive return on investment for government, and that the outcomes and experiences of WISE participants can meaningfully vary depending on their circumstances and specific program components. To test this hypothesis, the evaluation framework was designed to answer five key questions:

1. To what extent are WISEs that work with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness promoting their social and labour market integration?
2. How do the impacts for these people compare with impacts for those who have other interventions or no interventions?
3. How do the outcomes and experiences of the different kinds of structured social enterprise on-the-job-training compare under various circumstances (social enterprise industry type, initial level of housing instability, across vulnerabilities – mental health issues, youth, Indigenous people or recent immigrants)?
4. What features of participating WISEs are particularly effective in promoting the social and labour market integration of these populations?
5. What is the return on investment for government financial support of this set of WISEs?

The questions guided the development of the evaluation design as well as the data collection instruments used to capture outcomes at both the participant and organizational levels.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Quasi-experimental design

The project utilized a longitudinal, quasi-experimental design to estimate changes in participant outcomes that result from participation in a WISE intervention involving training and/or employment. To confidently estimate the impact of participation in a WISE intervention requires a comparison of outcomes between two groups: a group that receives the intervention – the program group; and a highly similar group that does not – the comparison group. Without the option of conducting an experimental evaluation, which by design mitigates any unobservable differences between both groups, a quasi-experimental approach that compares participant outcomes to those of a group of individuals who share a similar profile is the next best option.

The purpose of surveying participant for up to three years enabled was to enable the research team to measure changes to social and economic outcomes over a longer period. This longer time frame was intended to provide a more thorough understanding of the degree and nature of integration into the labour market of program participants when compared to the alternative pathways taken by comparison group members over the same time period. The longitudinal aspect of the study was designed to account for the possibility that the impact of a WISE training or employment experience might take longer to be observed among a group of job seekers who typically have a more tenuous attachment to the labour market.

While the quasi-experimental design of the project was intended to rigorously assess the impacts of WISE participation on individual outcomes for participants employed and/or trained by the project's WISE partners, it should be noted that the given the project's limited scope and data collection opportunities, caution needs to be taken when extending these findings to the broader WISE sector, or other jurisdictions and contexts. It is also important to note that due to limitations in how the project team was able to recruit the comparison group, their circumstances and employment journeys cannot be considered as a true counterfactual that precisely reflects what would have happened if WISE participants had not engaged in employment or training with their respective organizations. As a result, the research team was not able to utilize the data generated through the study to address project's original objective to provide an estimate on the return on investment for WISE financial supports. Despite these limitations, the project team is confident that this research will considerably advance the general understanding of how different WISE models can support individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in urban areas of Canada. In addition, the evaluation framework and capacity-building evaluation tools and methodologies established for the purposes of this study provide a strong basis for extending research on WISE effectiveness through participatory, community-based approaches.

## Qualitative research

For the final year of the project, the SRDC research team consulted with the project partners to expand the qualitative research approaches to include semi-structured interviews and digital storytelling with WISE participants. The purpose of these activities was to offer additional context and understanding to the quantitative findings emerging from the participant survey data, as well as build on qualitative data collected earlier on in the project from the WISE partners as well as add new elements to capture the employment journeys of participants.

The intent of the final interviews with WISE partners was to update the interim report WISE partner profiles and capture their insights into the unique model and operations of their organizations, including their key learnings from the project. They were also conducted to gain a broader understanding of the WISE sector and the shared aims and features of the participating WISEs, despite their diverse WISE models and social enterprise sectors.

The additional qualitative research with WISE participants was designed to provide a better understanding of the employment journeys and circumstances of participants prior to, during, and after their WISE participation. This research was also focused on exploring the role of their WISE participation on their social and labour market integration, as well as their experiences during the pandemic. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews also created opportunities to follow-up with participants on certain themes emerging from the quantitative data and probe participants to elicit more detail on their WISE training and employment experiences.

The digital storytelling was an added approach to provide a story-based description of the unique employment journeys among a select group of participants using their own words, voices, and imagery. In consultation with the project partners, the digital stories were selected as a research method for this project as they had the potential to provide some insight into the emotional depth and complexity of the WISE participants' individual journeys and challenging life circumstances. The digital storytelling included two to three 30-minute meetings with each participant. The first meeting involved a discussion with participants about the general theme and messaging of their story and follow-up meetings provided an opportunity to further refine the digital stories and for the participants to provide feedback on drafts of their digital story scripts and videos.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

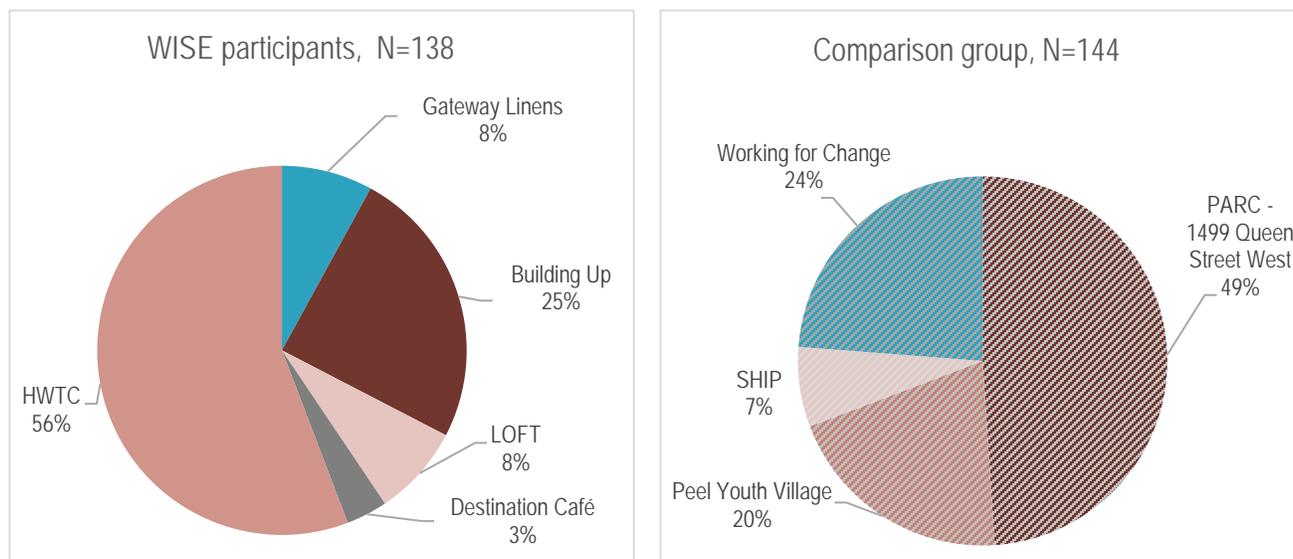
This project involved two groups of participants: a group of WISE participants who were engaged in employment and/or training with partner WISEs, and a comparison group of similar individuals who were clients of community-based programs and were not engaged in a WISE intervention at the time of their recruitment to the study.

The project team aimed to enrol 75-100 individuals who were recruited by the project's WISE partners as they began their employment and/or training programs over a one-year period (January to December 2018), to be compared against a similar number of clients or participants recruited through the comparison group organizations. As part of the intake process, each of these individuals were invited to be part of the research study, signed an informed consent to share their data confidentially with the research team, and completed a baseline survey. All participants were offered an honorarium in the form of gift cards for completing the intake survey and were informed that further compensation would be provided each time they participated in a research activity.

While the project team worked with four of the WISE partners to recruit participants directly, the Hospitality Workers Training Centre (HWTC) provided a unique opportunity to build off the ongoing evaluation processes they already had in place. Consultations with the HWTC team at the beginning of the project revealed that their participant outcomes evaluation overlapped significantly with those of the research project, and that they already tracked their training participant outcomes for one year. To avoid duplication, HWTC agreed to a data sharing arrangement with the project's research team whereby they would anonymously share data of participants who began the HWTC training over the project's recruitment period. At the conclusion of the HWTC follow-up period, the participants were invited to join the WISE research study to complete the year two and year three follow-up surveys.

The participant recruitment sources are illustrated in Figure 1. The project team was able to recruit 138 participants to be part of the WISE participant group. In 2018 and 2019, Allan Day of SET and the Community Research team were able to engage 144 clients of the three comparison group referral organizations to be part of the research study.

Figure 1 Participant and comparison group recruitment sources



As described in previous reports and reproduced in Appendix A, the demographic profile of the two groups shared a similar overall profile at the point they joined the research study, with a few key differences of note. Members of both groups were more likely to be men (58 per cent of comparison group members vs. 62.8 of WISE group members), born in Canada (70.1 per cent vs. 62.3 per cent), and have Indigenous identity (7.8 per cent vs. 10.0 per cent). Given this project’s focus on understanding the circumstances, experiences and employment journeys of people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, a key difference to note is participants’ housing situation at the time they joined the study. While over half of both groups reported having permanent housing at intake, comparison group members were significantly more likely than WISE group members to report having permanent housing, and they were also significantly more likely to report living in transitional housing or in another institution, such as a mental health centre or halfway housing facility.

Other key differences between the two groups are their age profiles and educational backgrounds. The comparison group, on average, was over eight years older than WISE group participants. The WISE group had achieved higher levels of education, with over three-quarters (77.1 per cent) having a high school diploma, compared to 58.0 per cent of the comparison group.

Given the project’s focus on longer-term employment outcomes as a result of the WISE interventions, it is important to note both similarities and differences in their employment status and circumstances at the time participants joined the study. The two groups had similar employment statuses at intake, with nearly 80 per cent of both groups (78.5 per cent of WISE participants vs. 79.0 per cent of comparison group participants) reporting that they were not

working. Both groups also self-reported similar levels of financial stress. However, the WISE group was significantly more likely to be looking for work (79.7 per cent of WISE group members vs. 43.6 per cent of comparison group members) and more likely to indicate they would like to generate more income and that they are looking for a better job.

As noted in the earlier reports, the differences between the two groups highlight the challenges of relying on a quasi-experimental approach to recruit participants from separate referral sources who may match an overall similar profile but may be in very different places in terms of their employment journeys. Given that the WISE group was engaged in the study as they were beginning their WISE training and employment, they would typically have different motivations or perspectives on changing their employment situation when compared to comparison group members who were participants or clients of broad-based programs or services. These observable and unobservable differences at intake may have been mitigated somewhat as both groups engaged in the labour market over time, but in large part they will have persisted – and perhaps even amplified due to the pandemic – and therefore need to be taken into consideration when comparing the differences in average outcomes between the two groups at the conclusion of the study.

## PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES AT YEAR THREE

The following section compares the final survey outcomes of both groups in combination with key findings from the participant interviews to capture further contextual information about what has changed for the WISE participant group over the three-year follow-up period. The interview protocol included a broad set of questions about each participant's life before their WISE involvement, their specific WISE experience and its influence on their employment journey, and their current life circumstances. The Community Researchers who conducted the interviews were encouraged to ask additional questions during the interviews to elicit further detail from participants and to follow-up on responses that were thought to be relevant to the project objectives.

Similar to the previous surveys, the final survey instrument included a broad set of outcomes that can be categorized as follows:

- **Employment, earnings, and income** – Participant's employment status, as well as their hours worked per week, earnings, job type and income sources.
- **Housing situation** – Participant's housing situation, including measures of housing stability and usage of housing/shelter services.
- **Participation in education/training** – Participant's enrolment in further educational or training programs.
- **Career activation** – Participants' self-efficacy and confidence in finding employment and making decisions about their career.
- **Self-care** – Participants' self-reported incidence of key self-care activities.
- **Self-esteem and self-efficacy** – Participants' self-esteem and general confidence.
- **Social support** – Participants' perceptions of social support in a number of life domains.
- **COVID-19 related outcomes** (added to year 2 and year 3 survey, based on consultation with the WISE partners) – Impacts of COVID-19 on: Participants' employment outcomes (e.g., current situation and long-term employment goals); Participants' non-employment outcomes (e.g., social supports, housing, physical/mental health).
- **Experiences of discrimination** (added to the year 2 survey, based on consultations with the WISE partners) – Participants' experiences of systemic racism in general and in employment

situations, suggestions for additional supports. Full results are detailed in the SRDC analytical brief, “WISE Alleviating Homelessness Report: Experiences of Discrimination”<sup>1</sup>.

