



## **Community Apprenticeship Skills Support (CASS)**

### **Lessons Learned**

## **Background**

Literacy Link South Central received three years of government funding to pilot the Community Apprenticeship Skills Support (CASS) project. Between December 2015 and December 2018, Literacy Link South Central used a case management approach to help individuals living in poverty on their path to apprenticeship. Project participants were supported as they pursued the education and connections they needed for a career in the trades.

This project was intended to support people who functioned at less than a Grade 12 skill level who live in the city of London or Middlesex County and who belong to one or more of the following categories:

- Someone who has a disability, either suspected or officially diagnosed
- Someone who is a young male, 29 years of age or younger who is not already in education, training or employment (NEET)
- Someone who is not born in Canada but has been here for 5 years or longer

Priority was given to those who qualify for Ontario Works or Ontario Disabilities Support Program payments.

Participants in the CASS project were matched with a local Apprenticeship Support Lead who specializes in supporting one of the three categories outlined above. The Apprenticeship Support Lead guided participants as they navigated the services and systems needed to successfully become an apprentice. There were a variety of interventions and supports that were offered to participants, including:

- Identification of their current skills, learning style, and apprenticeship goals
- An Educational Goal report outlining the steps needed to gain the essential skills and high school diploma or an equivalent that the participant needs
- Skills upgrading individualized to the participant's availability, skill level, and need for additional supports or accommodations
- Access to employment services
- Learning disability assessments, if needed

- Labour Market Information specific to their trade or trades of choice
- Assistance identifying potential employers
- Support during the classroom-based portion of their apprenticeship training
- On-the-job support during work placement if needed

## **A New Approach**

How was this approach different from what was already happening?

This project was a new way to support someone on the path to apprenticeship. Now, in our community, there are many services and supports available for people who want to enter the trades. Unfortunately, many people go from one service to the next, not quite sure of the path they are taking or what community services are out there that can help them to their end goal of apprenticeship. Service providers are good at the service they provide however, they are only accountable for the client's success within their program, and, in some cases, while the client transitions out of that program. With several activities and stakeholders involved in the apprenticeship process, people can become overwhelmed and often drop out along the way. This project intended to research, "What if the client was supported with a case management approach through the entirety of their apprenticeship journey?"

The idea of case management for the purposes of apprenticeship, to have support from the beginning of the journey to the very end, was new. Being able to provide extra services, assessments and attention to individuals, especially those who are living in poverty, was also new.

The CASS project was different, not only because of the introduction of an Apprenticeship Support Lead to help guide participants through the system, but also because it opened the door for communication between all of the services and support organizations that worked with CASS participants. Through the Apprenticeship Support Lead, these organizations could work in partnership to bring participants closer to their apprenticeship goals. In many ways, the CASS project represented a new approach to client support.

## **Project Evaluation**

How would we know if the CASS project was making a difference in our community?

The project engaged the services of an External Evaluator who lead the formal evaluation process. The evaluation framework and activities addressed the following measures:

- Are we increasing people's knowledge about apprenticeship?
- Are skills upgrading programs making a difference in people's lives?

- Are we helping to make people more employable?
- Are services and programs working closer together to assist community members who want to pursue apprenticeship?

The comprehensive findings of the External Evaluator have been delivered in a formal report and are available upon request. However, outside of formal evaluation there were several lessons learned during the project that we'd like to share.

## **Lessons Learned**

### **The need for support existed outside of our target categories.**

Our target population focussed on people who received support from Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP). Soon after our project began, we realized there are portions of our community members who live in poverty but do not receive supports from OW and ODSP. For instance, there are people who live in unstable housing conditions, such as those who “couch surf,” at friends’ or extended family members’ houses. Knowing this population could also benefit from the increased supports offered through the CASS project, we soon broadened our target categories to include people who self-identify as living in poverty.

Likewise, we broadened our definition of who is eligible for the project beyond people with disabilities, newcomers, and young men who were NEET. We found that others affected by poverty, but not falling into these categories, could benefit from the project (example, young women.) As we didn’t want to be the source of additional barriers, we accepted participants outside of our target categories on a case-by-case basis.