In consultation with the project partners, new questions were added to the year 3 survey to capture participants’ self-reported resilience gained from their experience at their respective organizations.

## SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

The three-year survey data was collected between July 2021 and January 2022. The survey response rates are shown in Table 1. Due to the challenge of reconnecting with participants years after they had left the WISE, the research team – in agreement with the partners – decided to focus the data collection efforts for the three-year follow-up survey on participants who had previously completed the two-year survey. Aside from the challenges of reconnecting with participants with whom the Community Researchers and partner organizations had lost contact over at least a two-year period, the team reasoned that this approach would keep the focus of the final survey on how participants’ key factors of interest (e.g., employment, health/well-being) may have changed both during and following the pandemic lockdown. Thus, this study was uniquely positioned compare key outcomes of participants one year later as lockdown measures were lifted and society began to return back to pre-pandemic conditions, particularly with respect to participants’ employment journeys. Therefore, this report includes the year-three survey results in comparison to year 2 outcomes wherever possible to better understand if and how participants’ personal and employment situation had improved since COVID-19.

**Table 1** Survey response rates

Organization	Number of responses				Three-year survey response rate (%)	
	Baseline survey (Total possible)	One-year survey	Two-year survey	Three- year survey	% of Year 2 respondents	% of baseline survey respondents
Building Up	34	18	17	17	100%	50%
Gateway	11	5	4	4	100%	36%
Social Coffee	5	0	3	2	67%	40%
LOFT	10	3	8	5	63%	50%
Hawthorne	78	72	25	21	84%	27%
Total WISE group	138	98	57	49	86%	36%
Comparison group	144	69	53	53	100%	37%

<sup>1</sup> <https://ccednet-rcdec.app.box.com/s/yiottocdshi5hhrqbs2d2skj2ko9bph6>

Through the efforts of the Community Research Team, Allan Day and the WISE partners, 86 per cent of WISE participants who completed the year 2 survey also completed the year 3 survey, while 100 per cent of comparison group participants who completed the year 2 survey also completed the year 3 survey. The year 3 respondents represent 36 per cent and 37 per cent of the study’s original sample of WISE participants and comparison group members, respectively.

## INTERVIEWS AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING PARTICIPATION

The interviews were conducted in February and March 2022 and the digital stories were developed with three interviewees in April and May 2022. Project team members and Community Researchers selected interviewees from the WISE participants who completed the three-year survey. They were purposively selected to provide representation of all the WISE partners and to capture the demographic diversity of the WISE participant group. The sample of participants differed across gender, age, Canadian citizenship, housing situation, and current and previous work experience.

The participation rates across WISEs for the interviews and digital storytelling are shown in Table 2. Notably, the interview sample size of 10 was sufficient for reaching data saturation. Participants were then recruited from the interviews to take part in the digital storytelling. The goal of the digital storytelling was to highlight diverse stories of WISE participants, therefore, the sample size of three was determined based on the resources available and interest among WISE participants. The three digital stories can be found on CCEDNet’s WISE project website.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2** Qualitative research activity participants by WISE

WISE	Number of participants	
	Interviews	Digital storytelling
Building Up	3	1
Gateway Linens	2	1
Social Coffee Bean	1	
LOFT Kitchen	1	
Hawthorne	3	1

<sup>2</sup> <https://ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/page/work-integration-social-enterprises>

Community Researchers conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with WISE participants and the research team developed digital stories with three participants. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interview findings are integrated with the quantitative survey results below to provide a fuller picture of the participants' experiences throughout the project.

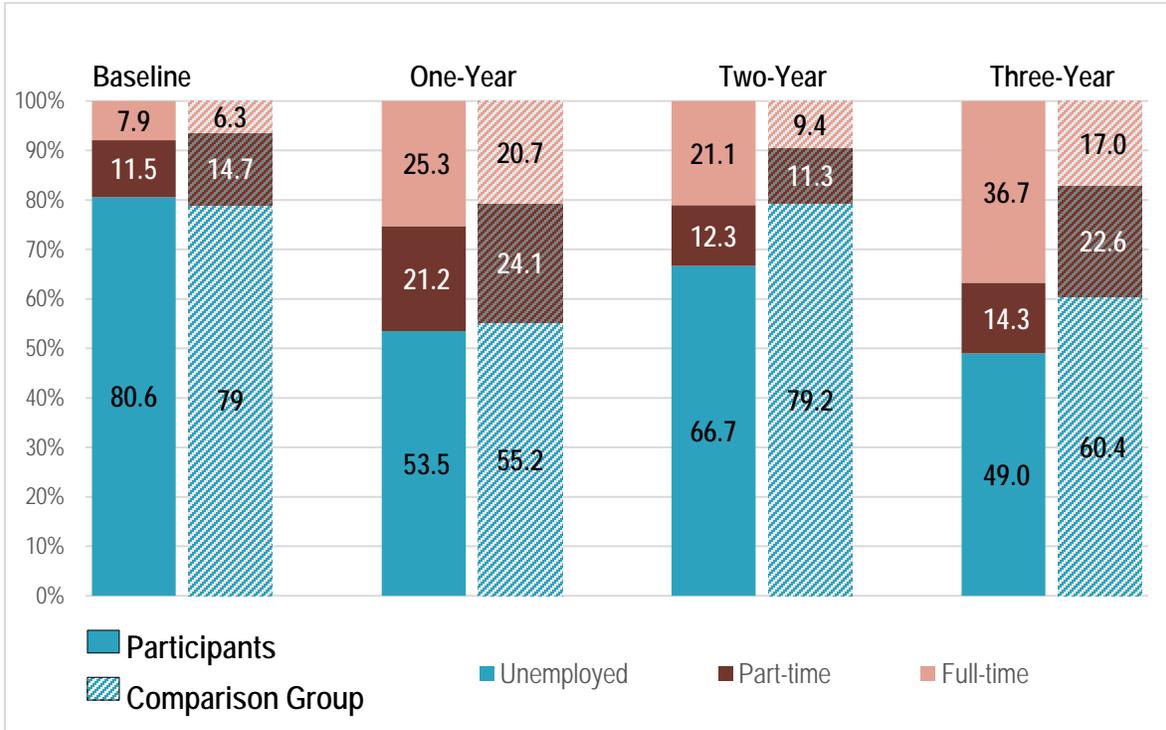
## OUTCOME MEASURES AT YEAR 3

### Employment and income

Despite a significant set-back in employment outcomes during the pandemic, WISE participants experienced strong employment gains by the three-year follow-up, both in terms of their employment situation at intake and relative to the comparison group. Figure 2 illustrates the employment rates for both WISE and comparison groups at intake (baseline) and at each annual follow-up. As was noted in the interim report, the two-year follow-up was completed by participants during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and the survey revealed that both WISE participants and comparison group members had lost the employment gains they had made as of the one-year follow-up, with the comparison group in particular returning to the employment levels they had reported at the beginning of the study.

The chart demonstrates that at the three-year follow-up, when many of the COVID-19 restrictions in the GTA had been lifted, the employment situation of participants in both groups dramatically improved. The unemployment rate of the comparison group declined by close to one-quarter from year 2 to year 3, such that it was nearly approaching its pre-pandemic level as of the final follow-up. The employment situation of the WISE participant group not only recovered by the three-year survey, over half of WISE participants reported that they were working, with most of the group's gains occurring in full-time employment. WISE participants were significantly more likely to be working full-time (36.7 per cent) than the comparison group (17.0 per cent) at the three-year follow-up, and this difference in the two groups' full-time employment rates is significant at the 5 per cent level.

Figure 2 Changes in employment from baseline to three-year follow-up



When asked retrospectively about the consistency of their employment over the past 12 months in the three-year survey (not shown), comparison participants were significantly more likely to report being consistently *unemployed* (51 per cent) over the past year, compared to less than a third (30 per cent) of WISE participants (difference between the two groups significant at the 5 per cent level). Thus, while nearly half of WISE participants reported that they were unemployed at the time when they completed the three-year survey, a much smaller proportion experienced consistent unemployment over the final year of the study.

The interviews with WISE participants revealed further insights into their employment situation both prior to, and after their participation in WISE training and/or employment. Participants shared that they were unemployed or underemployed prior to their WISE experience because they could not find consistent work, did not have the necessary qualifications, or they were dealing with challenging life circumstances, such as homelessness, an abusive relationship, and/or addictions. They explained how their WISE training and experience gave them the skills to find and retain steady employment, the certifications (e.g., SMART serve) to be employable in certain sectors (e.g., hospitality), and the supportive and flexible work environment to gain work experience, while also looking after their health and well-being (e.g., taking time off to enter treatment programs for addictions).

The following box illustrates how one of the interviewees described the role that his WISE experience played in his employment journey.

### Interviewee #1

Prior to taking part in WISE training, Interviewee #1 could not find consistent work. He explained:

"I was doing some roofing, as well as some random jobs I found on Kijiji...I didn't have much support at all...I couldn't find steady work. I wanted to get into construction, but couldn't find anything steady."

When he joined the WISE, he learned the technical skills and made the connections with employers that he needed in order to build a steady career in the construction industry:

"It's given me a lot of hands-on experience with things I didn't know how to do before...I'm employed full-time, with the union. I work Monday to Friday."

He shared that, alongside the skills and networks, the WISE also gave him a community of support that he can still rely on. When asked what supports he has available now after completing the program, he shared:

"[The WISE]. If I need anything or anyone to talk to, I can call them."

Other employment indicators and barriers to employment measured at the three-year survey are provided in Appendix B. Overall, there were few significant differences in the employment-related outcomes of both groups, including career decision-making and career planning skills. Just over half of respondents reported looking for long-term or better work. Among those looking for better work, WISE participants reported significantly greater confidence when it comes to searching for and finding good job opportunities (significant at the 5 per cent level).

Most participants reported experiencing at least one barrier to employment in the final survey, with more comparison group participants indicating that they face barriers to employment (75.5 per cent) than WISE participants (57.1 per cent), significant at the 10 per cent level. Comparison group members were also over twice as likely than WISE participants (37.7 per cent vs. 16.3 per cent) to report their barriers as being challenges with health (disability/injury/illness). The other key barriers reported by participants were not having a reliable vehicle or way to get to work or interviews (about 30 per cent), followed by not expecting to find a job with the desired pay (nearly 30 per cent).

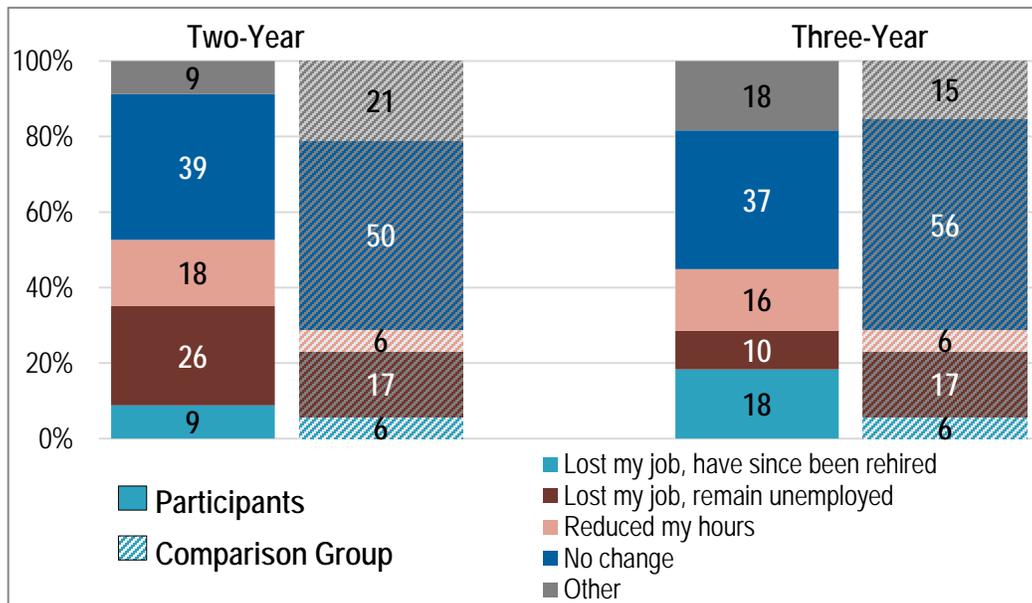
### *Impact of COVID-19 on employment*

Though the three-year survey was administered after the majority of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns had been lifted, there were still pandemic-related restrictions in the GTA at the time

of survey completion. Participants were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their employment experience in both the two-year and three-year surveys.

Figure 3 shows that the largest proportion of participants, for both groups and at both time points, reported experiencing no change in employment due to the pandemic. At the two-year survey, there were relatively similar patterns for the comparison group and WISE participants, though significantly more WISE participants reported having seen a reduction in hours, which reflects the fact that more WISE participants remained employed during the pandemic.

**Figure 3** Impact of COVID-19 on employment, from two-year to three-year follow-up



A notable outcome in the three-year survey is that, amongst those who had lost a job, WISE participants were significantly more likely than the comparison group to report they had been rehired. These findings provide further indication of the greater resiliency of WISE participants – as a group – in terms of their observed ability to not only maintain their employment during the pandemic, but also be able to regain any employment they lost in the final year of the study.

For the three-year survey, the research team added a question to ask participants how COVID-19 affected longer-term employment plans (not shown). There were no significant differences in the average responses of the WISE and comparison groups. A large proportion of respondents (approximately 40 per cent of both groups) reported no long-term impacts of the pandemic on their employment plans, while nearly a fifth (20 per cent of WISE participants and 15 per cent of comparison group participants) reported uncertainty for their long-term career.

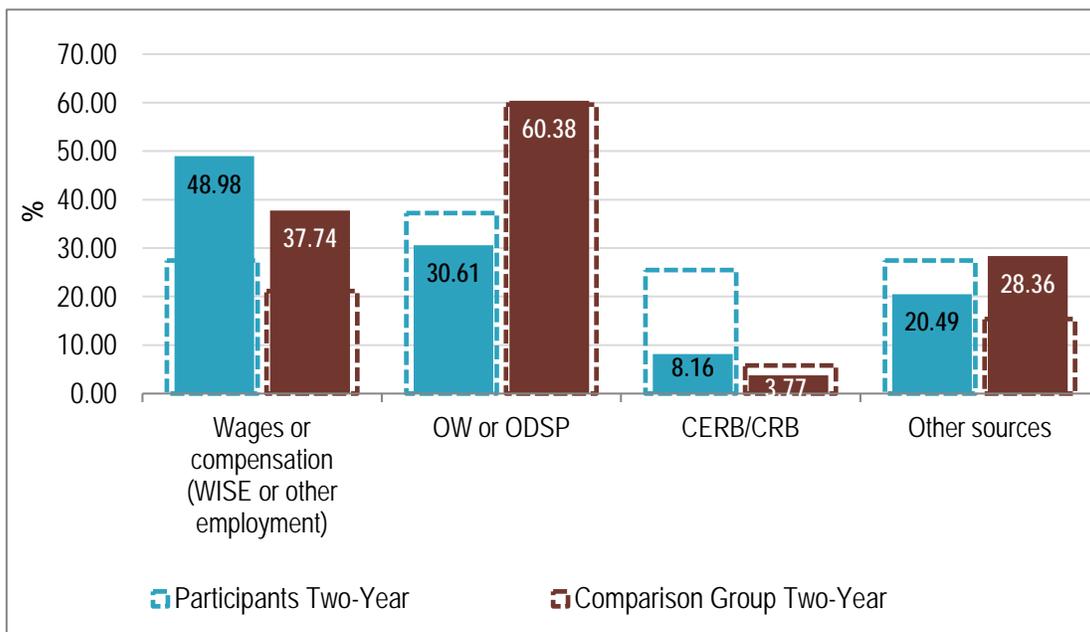
### Current income sources

The following figures illustrate the comparison of two-year responses (dotted lines) to three-year responses (solid colours) of the WISE and comparison groups.

Figure 4 shows the strong year-over-year increases in the percent of participants who reported income from wages or other employment income. In line with the previous figures which showed an increase in employment for all participants at the time of the year 3 survey, we see here that a greater proportion of participants from both groups reported receiving income from wages or other employment income at three-year compared to the two-year follow up, with WISE participants experiencing the largest gains.

While WISE participants reported a much greater reliance on CERB/CRB at the two-year follow-up, their increased employment levels (combined with reduced availability of these emergency benefits) have likely led to a sharp drop in benefit receipt as of the year 3 survey. Another notable reduction was WISE participants' reliance on benefits from Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) from their already reduced levels at the time of the year 2 survey. OW/ODSP receipt remained relatively stable at approximately 60 per cent of comparison group respondents between the two surveys.

**Figure 4** Current sources of income, two-year and three-year follow-up

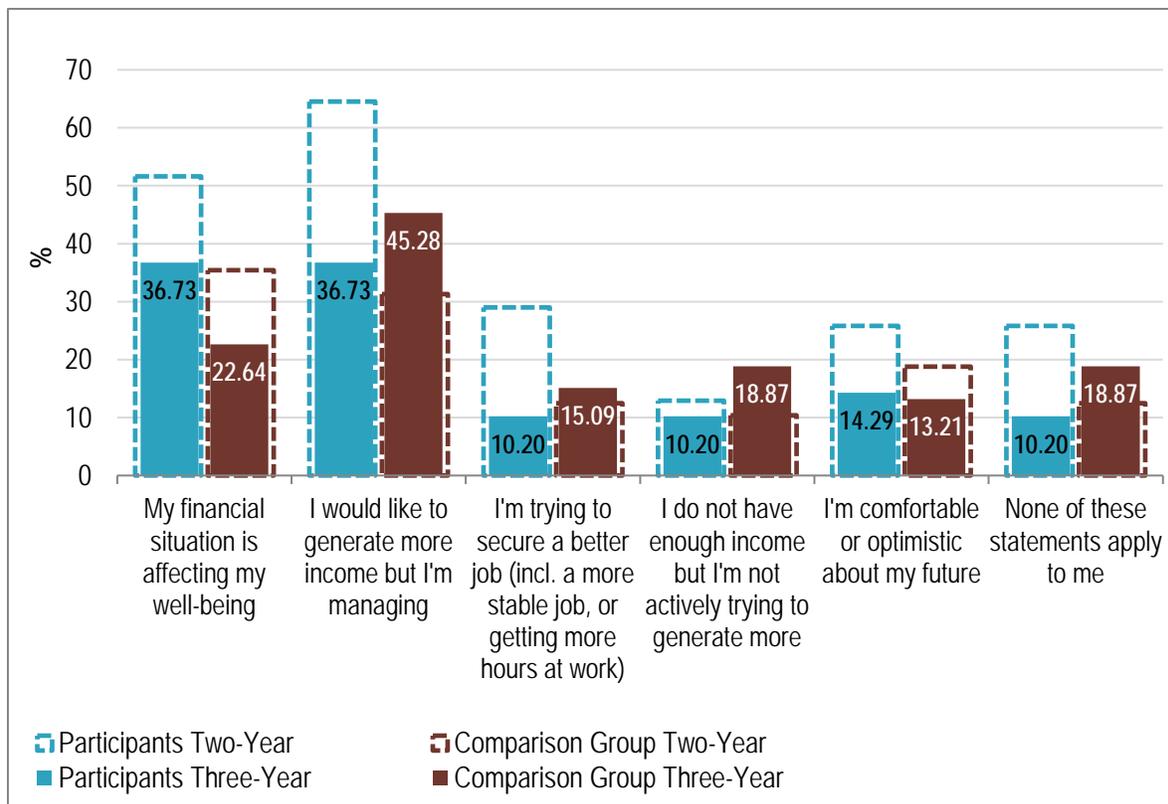


With respect to the wages received by employed participants in both groups, no statistically significant differences were observed (not shown), with just over one-third of participants reporting that they were making more than minimum wage (20 per cent reported making over \$18.50 per hour).

### Financial situation

Figure 5 illustrates differences in the financial situation of the two groups from year 2 to year 3. The chart shows that while there were differences between the groups at the two-year follow-up, these differences had been erased by year three. These changes indicate that WISE participants appeared to be more satisfied with their current financial situation by the three-year follow-up, particularly among those wanting to generate more income or trying to secure a better job.

**Figure 5** Current financial situation, two-year and three-year follow-up



The following story provides an example of the complexity of WISE participants' employment journeys, and how their WISE experience has changed their current and future outlook. It also illustrates how this particular WISE intervention had employment-related impacts beyond

gaining full-time employment. This story was chosen because it illustrates the multiple factors that influence WISE participants' employment outcomes and financial situations over time.

## Interviewee #2

Interviewee #2 is a single mom and at the time of the interview (March 2022) was unemployed. Prior to her WISE participation and the birth of her child, she was on social assistance and struggling with anxiety due to not having work. Her case worker referred her to the WISE.

When asked about her experience at the WISE, she shared:

"In my specific program [at the WISE], I was able to get my SMART serve, as that was part of the program...just before I had to leave work, I was able to get a job at [a nice hotel]. That was good because they looked at the [the WISE] training program and were really happy to see that on my resume."

As it did for many others in the hospitality industry, the COVID-19 pandemic made it very difficult for her to maintain employment at the hotel. She also became a mother and was focused on caring for her child.

Now she wants to get back into the workforce. She described what she gained from her WISE participation to help her on this part of her employment journey that she did not have before:

"I have to start looking for work soon and put my daughter in daycare. I hope to go back into hospitality because I did enjoy that. ...[the WISE program] gave me more confidence to go out in the workforce because before the program I didn't feel as confident in myself, so the training helped me put myself out there and feel more confident in myself."

## Health and well-being

### *Impact of COVID-19: Beyond employment*

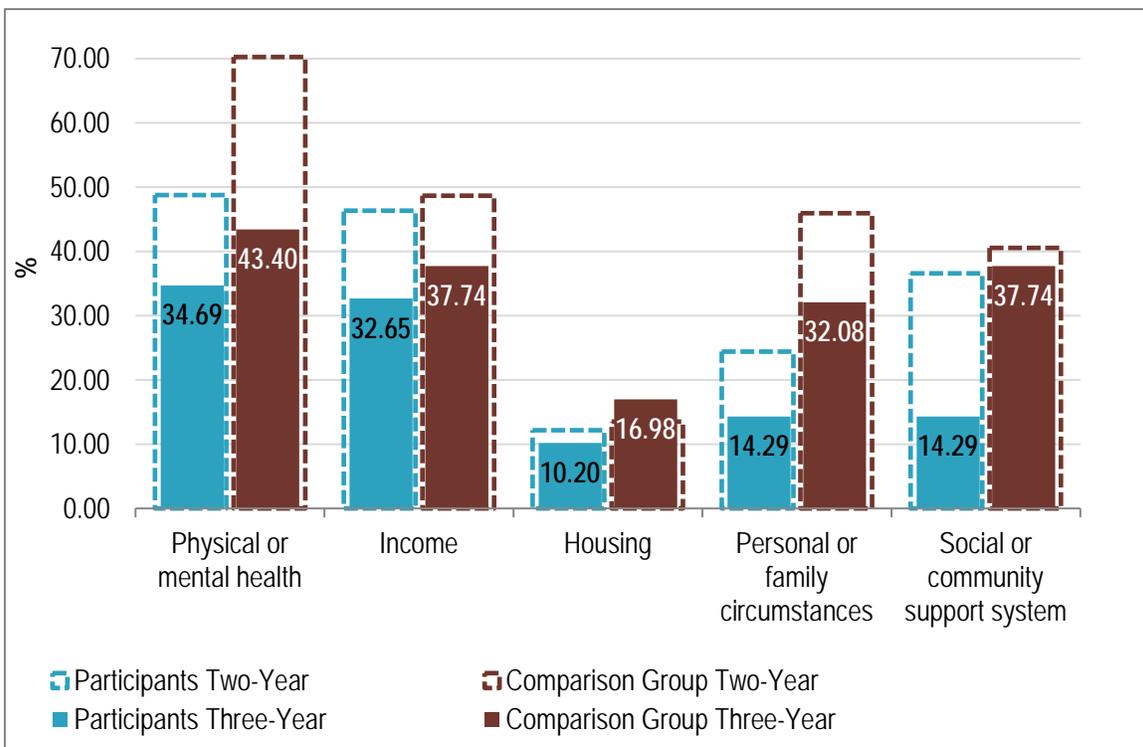
Given the fact that in the two-year survey, nearly 70 per cent of respondents reported being affected by the pandemic in areas of their lives beyond their employment, the project team and WISE partners were interested in learning if this were still the case one year later. As in the two-year survey, these questions were optional for respondents to complete.