### **Apprenticeship is about the long game.**

Although CASS participants were often enthusiastic about pursuing their area of apprenticeship, many of the clients we saw through the project experienced the tyranny of the moment. Apprenticeship is about the long game, but the participants in this project often experienced many external challenges such as:

- Deaths in the family
- Court proceedings
- Child care/custody considerations
- The need to apply for ODSP
- Unstable housing situations

Overlay this with the complexity of potential disabilities and/or mental health issues, and apprenticeship completion – a long-term commitment – may feel unattainable.

For the reasons listed and for other reasons, participants, on occasion, had to set aside their apprenticeship goals and therefore backed out of the corresponding programming

and services. It was during these times, especially, that we saw huge value in the case management approach to apprenticeship. If the participant decided to re-engage in their apprenticeship goal, the Apprenticeship Support Lead was able to pick up where the participant left off in the process and guide that person towards their next steps.

### **Success can be defined in several ways.**

Initially, we thought that the overall success of the project would be if we assist people to successfully complete an apprenticeship. As the project progressed, we found we also celebrated these outcomes:

- Participants found permanent work related to a trade. They felt satisfied to be working in a career of their choosing and no longer wanted to pursue an apprenticeship.
- Participants realized that an apprenticeship wasn't a good fit for them so they redirected their career goals and sought other opportunities. The good news is they avoided finding this out later after investing effort, time, and money.
- Participants were engaged in meaningful programming that would ultimately lengthen their time in the apprenticeship process, but improved their chances of success, because the time they took to address gaps in skills and knowledge up front would provide them with a more solid foundation.

### **Skill and knowledge assessments are valuable in preparing people for a successful apprenticeship.**

As part of the overall evaluation, three assessment tools and an Educational Interview were offered to project participants. Originally our intent was to measure changes in literacy skills, employment readiness and \*apprenticeship knowledge with each participant throughout the life of the project. Often participants were engaged in the first series of assessments, wanting to know if they had the education, skills and knowledge they needed to move forward with their career goals. These assessments were valuable in helping participants realize where they may have gaps early in the apprenticeship process. This allowed the necessary programming and supports to be put in place at the onset, instead of having the participant fail at some point down the road due to unforeseen challenges.

It's worth noting that one Apprenticeship Support Lead stated that he often administered the assessments in segments, at times that made sense for what the client was focusing on, instead of having the client complete them all at the same time. This helped the client to more clearly see the value of each assessment and also mitigated the possibility of client assessment fatigue.

Completing assessments was completely voluntary. As the project progressed, we found that the willingness to participate in ongoing assessments was fading. Although many participants found the initial assessments very helpful, they couldn't see the value of completing another set of assessments, especially if they had moved closer to their goal (if they were employed, in upgrading and so on.)

\*The “ApprentKnow” assessment and corresponding “Cassport” was developed through this project to address knowledge about apprenticeship terminology and concepts. This assessment was the result of international research and input from local apprenticeship stakeholders.

### **The idea of client sharing is difficult for some service providers to understand/execute.**

During the life of this project, provincial policies and corresponding funding models, prevented provincially-funded (EO) employment agencies from sharing clients. A client could be affiliated with only one EO employment agency. The CASS project was funded through a different source and therefore was not bound by those restrictions. That said, when publically promoting the CASS project it seemed difficult for some employment service providers to understand that their apprenticeship-bound client, upon becoming a CASS project participant, would be case managed by an Apprenticeship Support Lead at another agency. Instead of seeing the CASS project as a valuable tool to help high-risk and harder-to-serve clients achieve success, service providers often perceived this sharing of clients as undesirable. Despite our varied attempts to overcome this misconception, service providers often didn’t understand that what we were trying to achieve would not negatively impact their numbers. In fact, it would ultimately help them and their clients be successful.

### **Apprenticeship is not a linear path.**

Often, when service providers speak about the path to a successful apprenticeship, it’s described as a simple and linear process. For example, “First, you find an employer. Then you sign a contract with the Ministry. Then you have on-the-job training and in-school training and then, if applicable, you write the C of Q exam.”

During this project we found that the path is anything but linear. At project intake, participants were often at various points along that perceived linear path. Some had an employer but also had a lack of skills to succeed during the in-school portion of their apprenticeship. Some had a high school diploma but lacked the skills and habits that are required by an employer. Some didn’t have a high school diploma but had strong literacy skills.

Participants in the CASS project moved in and out of services, piecing together the necessary components to build their foundation for a successful apprenticeship. Literacy upgrading, employment readiness programs. and continual assessments played a key role in building this foundation. Once participants acknowledged that the path to apprenticeship included several side roads that could include revisiting certain points/services, they were more receptive to talking about their apprenticeship needs.

### **People might lack knowledge about what supports are available to them as they pursue an apprenticeship.**

It was revealed during this project that there are gaps in knowledge about supports that are available to people who pursue an apprenticeship. In addition, there were misconceptions about what is “allowed” when someone is on OW and ODSP. To address these gaps in knowledge, Literacy Link South Central self-funded a community

conversation for service providers. During the “Let’s Trade” event, panel members told an audience of 40 service providers about the supports they offer and about other supports that are available elsewhere and often not known about. Panel members represented OW, OSDP, Literacy and Basic Skills programs and an agency working with people with various disabilities.

After presentations from each panel member, the audience was invited to ask questions. There was also an opportunity for everyone in the room to share their knowledge on the topic of supports for apprentices.

***Employment Ontario services are still unknown to many people who could benefit from using these services.***

The CASS project was promoted to any organization that might be working with the target population. This took us outside our regular spheres of interaction. It was interesting that the most uptake we got to do presentations was from agencies working in the mental health field. During conversations with their clients and staff, it became apparent that EO employment services were unknown to many of them. In some cases, EO employment services were thought to be the same as privately owned “temp” agencies. This project allowed us to introduce EO services to a new population. This was an unintended positive outcome of the CASS project.

***The more service providers know about apprenticeship, the more likely their apprenticeship-bound clients will be successful.***

One of the re-occurring lessons learned during the project was around the need for service providers to have a strong knowledge of the intricacies of the apprenticeship system. One of the CASS Apprenticeship Support Leads reflected that, as the project progressed, he was more effective and efficient in helping his apprentice-bound clients. He directly related this to his increased knowledge of programs, services and supports that someone can access in pursuit of their career goals. During the project he admittedly learned more about apprenticeship and different ways to navigate the existing systems. He provided this insight, “I learned a lot about apprenticeship and I already thought I knew a lot. I was the go-to person within my organization for matters related to apprenticeship. I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” In learning more about apprenticeship, he also learned how to frame conversations related to apprenticeship – how to talk to clients about apprenticeship in ways that make apprenticeship sound more achievable and within clients’ reach.

Many community organizations have someone who is designated as an expert related to apprenticeship, but that individual may not know what they don’t know. In addition, agencies may not feel like they need more information about apprenticeship because they have no direct stake in apprenticeship. They don’t have to assist a certain number of clients in finding an apprenticeship per year. There are no targets. In fact, nobody within Employment and Training (employment and adult literacy) is specifically contracted to assist people in getting into apprenticeship. We rely on people coming to our programs with this goal already firmly established.

If we want to be more proactive in moving people towards apprenticeship, we need to build our collective capacity to talk about apprenticeship to interested parties. This capacity goes beyond basic knowledge of government incentives that are available to employers and apprentices. A true understanding of the apprenticeship system includes knowing how we can all play a role in the process. How do we know if a person has the skills and knowledge they need to successfully pursue an apprenticeship? How can programs that offer pre-apprenticeships, literacy skill building, employment readiness, work placements, disability supports and financial aid be integrated into a person's overall apprenticeship action plan? Only when we have a grasp of this total picture can we, as service providers, be more effective in helping clients succeed in their apprenticeship goals and address the community-wide shortage of apprentices.



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