In the three-year follow-up, a large majority (67 per cent) of respondents continued to report that COVID-19 was still impacting their lives beyond employment, although these impacts were lessened from the year 2 to year 3 surveys (see Appendix C for detailed results). At the three-year follow-up, WISE participants reported significantly fewer impacts of COVID-19 in fewer areas of their lives than the comparison group (an average of 1.1 areas affected by WISE participants vs. 1.7 among comparison group respondents).

Figure 6 shows how the year-to-year impacts of COVID-19 on WISE participants decreased in every area apart from housing, and decreased in nearly every area for the comparison group,

apart from housing and social community support systems. While physical or mental health remained the greatest area of impact for both groups in the final follow-up, this area also saw the greatest recovery from the two-year to three-year responses for the comparison group (-26.9 per cent) and the second largest recovery for WISE participants (-14.9 per cent). WISE participants experienced the largest decrease in the impact of the pandemic on their social or community supports (-22 per cent), while this remained in the top three areas of impact for the comparison group as of the year 3 survey. This suggests that while WISE participants experienced similar impacts of the pandemic on their social support systems, this was an area where they were able to experience a larger improvement coming out of the pandemic lockdown relative to the comparison group.

**Figure 6** Impact of COVID-19 on areas other than employment, from two-year to three-year follow-up

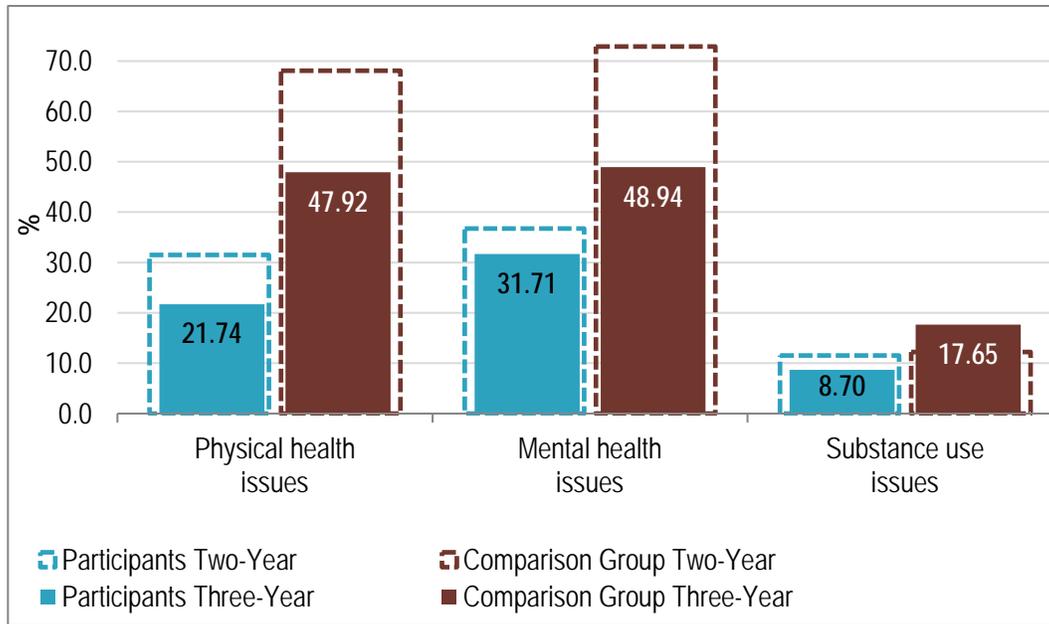


### Health issues and stress

In addition to COVID-19 related issues, participants were also asked about their general health challenges. Figure 7 shows that both WISE participants and comparison group members experienced a reduction in health issues from year 2 to year 3, with the largest improvements occurring among the comparison group. At the time of the year-two follow-up, significantly

more comparison group participants were experiencing mental health and physical health issues than the WISE group. By the three-year follow-up this difference between the two groups was only significant for physical health issues.

**Figure 7** Currently experiencing health issues, from two-year to three-year follow-up



However, it is notable that even after some recovery from the pandemic, at the three-year follow-up nearly 50 per cent of comparison group members continued to report physical or mental health issues (vs. 20 per cent and 30 per cent among WISE participants, respectively). This puts into perspective the multiple barriers faced by this project’s population of interest that will likely persist beyond the pandemic.

The interviews provided context for some of the stressors and challenges WISE participants experienced. The following quote depicts one interviewee’s past stressors and mental health struggles that they have had to overcome and from which they continue to recover.

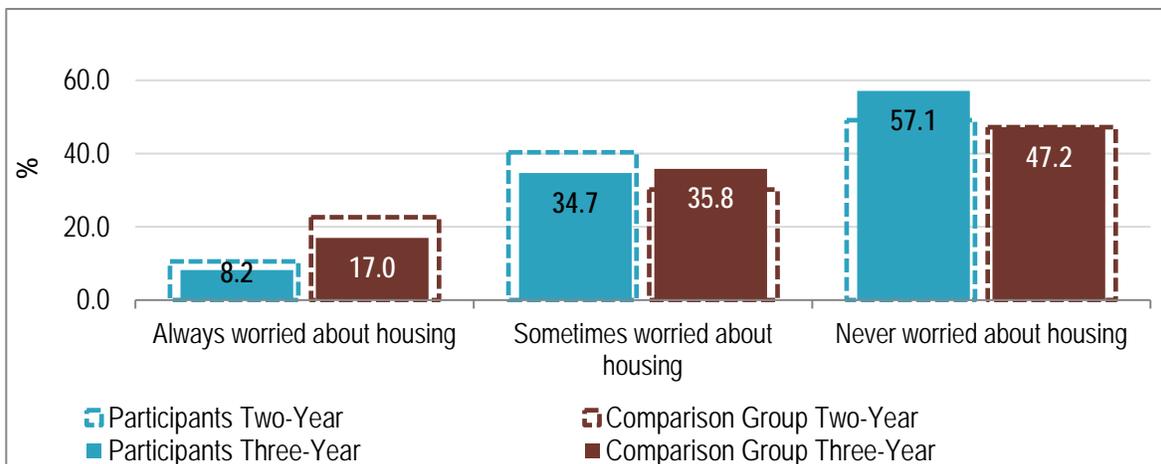
### Interviewee #3

“Before [the WISE], it had been a few years that I was heavily addicted and then I finally decided to clean up...My challenge was staying sober at the time [before WISE participation]...I’ve worked hard the past 4 years on myself and at work.”

## Housing

Given the importance of participants' housing situation to this research study, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their housing and related concerns. When asked about their current housing situation, 75 per cent of all respondents reported no change in the past 12 months, and there were no significant differences between WISE participants and comparison group. However, Figure 8 illustrates that there was a significant difference between WISE and the comparison group for those that were always worried about housing at the two-year follow-up; this pattern remained (though was no longer significant) at the three-year follow-up. We also see that the proportion of WISE participants who reported that they were never worried about their housing increased from 50 per cent in the two-year survey to nearly 60 per cent in the final follow-up.

**Figure 8** Worried about housing, from two-year to three-year follow-up



When asked about their specific housing worries at the three-year follow-up, the cost of housing ranked the highest for both groups (20.4 per cent for WISE participants, and 34 per cent for the comparison group) and the comparison group were significantly more worried about the safety of their building or neighbourhood than WISE participants (18.2 per cent versus 4.1 per cent, respectively). This finding suggests that while a substantial proportion of WISE participants continue to experience challenges with respect to their housing, the group overall has a more positive outlook on their current situation, including their ability to find more stable or secure housing if needed.

In line with the survey results, WISE participants who spoke about housing concerns in their interviews, discussed the financial burdens associated with housing. Even for those who had a job (see Interviewee #4), the cost of housing, particularly in Toronto, was a barrier to achieving their housing goals and created uncertainty about their future employment options.

## Interviewee #4

Before her WISE participation, **Interviewee #4** was incarcerated for a number of years. She shared that this time in her life was focused on:

"Trying to find myself and get out of the [criminal justice] system, which took a long time, battling mental health, battling family that I thought were supportive, battling friendships. I was battling myself and didn't trust anybody, I really felt alone."

Her case worker told her about the WISE's training program. When asked about her experience at the WISE, she described:

"[It is] a program that helps people to get in the trade and not just only support you, but takes away that stigma from your past and tries to help you build yourself with confidence and integrity to move to the next level."

She is now working full-time with a union and working towards completing her Red Seal in a skilled trade. Her main concern and challenge now is housing, despite her good income and stable employment:

"[One thing] that sucks right now is the housing market. Me making money is not a problem. Working in my union, I'm making good money. The only thing is just that it is so hard to buy a house. This is where my mindset is for the next 2.5 years. I want to save as much as I can, but also balance my budget so that I can afford a house, but if I can't find one in Toronto. I'll have to move up North [of Toronto where housing prices are lower]...Moving up North, the union can only stretch so far."

## WISE impacts

To gain better insight into the experience WISE participants had at the organization, participants were retroactively asked to think back on their time at the WISE and consider how it impacted their employment and other areas of their lives.

Participants reported high satisfaction for both the training they received (4.0 out of 5) and their employment experience at the WISE (4.4 out of 5). Figure 9 displays the top five impacts on employment and life, as reported by WISE participants at the three-year follow-up. These questions were optional, so response rates for each option are indicated in the figure. The most frequently reported impacts on employment were gaining experience in training, followed by receiving certificates and leveraging the WISE experience to find a better job. As for impacts of the WISE experience on other areas of their lives, respondents were most likely to cite increases in self-esteem, improved ability to deal with challenging situations, and improved life satisfaction.

**Figure 9** Top five impacts of WISE organizations on employment and life, three-year follow-up



All interviewees discussed the positive impacts that their WISE participation had on their life and employment. The following example illustrates what a participant felt he gained in his life by participating in a WISE’s employment retraining program.

### Interviewee #5

Before he found out about the WISE, Interviewee #5 was unemployed for a few years and living in a shelter. With its emphasis on direct workplace experience, the WISE’s employment retraining program was an opportunity to learn about workplace expectations, in a supported environment. When asked about his experience at the WISE, he shared:

“The first thing I learned was that it was hard work. Being on time, showing up every day, not calling in saying you couldn’t be there. Once they hired you, you made a commitment, you had to be there on time and every day, just like a regular job.”

For Interviewee #5, the workplace learnings from the direct work experience were important, but it was the personal growth that was the most meaningful:

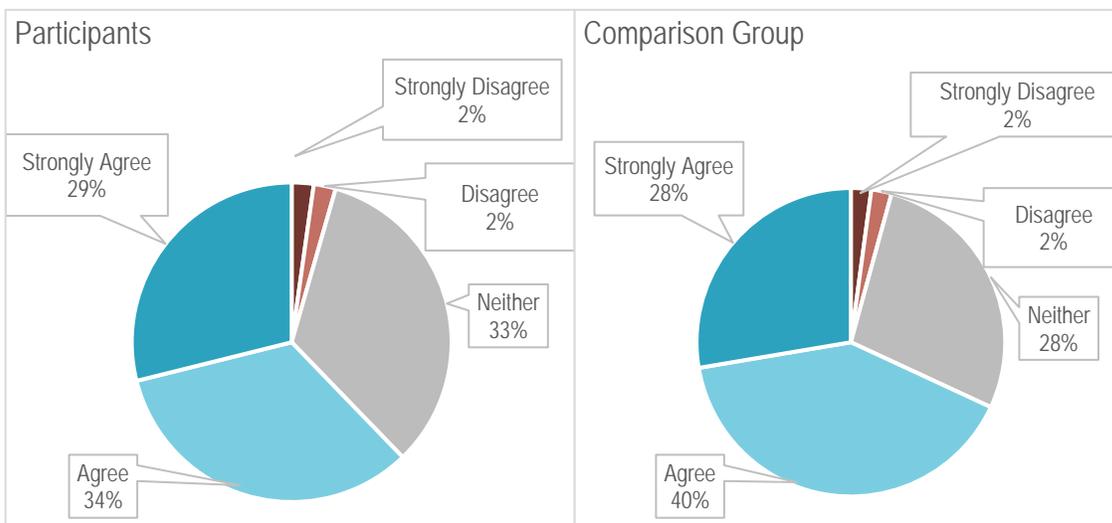
“When I was working there [at the WISE], I had a sense of control in my life...because I was working, being responsible every day, doing the work that was necessary and I felt good because I was making money every week or every month.”

### *WISE impacts on resilience*

Given the expected negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the project’s key outcomes of interest, the project team was interested in learning more about the extent to which respondents were able to recover from the pandemic in the last year of the study, as well as the key factors that contributed to their recovery. Specifically, the research team and partners were interested in not just resilience in the face of a pandemic, but whether this resilience could be attributed to their WISE experience. For the three-year survey, participants were asked to report on whether their WISE or referral organization (for comparison group members) contributed to their resiliency and offered an open-ended question for respondents to share their experiences.

Figure 10 provides the results from one of the newly added questions. When asked if their participation helped them adapt to change, more than half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (63 per cent of WISE respondents, and 68 per cent of the comparison group). Additionally, half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their participation at the organization helped them bounce back after hard times, with no differences between the two groups. Select quotes from responses to the open-ended question are provided below the figure.

Figure 10 Participation at [org] helped me adapt to change, three-year follow-up



*“Reinforced the idea of working for a living and bearing responsibility.”* – WISE participant

*“I was pushed to change my working habits and challenged to become my best self.”*  
– WISE participant

*“I learned how to find resources that I need for whatever hard times I may be having.”* – Comparison group participant

*“I have learned better coping skills to stay motivated as well have gained a lot of confidence to solve issues.”* – Comparison group participant

While there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of how respondents attributed their adaptability to their experience at the organization, this still represents an important finding, particularly given the *differences* in the nature of the supports generally offered by these two types of organizations. The WISEs involved in this study are typically focused on employment and training with less ongoing supports to participants who complete and/or leave their program or position, whereas comparison organizations typically offer wrap-around and ongoing supports to individuals on an as-needed basis. Thus, it is impressive that WISE participants still attribute their ability to bounce back and adapt to change to their employment/training experience at the WISE, even if it may have finished a few years prior. This was a consistent finding in the interviews with WISE participants as well, as described in the previous examples. This shows the strong, and lasting impact that WISEs can have beyond the training or employment experience.

The final example provided below (see Interviewee #6), as well as the three digital stories, highlight how individuals taking part in WISE programming face incredibly challenging life circumstances (e.g., homelessness, racism, abuse, incarceration, addictions) and significant barriers to employment. Despite these hardships, their stories demonstrate the impacts of WISE interventions on participants' resiliency, employment, and overall life circumstances.

## Interviewee #6

"[Before my WISE experience] [my life] was not great at all. My husband and I separated because we had some substantial issues in our marriage...I was cut off from my own community, my parents disowned me, like on paper disowned me. Friends who were my life long friends, they said "you married a Muslim man, you're going to become a terrorist," so all of that stigma and then the abuse that I went through with my husband. The only thing that I really lived for was [my child].

There was a whole sense of belonging [at the WISE], especially as I was living in a transition home [at the time], I didn't know people. I'm not social. There are certain people that the minute they go somewhere they mix right in. Because of the trauma [from an abusive relationship], I usually don't mix as well. I used to be very good at mixing, but a lot of my experiences have changed me. The minute I walked in [to the WISE], [the manager] showed me the kitchen...That belonging made me feel so comfortable, just the first shift I was there. This was it; I loved it. People were encouraging me.

It's actually one of the most rewarding experiences because I learned so much. I knew how to cook, so it wasn't that I went to cook, I went to learn how to deal with real life. Living in a shelter is different, living with your husband is different, living by yourself is different. Because of my husband's over-possessiveness, he just kind of cut me off from the real world. For many years, I had no idea of what the real world is like...I also learned how to speak up for myself when I needed to. I kept quiet for too long and that's why I went through so much abuse. I would say it was probably the most positive experience.

They are wonderful employers. They are very generous too, I felt. You made stuff and leftovers you could take home. Those little things go a long way when you don't have a lot...that generosity means so much more when it's coming from so much less. When bigger companies are generous, it's really not that generous because they can afford it, but when you only have \$2 and you are giving \$.75 away, that's generosity."

## Summary

The three-year survey results provide important insights into how WISE participants who have received a range of WISE interventions in the form of training and employment have fared despite the COVID-19 pandemic that has challenged their ability to find and/or retain employment. When contrasted against the experiences of a similar group of people who are affected by homelessness and related challenges, the outcomes of the participants who are currently engaged in – or have completed – training or employment with the project's WISE partners illustrate the powerful effect that the experience, skills, and opportunities they gain through these interventions can have in terms of their employment journeys, life circumstances, and resiliency. The final follow-up survey findings illustrate a recurring pattern across a variety

of key outcomes of interest where WISE participants have demonstrated their ability to bounce back from the setbacks they experienced during the pandemic, with participants indicating that their WISE experience was a key factor in their ability to remain resilient and adapt to difficult circumstances.

The interview findings support the survey results and provide some indication of the potential ways in which WISE training and employment experiences helped participants build their resiliency. Based on interviews with WISE participants, two main factors emerged that suggest how WISE participation potentially contributed to participants' resiliency and led to their high levels of satisfaction: 1) the relationships WISE participants developed with WISE staff and other participants, and 2) the hands-on training or paid employment in a safe and supportive environment.

The stories shared throughout this report demonstrate how each participant began their WISE experience with their own personal barriers to overcome. The interviews and digital stories reveal how participants' journeys were all different, but they all experienced a common struggle with finding and retaining adequate housing and employment. The findings suggest that this shared experience among participants, WISE staff and their colleagues fostered a sense of community and belonging, and that they did not feel alone in their experiences.

Furthermore, with the detailed application processes and referrals of participants from health and social services agencies, WISE interventions can be well-suited for job seekers who – at the current stage of their employment journeys – would likely be unsuccessful in gaining employment in traditional workplaces due to the social challenges they may be experiencing (e.g., homelessness, mental health issues, poverty, etc.). The findings indicate that this fundamental value of WISEs, where participants are accepted for who they are and where they are at, facilitates a strong feeling of trust and connection between WISE staff and participants. Participants shared that they knew they had reliable and compassionate people supporting them on their employment journeys and that, among nearly all the WISE partners, there was an opportunity for them to come back to the organization for support and guidance, even after their WISE experience was complete. This suggests that the relationships between WISE staff and participants created a sense of stability and, for many participants, added one area of certainty in their lives.

The interview findings also suggest that direct work experience in an environment that supports job seekers' health and well-being is an important factor contributing to the WISE participant outcomes. WISEs provide employment training, albeit through diverse models, that include direct work experience, skill development, and networking opportunities. Alongside these opportunities, WISEs may also provide wraparound supports through internal resources or external networks, based on the individual needs of each participant. The interviews highlighted the value for participants in having an opportunity to develop their employment skills, while

being supported to become independent, address their personal barriers to employment, and manage their health and well-being. This suggests that the participant-centred manner in which this project's WISE partners operate is an important contributing factor to supporting the employment journeys of such a diverse and unique range of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

## FINAL INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### WISE PARTNERS

Appendix D provides an updated profile on each WISE partner, summarizing the insights shared with the research team as part of their final project interviews. These profiles highlight the diversity in the WISE models of each of the project partners, particularly with respect to their enterprise operations, ways of providing wraparound supports to participants, and approaches to employment training programs. Consistent across the various WISE models, however, is their use of business revenues to meet their social goals of providing flexible, individualized workplace environments and training to support the labour market integration of vulnerable community members, especially those who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

The interviews highlighted the challenges facing all the WISE partners to some degree, particularly in the past two years as the organizations have had to shift their operations and business models as a result of the pandemic. For some the partners, the pandemic challenged their ability to maintain WISE operations due to a drop in demand or lack of staffing, while for others it represented an opportunity to expand their operations or shift focus to a new line of business or training area. The profiles reveal how sustaining and/or growing a WISE is complex as it relies on a mix of sales revenue and internal or external funding. Even among this project's small group of WISE partners, there is no common business model for sustaining their operations that has remained static over time.

WISEs also shared how they have struggled to find needed supports for their employees or trainees, particularly with respect to accessible affordable housing. While the idea of sustainability and self-sustainability can work with some WISE models, the partners spoke to the need for recognizing the unique role that WISEs play in engaging job seekers who are at a greater distance from the labour market and therefore may require additional supports beyond what a traditional employer may provide. This has implications for funders or procurement programs to incorporate into their purchasing or funding processes a more sustainable recognition of WISEs as unique businesses that play an important role in actively supporting the employment journeys of job seekers with significant barriers to finding or sustaining employment.

## WISE RESEARCH

There are important lessons from this project in terms of how to engage in future research involving WISEs and people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. The project's quasi-experimental model provided an opportunity to benchmark the outcomes of WISE participants against those of a group of people who shared a similar profile, but were recruited through separate referral sources. While these two groups shared a similar background, there were substantial differences in terms of their readiness to engage in employment, as well as their general health and well-being that would have played a role in managing the challenges and setbacks they faced due to job losses and service disruptions during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Together with the additional challenges of conducting data collection activities with a vulnerable population during a pandemic, these data constraints limited the research team's ability to extend the analysis to include an estimate of the return on investment from WISE interventions based on the outcomes captured in the participant longitudinal study. This project demonstrated that such research questions are better addressed through a larger scale study, ideally involving participants recruited through a similar set of referral sources, with a focus on collecting sufficient data to mitigate any observed or unobserved differences at intake between the research groups.

Despite these limitations, the project has provided important information on the longitudinal outcomes of participants who were engaged in diverse range of WISE training and employment. For the WISE partners in the study, this research provided information that they typically do not have the time, capacity or resources to capture. As noted in partner meetings, this data provides important insights into the sustainability of outcomes well beyond the typical follow-up period of a traditional program evaluation or follow-up study. It also captured a breadth of outcomes using a common set of indicators across the WISE partners to generate data that is potentially generalizable and transferrable to other WISEs.

The array of outcomes captured in the participant study, as well as the diversity of methodologies used to gather data with participants and WISE organizations, provided the project team and WISE partners with a rich picture of participants' employment journeys as well as a deeper and more complete understanding of the role that the WISEs played in supporting and sustaining those outcomes over the longer term. The manner in which the project's research approaches, methodologies and instruments were regularly updated and refined in close consultation with the project partners demonstrates the value of a participatory approach to working with project partners and people with lived experience throughout the process. This enabled the project team to learn from partners who have a deep understanding of the people they train and employ, and who can help ensure that the project is gathering information that is timely and relevant to both policy makers and practitioners. It also recognized the critical importance of involving the participation and perspectives of people with first-hand knowledge and experience, who can help ensure that the project's approaches and findings are engaging, respectful and reflective of the diverse population it is designed to support.

## APPENDIX A: SUMMARY CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS AT INTAKE

Table 3 Summary characteristics of participants at intake

	Comparison Group (N=144)	WISE Group (N=138)	Difference	Standard error
<b>Gender (%)</b>				
Female	39.2	36.5	-2.7	(5.8)
Male	58.0	62.8	4.7	(5.9)
Non-Binary (incl. 2 spirit and gender fluid identities)	2.8	0.7	-2.1	(1.6)
<b>Average Age</b>	43.5	35.2	-8.3 ***	(1.6)
<b>Median Age</b>	47.0	33.5	-13.5 ***	(0.0)
<b>Age (%)</b>				
30 or younger	26.4	43.5	17.1 ***	(5.6)
31 to 40	11.8	27.5	15.7 ***	(4.6)
41 to 50	18.1	18.8	0.8	(4.6)
50 and older	43.8	10.1	-33.6 ***	(4.9)
<b>Immigration Category (%)</b>				
Not born in Canada	29.9	37.7	7.8	(5.6)
Born in Canada	70.1	62.3	-7.8	(5.6)
<b>Indigenous Identification (%)</b>				
Non-Indigenous	92.2	90.0	-2.2	(4.1)
Indigenous (First Nations)	7.8	10.0	2.2	(4.1)
<b>Have a High School diploma (%)</b>				
No	42.0	22.9	-19.1 ***	(5.6)
Yes	58.0	77.1	19.1 ***	(5.6)
<b>Household Structure (%)</b>				
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Never married	75.7	81.9	6.2	(5.0)
Married	3.5	13.4	9.9 ***	(3.3)
Divorced, separated, or widowed	20.8	4.7	-16.1 ***	(4.0)

	Comparison Group (N=144)	WISE Group (N=138)	Difference	Standard error
<b>Support (%)</b>				
Self-supporting (e.g., living alone, living with roommates)	74.3	37.7	-36.6 ***	(6.9)
Supported (e.g., living with parents, in-laws, supported housing)	11.8	47.5	35.7 ***	(5.9)
Supporting others (e.g., spouse, children, extended family)	13.9	14.8	0.9	(5.3)
<b>Housing Situation (%)</b>				
I have permanent housing (incl. renting, or low-income housing)	69.4	57.1	-12.3 **	(5.8)
I am couch surfing or staying with friends or family	5.6	9.8	4.2	(3.2)
I am staying in transitional housing offered by the City or other community agency	16.7	6.8	-9.9 **	(3.9)
I am staying at another institution, such as a mental health centre or a halfway housing facility	2.1	0.0	-2.1 *	(1.2)
I am homeless or staying in a shelter	6.3	6.8	0.5	(3.0)
Other (not specified)	0.0	19.5	19.5 ***	(3.3)
<b>Employment Status at Baseline (%)</b>				
Not working	78.5	79.0	0.5	(4.9)
Working	21.5	21.0	-0.5	(4.9)

Source: SRDC intake surveys and data shared by HWTC.

Note: Statistical significance is denoted by asterisks: \* = 10%, \*\* = 5%, \*\*\* = 1%.

**Table 4** Intake characteristics of WISE participants (excluding Hawthorne) and comparison group

	Comparison Group (N=144)	WISE Group (N=61)	Difference	Standard error
<b>Looking for long term work (%)</b>				
No	43.6	10.2	-33.4 ***	(7.2)
Yes	43.6	79.7	36.1 ***	(7.6)
Not sure	12.9	10.2	-2.7	(5.3)
<b>Financial Situation (%) (participants were asked to select all that apply, thus percentages add to &gt; 100%)</b>				
I would like to generate more income but I'm managing	26.4	52.5	26.1 ***	(7.0)
I'm trying to secure a better job (this could include a more stable job, or getting more hours at work)	19.4	57.4	37.9 ***	(6.6)
I do not have enough income but I'm not actively trying to generate more	12.5	21.3	8.8	(5.5)
My financial situation is affecting my well-being	35.4	24.6	-10.8	(7.1)
I'm comfortable or optimistic about my future	16.7	9.8	-6.8	(5.4)
None of these statements apply to me	18.8	4.9	-13.8 **	(5.3)
<b>Financial Stress (Scale 1-10, 1 no stress at all to 10 extreme stress)</b>				
	6.9	6.6	-0.3	(0.4)
<b>Feeling about current housing situation (%)</b>				
Always worried	27.8	33.3	5.6	(7.0)
Sometimes worried	36.1	46.7	10.6	(7.5)
Not worried	36.1	20.0	-16.1 **	(7.1)
<b>Health (Scale 1-10, 1 Poor to 10 Excellent)</b>				
	6.3	7.5	1.2 ***	(0.3)
<b>Life Satisfaction (Scale 1-10, 1 Very Dissatisfied to 10 Very Satisfied)</b>				
	5.9	5.7	-0.2	(0.4)

Source: SRDC intake surveys.

Note: Statistical significance is denoted by asterisks: \* = 10%, \*\* = 5%, \*\*\* = 1%.

## APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL THREE-YEAR EMPLOYMENT-RELATED OUTCOMES

Table 5 Additional employment-related outcomes

	Comparison Group (N=53)	WISE Group (N=49)	Difference	Standard Errors
<b>Career Planning</b>				
<b>Career Planning scale score, 3-items (1 to 5)</b>	3.51	3.50	-0.01	(0.19)
I decided what my career objectives should be (1-5)	3.40	3.35	-0.05	(0.24)
I have a plan for my career (1-5)	3.56	3.80	0.24	(0.21)
I have a strategy for achieving my career goals (1-5)	3.60	3.62	0.03	(0.20)
<b>Career decision-making self-efficacy</b>				
<b>CDMSE scale score, 5-items (1 to 5)</b>	3.28	3.48	0.21	(0.21)
How confident are you that you can successfully...				
Find information about careers you are interested in (1-5)	3.46	3.55	0.09	(0.23)
Find information about education or training programs in the area of work you are interested in (1-5)	3.52	3.60	0.07	(0.22)
Determine the steps you need to take to successfully achieve your career goals (1-5)	3.30	3.53	0.23	(0.21)
Determine the steps to take if you are having trouble with an aspect of your job (1-5)	3.25	3.33	0.08	(0.23)
Choose a career that will fit your abilities and interests (1-5)	3.49	3.53	0.04	(0.24)
<b>Current Employment</b>				
<b>Are you currently looking for long-term (or better) work?</b>				
Yes	50.94	53.06	2.12	(10.00)
No	30.19	24.49	-5.70	(8.91)
Unsure	18.87	22.45	3.58	(8.09)
<b>Job Search Self Efficacy (conditional on those looking for work)</b>				
<b>JSSE scale score, 5-items (1-5)</b>	3.26	3.40	0.14	(0.25)
Prepare resumes that will get you interviews (1-5)	3.22	3.30	0.08	(0.27)
Prepare for interviews by researching the company and/or job role (1-5)	3.43	3.39	-0.04	(0.26)
Use a variety of sources to find job opportunities (1-5)	3.33	3.44	0.11	(0.28)
Search for and find good job opportunities (1-5)	3.24	3.69	0.45	*(0.26)
Choose a career that will fit your preferred lifestyle (1-5)	3.37	3.50	0.13	(0.25)

	Comparison Group (N=53)	WISE Group (N=49)	Difference	Standard Errors
<b>Job Search Skills (conditional on those looking for work)</b>				
JSC Scale score (1-5)	3.95	3.93	-0.02	(0.18)
I have a clear idea of the type of job I want	3.85	3.91	0.06	(0.22)
I have work experience that makes me employable	3.91	3.77	-0.13	(0.24)
I am aware of what it takes to get and keep a job	4.25	4.11	-0.14	(0.19)
<b>Barriers to Employment</b>				
<b>Barriers to Employment</b>				
Yes, experiencing barriers (%)	75.47	57.14	-18.33	* (9.26)
Number of barriers (range 0 to 5)	1.51	1.08	-0.43	* (0.25)
<b>% Responding agree/strongly agree to each barrier:</b>				
I do not have a reliable vehicle or a way to get to work and interviews	30.19	28.57	-1.62	(9.12)
The hours I can work rarely match the hours employers want	15.09	12.24	-2.85	(6.88)
Finding affordable child care when I work is a problem for me	11.32	12.24	0.92	(6.45)
It may be hard to find a job with the pay I want	30.19	24.49	-5.70	(8.91)
I have a disability, injury, illness, or health problem that may hurt my chances of getting a job	37.74	16.33	-21.41	** (8.67)
My ability to read or write English may limit my ability to find a job	9.43	2.04	-7.39	(4.65)
Other	16.98	12.24	-4.74	(7.07)

Note: Statistically significant levels: \* = 10 per cent; \*\* = 5 per cent; \*\*\* = 1 per cent.

## APPENDIX C: OTHER THREE-YEAR OUTCOMES

Table 6 Three-year outcomes other than employment

	Comparison Group	WISE Group	Difference	Standard Errors
<b>Impact of COVID-19 beyond employment</b>				
Experienced impact of COVID-19 (%) (N=68)	71.70	61.22	-10.47	(9.38)
Number of areas impacted by COVID-19 (out of 5)	1.68	1.06	-0.62	** (0.29)
<b>Impact of COVID-19 categories (%) (N=68)</b>				
Physical or mental health	43.40	34.69	-8.70	(9.73)
Income	37.74	32.65	-5.08	(9.55)
Housing	16.98	10.20	-6.78	(6.85)
Personal or family circumstances	32.08	14.29	-17.79	** (8.30)
Social or community support system	37.74	14.29	-23.45	*** (8.51)
<b>Self-Care (1 to 5)</b>				
Paid attention to personal hygiene	4.49	4.52	0.03	(0.15)
Paid attention to personal appearance	4.21	4.27	0.06	(0.15)
Ate healthy, regular meals	3.79	3.60	-0.19	(0.21)
Made it to scheduled appointments on time	4.57	4.32	-0.25	(0.17)
<b>Overall Health</b>				
(1=Poor, 10=Excellent) (N=97 responses)	6.44	7.12	0.68	** (0.33)
<b>Life Satisfaction</b>				
(1=Very dissatisfied, 10=Very satisfied), (N=102 responses)	5.83	6.06	0.23	(0.40)

Note: Statistically significant levels: \* = 10 per cent; \*\* = 5 per cent; \*\*\* = 1 per cent.

## APPENDIX D: WISE PROFILES

### BUILDING UP

Building Up is a social enterprise established in Toronto in 2014 which runs a pre-apprenticeship trades training program for individuals with barriers to employment and provides wraparound support to program participants. For Building Up, the goal is not only to help participants start an apprenticeship, but also to support them in the longer-term to complete it and retain employment, while building their resilience and adaptability. Interviews with Building Up staff and participants identified that Building Up's unique approach to achieving this goal as a WISE is to be flexible, reflective, and person-centred. This approach allows the WISE to adapt to participants' current and emerging barriers and interests with employment and grow as an organization to respond to opportunities and challenges within the WISE sector.

The enterprise offers three main areas of service which are (1) water efficiency retrofits in apartment buildings, specifically toilets, showerheads, and faucet aerators, (2) general contracting including renovations of bathrooms, kitchens, and homes, and (3) general labour. Fundamental to Building Up's operation as a WISE is incorporating workforce development at the core of their social enterprise operations. For Building Up, the business aspect of the WISE is used as a training tool for the pre-apprenticeship trades training program and as a means for providing employment opportunities to community members facing barriers to employment.

As a WISE, Building Up's approach centres on:

1. Having a flexible funding model;
2. Engaging in reflection to inform program adjustments; and
3. Fostering continuity of care and a person-centred environment.

Using this approach Building Up is focused on supporting each participant's personal development and growth as they move through their employment journey.

#### Flexible funding model

For Building Up, a flexible funding model is central to their approach as a WISE where the core operations of the enterprise are financed through a combination of customer contracts and grants from public and private funders (e.g., federal government, provincial government, Toronto Enterprise Fund). Building Up staff shared that generating their own revenue as a social enterprise through construction, renovation, and maintenance contracts provides greater

flexibility for the enterprise to manage the way in which these funds are used within the program. This allows the organization to have the flexibility to utilize their funds in response to emerging priorities and needs. For example, if participants experience unexpected financial struggles, Building Up is able to provide them with short-term financial support in the form of grocery cards or rent payments. Additionally, one program participant shared that Building Up purchased work boots for them when they first started in the training program, as they were unable to afford work boots at that time.

This flexibility in funding enables Building Up to directly support participants based on their unique circumstances and needs, even when the funding for that participant has ended. In contrast, most of the grants that Building Up receives from public and private funders typically have deadlines of when they can be used and parameters that can limit how they can be used. Building Up uses these more restrictive funds primarily to support the WISE's operating costs. Through these two main revenue sources, Building Up has been able to generate a stable yet flexible funding approach to addressing the specific needs of the organization and of the participants it trains and employs.

## Reflection and program adjustments

An additional key aspect to Building Up's approach as a WISE is how it utilizes a reflective approach to making program adjustments. Building Up staff noted that their reflective activities include check-ins with current and previous participants, as well as observing what is working well and what could be improved with their programming specifically and the organization more broadly. Building Up staff discussed how being part of the "Alleviating Homelessness" research project has validated and reinforced their engagement in these reflective activities, as they spark growth and change at both the participant level and organizational level. With reflection as a valued aspect of their approach, Building Up staff are able to learn from participants' feedback and experiences and adjust programming as needed, and they are able to respond to emerging opportunities for growth and development as an organization.

Building Up has trained over 550 people since they started as a WISE eight years ago. Building Up staff discussed how they have used this time to not only increase the quantity of program spots, but also the quality of the training and work experiences they are able to provide to participants. As Building Up has grown as a WISE, check-ins and observations have encouraged staff to identify how they can employ and support individuals for a longer period of time beyond the training program.

Through informal check-ins and ongoing engagement with previous program participants, Building Up staff recognized that their participants were still facing barriers to maintaining employment even after they started an apprenticeship or gained other employment. This

recognition was the impetus for the development of Building Up's alumni program, which provides previous participants with career navigation, financial coaching, and other social supports, as needed, throughout their apprenticeship and other employment journeys.

Building Up staff also shared that their involvement in the Alleviating Homelessness project has strengthened their commitment to research as it supports them in being more accountable to their organizational goals. At the broader organizational level, Building Up staff are increasingly seeking contracts with affordable housing providers in recognition of the lack of affordable housing in Toronto and surrounding areas for many current and previous program participants. Building Up senior management identified that the potential implications of this effort are two-fold; first, it provides an opportunity for participants to develop and use their construction skills in a way that they have identified as meaningful and fulfilling. Second, as participants increase their capacity to build and renovate affordable housing, they are also building their capacity to support themselves and their communities, fostering empowerment, self-determination, and collective action.

### Continuity of care and person-centred approach to growth and employment

Through a flexible funding model and a reflective approach to improving participant training and supports, Building Up programming has been developed to address participants' unique needs, which supports their personal growth, learning, and development. Building Up's pre-apprenticeship training includes a variety of construction experience for participants, such as bathroom, kitchen, and full home renovations; water efficiency retrofitting; and general labour. Through the training, participants are also connected to Building Up's employer networks for apprenticeship and employment opportunities based on their experience and areas of interest; however, interviews with program participants and program staff demonstrate that participants have access to more than just skills training and employment connections necessary for work as an apprentice in the trades. Participants are also provided with the wraparound supports needed to address their barriers to employment both during and post-completion of the program.

### Wraparound supports for current and previous program participants

Grounded in the understanding that everyone has a unique life experience and unique needs, Building Up has a full case management team that supports each participant through the provision of financial literacy training, career preparation and planning, food security supports, support with accessing housing, mental health supports, among others as needed. Participants shared that they are also provided with tools and equipment necessary to take part in the training program, such as hardhats, safety vests, and work boots. When participants have struggled financially and needed assistance, Building Up has also been able to offer grocery

cards, rent payment assistance, and financial support to cover their union dues. When Building Up staff are unable to provide specific supports that participants need, they are able to draw on a growing network of external agencies for referrals. Through this combined access to internal and external services and resources, Building Up is able to offer participants with a range of wraparound supports that align with their multiple and intersecting factors that contribute to them building their capacity to be independent, achieve their goals, and be successful in their careers.

### Wraparound supports for current and previous participants

Building Up's person-centred approach to growth and employment extends beyond current participants to those who previously took part in the WISE's programming. As shared by Building Up staff, participants who have moved on to employment sometimes need to step back for personal reasons. Participants can also find themselves unemployed due to the nature of employment within the construction industry, which can be seasonal, contract-based, project-based, etc. When these setbacks occur, the Building Up team can provide paid work and other wraparound supports through the alumni program. This reliable source of employment income and connection to supports that previous participants can access provide them with long-term support and stability.

Building Up's wraparound supports that are based on each current and previous participants' unique needs provides an opportunity for meaningful, supportive, and well-paid training and employment where individuals' unique barriers to employment can begin to be addressed. This approach as a WISE allows them to meet individuals where they are at, but also helps them to see the possibilities of where they can be.

### HWTC: HAWTHORNE FOOD & DRINK

At the beginning of the "Alleviating Homelessness" project, The Hospitality Workers Training Centre (HWTC) operated Hawthorne Food & Drink, a social enterprise that provided hands-on training in the hospitality sector for individuals experiencing barriers to employment. The enterprise was located at 60 Richmond Street East in Toronto. The restaurant served food using local, seasonal, and sustainable ingredients, and the menus took inspiration from Ontario farms and Toronto neighbourhoods. As has been noted in the project's interim report, the restaurant ceased operations in March 2020. Despite its closure, the research team has been following up with current HWTC staff and previous participants to learn about the unique role of the WISE in their employment journey.

## Role of Hawthorne

Given that Hawthorne participants were trained to work in the hospitality industry, it is unsurprising that their employment opportunities directly connected to the WISE were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; however, participants shared that the skills they learned through Hawthorne’s programming enabled them to be employable in other jobs outside of the hospitality industry. For the participants interviewed, the transferability of skills was particularly impactful on their employment journey.

Participants described how the hands-on training in a restaurant setting gave them the experience of working in a fast-paced environment and an understanding of the skills required for this line of work, such as problem-solving and communication, which they are now able to apply in other sectors, such as healthcare and childcare. For some participants, their participation in the program allowed them to get the required certifications and training (e.g., Smart Serve) to work in a variety of positions throughout the hospitality industry. Some also shared that the opportunity to be part of a food and beverage training program aligned with their passion for cooking, providing them with a meaningful training and work experience. Additionally, participants identified that taking part in the Hawthorne program increased their confidence and job preparation skills (e.g., building a resume, preparing for a job interview) to get into the workforce.

One individual shared that prior to Hawthorne, she had never worked in the restaurant industry, so it was entirely new to her as a newcomer to Canada. While she was unable to work in the hospitality industry, the hands-on training increased her understanding of workplace expectations and communication, which gave her the confidence to further her education.

Despite the impacts of the pandemic on the hospitality industry, these follow-up interviews with Hawthorne participants demonstrate how their experience at the WISE provided them with valuable skills that are transferable to other industries and sectors, as well as the confidence to continue their employment journeys in diverse areas.

## Role of WISE sector

In the final interview for this project, HWTC staff reflected on the unique role of the WISE sector related to workforce development and employment, particularly for some of the most vulnerable community members who face significant employment barriers, as well as the current state of the WISE sector in terms of sustainability in the current labour market.

Central to this discussion was the way in which WISEs provide participants with a safe, inclusive space for training and employment, where they can access the wraparound supports that address their individual needs. Staff shared how within the WISE sector, employers anticipate

that participants will face significant barriers that make showing up to work, enrolling in training, and/or completing a program incredibly difficult. In traditional workplaces, barriers such as homelessness, food insecurity, addictions, mental health concerns, and poverty may be sources of shame and lead to unemployment; however, WISEs typically seek out participants who experience these social issues. At Hawthorne, staff shared that if a participant was absent, there was a staff member who could check in on them and support them to access the supports they needed, allowing the participant to return to the program and start where they left off when they were ready to do so. HWTC staff explained how this compassionate, flexible, and safe approach is central to the WISE sector.

However, HWTC staff shared that this high level of individualized support they provide can make it particularly challenging for WISEs to be self-sustainable. The additional supports and flexible, hands-on employment approach are often crucial to participants' success. HWTC staff explained how these features are also what set the WISE sector apart from other workforce development and employment opportunities. However, the staff shared that this unique approach to supportive employment is not always recognized by funders. To support the economic sustainability of WISEs, HWTC staff identified how WISEs could benefit from integrated and sustained business supports, such as tax credits, payroll tax credits, marketing supports, and other business development supports, rather than direct funding to finance their operations.

## GATEWAY LINENS AND DISPOSAL SERVICES

Gateway Linens and Disposal Services (“Gateway Linens”) is a social enterprise of The Salvation Army and an employment retraining program for individuals experiencing barriers to employment, notably through experiences of homelessness or precarious, non-permanent housing. Central to its operations as a social enterprise, it provides industrial laundry and garbage-disposal services. While Gateway Linens operates within the larger Salvation Army umbrella of community supports, it is funded through the social enterprise's business revenues and does not receive direct funding from The Salvation Army, nor other outside grants.

For Gateway Linens staff, the focus of the WISE's programming is to provide structured hands-on training that includes direct, paid work experience (i.e., within the social enterprise), targeted skills training (e.g., workplace certifications, workplace communication, conflict management skills), and life skills training (e.g., financial literacy) to support participants' recovery, growth, and independence. Interviews with Gateway Linens staff and participants identified that its unique approach as a WISE centres on providing participants with individualized programming made possible through:

1. A stable yet flexible work environment; and
2. A large network of support agencies within the health and social services sectors in Toronto.

Using this approach, Gateway Linens can support each participant’s personal development and growth as they move through their employment journey.

### Individualized programming

At Gateway Linens, individualized programming is about “meeting people where they are at” and recognizing that each participant’s employment journey is unique. To meet people where they are at, Gateway Linens staff shared how they try to understand each new participant’s current reality when they first enter the employment retraining program. For example, applicants are asked about their barriers to employment and their mental health challenges, including their histories with drug and/or alcohol addictions. This is not done to screen applicants out of the program, but to understand the specific support each applicant can benefit from within the WISE and to foster a sense of community among participants who may each have their own personal barriers to overcome yet have faced similar challenges in the past. As a previous participant explained about his experience at Gateway Linens, he felt supported by others in the program who had faced similar struggles with addictions and were focused on recovery.

This individual approach to programming is also evident in the way in which Gateway Linens staff conceptualize participants’ success throughout their employment journeys. Due to their knowledge of the range of circumstances participants are at when they begin the program, staff shared how success means something different for each participant. For some participants, this can mean moving into stable, long-term employment or enrolling in or completing an educational program. For others it can mean starting at “rock bottom” with respect to their finances, housing, and health as they work on staying clean and gaining stable housing. At Gateway Linens, these are very different journeys, but are all stories of success.

The individualized approach at Gateway Linens is made possible through its stable, yet flexible, work environment for participants, and its large network of agencies in Toronto.

### Stable, yet flexible, work environment

Staff and participants at Gateway Linens described how the work environment is both stable and flexible. Previous participants shared how this stability provided them with an opportunity to learn about workplace expectations through direct work experience and to build their sense of responsibility and commitment. They could gain this work experience while also attending to their needs through recovery programs or addictions treatment. As staff described, this environment is unlike traditional employers who may not be able to retain or support employees who have these specific needs and periods of absence.

Additionally, Gateway Linens is also a flexible work environment as staff recognize that participants are often coming from precarious housing and personal situations that can lead to uncertain work availability. Participants can adjust their shifts on short notice, if needed and without significant consequences (e.g., losing their job). While staff acknowledged that this provides some challenges operationally, as staffing can sometimes be unpredictable, it gives participants the flexibility that is sometimes needed to manage their day-to-day circumstances. Staff believe that, together, the flexibility and stability of Gateway Linens takes away some of the uncertainties for participants related to income and employment.

Central to Gateway Linens' approach as a WISE is that it provides a foundation for participants to come back to if needed. Staff explained how a participant will not lose their job if they must pause to go into a treatment program or if a participant finds employment elsewhere; there is almost always an option to return to the WISE for work if that employment does not work out.

### Large network of supports

Contributing to Gateway Linens' ability to support the individualized needs and goals of each participant is its large network of health and social service agencies within Toronto, which has grown over recent years due to increasing awareness and interest in Gateway Linens' work in the community. This network acts in two ways: 1) as an incoming referral source for potential participants, and 2) as an outgoing referral source for participants who need specific supports related to health, housing, etc.

In the early stages of Gateway Linens' operation, participants primarily came into the program from internal connections through The Salvation Army's Gateway shelter. Staff shared, however, that over time participants have increasingly been referred to the WISE through a broad range of agencies and organizations in Toronto. Examples of referring agencies include St. Michael's Hospital, Good Shepherd Centre, and other Salvation Army-associated and external community programs (e.g., Toronto Harbour Light). Staff described how the interest and reach of their program has expanded to such an extent within the city that there is usually a backlog of applicants due to the limited number of spots within the program.

In turn, as Gateway Linens' referral network has expanded, so too have its relationships with other service providers who can provide participants with specific wraparound supports as needed. As staff explained, Gateway Linens no longer needs to build these individualized supports into their in-house programming, but can leverage their existing relationships within the community to refer participants to agencies with expertise in specific areas, such as addictions support, mental health, etc. For example, if a participant is experiencing an addictions relapse, Gateway Linens staff can use their networks to ensure participants can quickly access a detox facility. They noted that this referral process reduces the duplication of services and

ensures participants can access the individualized wraparound supports they need, in a timely manner. If participants need to take time off to attend to their health and well-being, due to the stable and flexible nature of Gateway Linens' work environment they know they can continue their employment in a way that suits their specific circumstances and personal goals as they relate to health, housing, employment, education/training, etc.

Prior to their participation in the “Alleviating Homelessness” research project, staff shared that the diverse successes of participants and the unique ways in which Gateway Linens staff support participants on their employment journeys were mainly captured anecdotally in an unstructured format. Their involvement in the project, however, was the catalyst to Gateway Linens staff taking steps towards a more structured approach to research and evaluation of the program. They realized that this will allow them to better understand and document how these unique successes are connected to their overall operation and objectives as a WISE and how they can better serve the participants in their program.

## SOCIAL COFFEE BEAN & DC CLEANING

Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning are social enterprises of Services and Housing In the Province (SHIP) and provide employment opportunities for individuals experiencing barriers to employment, particularly individuals with mental health concerns. Social Coffee Bean is a café and coffee roaster providing services to the public and to private businesses through in-person take-out, curbside pickup, and delivery of bulk orders. DC Cleaning provides cleaning services to multiple SHIP sites and regional and local organizations. While these WISEs are owned by SHIP, they are funded through social enterprise business revenues and do not receive direct funding from SHIP.

For staff who oversee the WISEs, the goal of the programming is to provide safe, supportive employment opportunities where individuals may be connected to necessary wraparound supports through broader SHIP services and can maintain permanent employment within the social enterprises or build their employability skills to find employment with other businesses or organizations. As WISEs, Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning's approach centres on:

1. Being innovative and adaptable as a social enterprise, and
2. Fostering an employee-centred environment.

Using this approach, these WISEs are able to support each participant's personal development and growth as they move through their employment journey.

Staff shared how the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on both Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning, albeit in very different ways.

## Social Coffee Bean

The Social Coffee Bean's café operations have been mostly shut down since the beginning of the pandemic. Staff described how they avoided completely closing the operations of the social enterprise by focusing on increasing their revenue streams based on coffee bean roasting and bulk bean orders. They began providing curbside pickup of coffee beans, delivery of bulk orders, and coffee services to new partners. Through their connections with Buy Social Canada, Social Coffee Bean became connected with Mobilinx, the winning bidder for the Metrolinx Hurontario Light Rail Transit project. Staff explained that while this connection created an opportunity for Social Coffee Bean to provide coffee services at some of Mobilinx's construction sites, it has not yet come to fruition. Despite having to close the store-front café due to the pandemic, bulk bean sales have provided additional sources of revenue to maintain employment for some of the staff.

The café is beginning to open back up with the easing of pandemic restrictions, albeit with an adjusted schedule where its hours of operation will be at peak times, such as 7:30am to 10:00am and 4:00pm to 6:00pm. There are also pop-ups planned to increase awareness and demand for Social Coffee Bean's goods and services.

## DC Cleaning

While Social Coffee Bean refocused its social enterprise operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, DC Cleaning expanded its services and sales. During the pandemic, DC Cleaning gained two additional contracts for cleaning services and also introduced enhanced cleaning services in response to their clients' COVID-19 needs. Staff shared that they plan to sustain both of these areas of growth beyond the pandemic to continue building the social enterprise. They also described how they were able to retrain some employees from Social Coffee Bean to work at DC Cleaning in order to maintain employees' income and employment experience.

Through the innovation and adaptability of senior staff and employees, both the Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning have been able to maintain an employee-centred environment in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

## Employee-centred environment

While innovation and adaptability are important for maintaining business operations, management shared that their primary focus is on providing an employee-centred environment where meeting their employees' needs is at the forefront of their objectives as a WISE. They explained that while WISEs are about employment, their role goes beyond just being an employer and is about providing both wraparound supports and real-life work experience and training to their employees to support them in being successful in their employment journeys.

With both WISEs being under the ownership of SHIP, employees of Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning are often clients of SHIP. This means that they have access to various health and social supports, such as housing supports, case management services, mental health services, and social recreational programming. Consequently, employees can access the supports they need to help overcome their barriers to employment.

Another aspect of the employee-centred environment at Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning is supporting employees to work towards their individual employment goals by helping them to build their skills, have an income, and gain confidence. Staff described how employees learn about workplace expectations and build their communication skills so that they not only increase their employability, but also learn how to advocate for themselves in the workplace. As employees begin to express their confidence and interests, they can also move into leadership roles within the enterprise where they can train new employees.

As one employee described, they had little opportunity to gain work experience after living in difficult circumstances for years prior to starting work at the Social Coffee Bean. Their time at the WISE built up their self-confidence and their courage to advocate for themselves, which, for this individual was an incredibly meaningful experience after the experience they faced. They also shared that when they were dealing with financial hardship, the staff were very generous and provided them the opportunity to share in the end of day food supporting a zero-waste mandate.

By working within an employee-centred environment at Social Coffee Bean and DC Cleaning, employees have the support and opportunity to sustain stable employment with the WISEs or to gain the skills to apply for and obtain employment in other workplaces.

Through their participation in the “Alleviating Homelessness” project, staff indicated that they intend to use this research to document and share with the broader SHIP organization and community their approach as WISEs. Their involvement in the project has helped to highlight the innovative ways in which they have been able to maintain social enterprise operations and support for employees during the pandemic, which has been central to their objectives as a WISE.

## LOFT KITCHEN

LOFT Kitchen is a social enterprise within Christie Ossington Community Centre (CONC) and a culinary employment training program for youth experiencing barriers to employment, particularly youth who identify within 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Central to its operations as a social enterprise, LOFT Kitchen provides café and catering services, sells pre-packaged meals (e.g., Sunday brunch, Friday lunch and dinner) and operates a weekend farmer’s market. LOFT

Kitchen operates within the larger CONC umbrella of community supports and is sustained through its business revenues along with grant funding and youth wage supports.

For CONC, the goal of the enterprise is to provide safe, supportive, and hands-on training and employment for youth in the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Interviews with management and participants identified that LOFT Kitchen’s unique approach as a WISE centres participants’ personal development and growth in the earlier stages of their employment journeys and their successful transitions into the labour market. CONC aims to achieve this by offering an inclusive and safe environment and providing youth with opportunities to develop a broad range of skills.

### Inclusive and safe environment

Staff and participants described how the training and work environment of LOFT Kitchen is inclusive and safe for youth from diverse backgrounds. For enterprise staff, this means encouraging an environment where inclusivity is engrained in their work and the objectives of the social enterprise. Related to the physical environment, LOFT Kitchen operates within the George Chuvalo Neighbourhood Centre, which was developed and designed with the intent of specifically supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ initiatives in Toronto’s West End. From the physical space that includes symbols and imagery representative of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities (e.g., Pride and Transgender flags painted onto outdoor seating and reflected in marketing material), to the availability of services that include a free store with an inclusive clothing bank (e.g., +gender affirming underwear) and drop-in activities specifically for trans and gender diverse youth, the space that LOFT operates within is affirming, inclusive, and challenging of gender norms. This training and work environment enables LOFT to offer participants a space that accepts and celebrates their diverse identities.

Enterprise staff described how they also try to foster inclusivity and safety into their interactions and approach with participants in the enterprise. Staff tend to act as a general resource for youth in terms of accessing specific wraparound supports that address their barriers to employment. They explained how some external referring agencies do not have a 2SLGBTQIA+ focus and struggle to provide the individual supports that youth within these communities may need, such as access to service providers with lived experience. LOFT Kitchen staff described how they work together as a team to identify appropriate internal (i.e., within CONC) or external supports to address the youth’s unique needs and to ensure their sense of safety.

The significance of LOFT Kitchen inclusive environment was also reflected in interviews with previous participants. One participant shared how she felt accepted and “like family” when she started at LOFT Kitchen. She described her struggles with mental illness and how her time at LOFT Kitchen built up her self-confidence, her ambition, and sense of belonging. For example,

she shared how within the first few days at LOFT Kitchen she was given keys to access certain aspects of the social enterprise. This made her feel important, trustworthy, and valued.

Staff explained how the integrated model of LOFT Kitchen, with its space, operations, and inclusive approach provides a training program and paid work for youth with barriers to employment that is focused on inclusivity and acceptance.

## Broad range of skills development

Within this inclusive and safe environment, participants have opportunities to develop a broad range of skills that contribute to their employability in a variety of sectors, which is particularly important in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the hospitality industry. Staff shared how LOFT's skills training includes specific culinary and café skills, as well as general administrative, maintenance, and customer service skills.

Training at LOFT Kitchen is hands-on, so participants gain practical experience through employment at the social enterprise. Examples of specific culinary and café skills training that LOFT Kitchen offers to staff and youth enrolled in the employment training program include kitchen safety, menu creation, barista skills (e.g., espresso machine operation), basic cooking and baking skills, cooking and baking foods from specific cultures, sales system operations, among others. Staff and participants also provided examples of the more general skills training opportunities available within the enterprise, which include customer service, job preparation (e.g., resume building, interview preparation), cleaning and maintenance of the kitchen and café, and administrative skills (e.g., reception, inventory, scheduling).

LOFT staff described how the enterprise does not offer a standardized employment training program where all participants complete the same training, in the same sequence, at the same time. Instead, participants can build their skills and gain experience in the areas that align with their interests and goals. Participants can then further hone their skills after they are finished with the program by working as relief staff at LOFT Kitchen. The broad range of training opportunities that participants have access to at LOFT Kitchen, within the program and after the program, not only supports their employability in a variety of sectors, but also provides a more individualized approach to learning based on youth participants' interests and skills gaps.