

Christie Refugee Welcome Centre



External Evaluation

Employment and Settlement Program for Refugee Claimants

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External Evaluation by:

Andrea Blackman

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BACKGROUND

The idea of piloting an employment program had been percolating since the mid-2010s but began to become more serious in 2019. Christie Refugee Welcome Centre (CRWC) had steadily increased its service offerings in the last decade to provide greater wraparound support for refugees in their settlement process. Initial shelter, refugee hearing support and housing search were the core of CRWC's services for its first two decades. In the 2010s, much longer wait times for refugee determination hearings and a tighter rental housing market became the new normal, which contributed to clients living longer at CRWC's shelter, steadily increasing from about 1 month on average to over 4 months by 2019. In response to the longer in-shelter living period and other challenges that refugee claimant families were facing, CRWC systematically began to introduce new programs to meet refugee needs starting with a post-shelter program that supported families with case management services after they move into new communities. An on-site health clinic, women's wellness program and after-school children's literacy, fitness and music programs were launched in the following years.

Over the years of delivering post-shelter support, one of the most common requests from clients was for more employment support. It was clear that refugee claimants wanted to enter the Canadian labour market but did not have the supports they needed. Refugee claimants, due to their refugee status, are often not eligible to receive services from agencies that receive Federal government funding which targets government-assisted refugees, sponsored refugees, immigrants and other newcomers.

A 2004 study by the Vancouver Centre of Excellence found asylum seekers without the same supports as government-assisted refugees or sponsored refugees are economically worse off and this trend continues throughout their time in Canada. It will take many years for refugee claimants to escape poverty but with the right supports in their first years in Canada they can successfully do so. The same study by the Vancouver Centre of Excellence found the vast majority of refugees' income is earned from employment, not social assistance, within seven years of their arrival.

Most refugees are not accustomed to poverty – 40% held a professional job prior to fleeing to Canada, though only 7% found comparable work within 5 years (Marr, 2001). Refugees face the largest barriers among the newcomer population to employment and the consequence of unemployment may be more serious because of the refugee experience (Hynie, 2018). The sooner they are able to find adequate employment the less likely they will fall into chronic un/underemployment and poverty. Refugees are twice as likely to collect social welfare payments as other newcomers (DeVoretz, 2004).

Within this context, CRWC understood the gap in employment services for refugee claimants and the demand for such an initiative. CRWC was confident in its ability to develop an employment program given its recent experience in developing other programs. The largest hurdle was securing funding.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) is an agency of the Government of Ontario that was founded in 1982 and has grown to become one of Canada's leading granting foundations. Funded through provincial government lottery revenue, the OTF provides over \$100 million of funding each year to non-profit organizations across Ontario. Among its funding streams is the Grow grant, which provides up to \$750,000 over 3 years to expand successful projects or adapt a project that has proven to work elsewhere.

In the Spring of 2019, the CRWC leadership team began to plan submitting a proposal to the OTF's Grow grant stream due in November 2019. As CRWC did not already have an employment program the

organization needed to find an existing employment program that was proven to work elsewhere to use as a model for the proposal.

After a literature review, CRWC decided to use the Given the Chance (GtC) program as the evidence-based model that will inform CRWC's employment program. The GtC program was developed and implemented by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence's Ecumenical Migration Centre in Australia in 2002 and continues to this day in 3 sites serving refugees in Melbourne. The program evaluation was undertaken by BSL Research and Policy Centre from January 2005 to December 2007 with the evaluation report published in March 2008 by Kemran Mestan.

The GtC program develops social, educational and employment pathways for refugees. It applies a case management approach, guiding refugees into integrated and specialized support service components of employment training, mentoring and work placements. The employment training includes practicing interview skills, writing skills, job search techniques, understanding employment environment, and developing personalized employment pathways. Mentorship matches refugees with volunteers aligned with refugees' career goals. Work placements give refugees job experience.

The evaluation of the GtC program assessed the extent to which the program led to improved employment and settlement outcomes for refugees. Surveys and interviews were the two main data collection methods. Overall, 55% found employment during the evaluation period with 53% of that subset finding skilled employment. In addition, 22% of refugees began education or training study. In total 147 out of 220 participants (66%) found employment/commenced study. A cost-benefit analysis by KPMG found an overall return of \$3 for every \$1 invested in the program, with the majority of this benefit derived by Government (\$1.56).

With an evidence-based model to support CRWC's employment program design, the CRWC team began to plan the program. An adaptation CRWC made to the GtC model was that CRWC's employment program would include individualized settlement services to achieve stability in their settlement in order to be ready for employment and providing workshops to address issues and concerns that arise in accessing services in an unfamiliar system. The goal of the adaptation was to ensure greater job readiness to more fully engage in the rest of the project.

The proposal to the OTF was submitted in November 2019 for \$627,700 over 3 years and included a 1 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Employment Counsellor, 0.4 FTE Mentorship/Job Placement/Workshop Coordinator, 0.2 FTE Program Manager, and program expenses including client travel, interpreters and workshop costs. The proposal was approved by the OTF in March, 2020. However Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 and CRWC, like organizations around the world, were adjusting to the complications and service disruptions brought on by the devastating early stages of Covid-19. CRWC and the OTF agreed to a later project start date of April 1, 2021.

CLIENTS SERVED

A total of 153 clients were admitted to the employment program from 2021-2023, as well as an additional 77 clients who attended workshops only, for a total of 230 clients. This represents 95.8% of the OTF target of 240 clients served. An additional 19 clients during this time were contacted for follow up but did not ultimately engage with services, a 12.4% drop out rate, which was an anticipated outcome given the constellation of barriers to service affecting our program population. Employment status was

not collected from a further 20 clients, who were excluded from the employment outcome analysis for this reason. This data was examined across program years in the figure below.

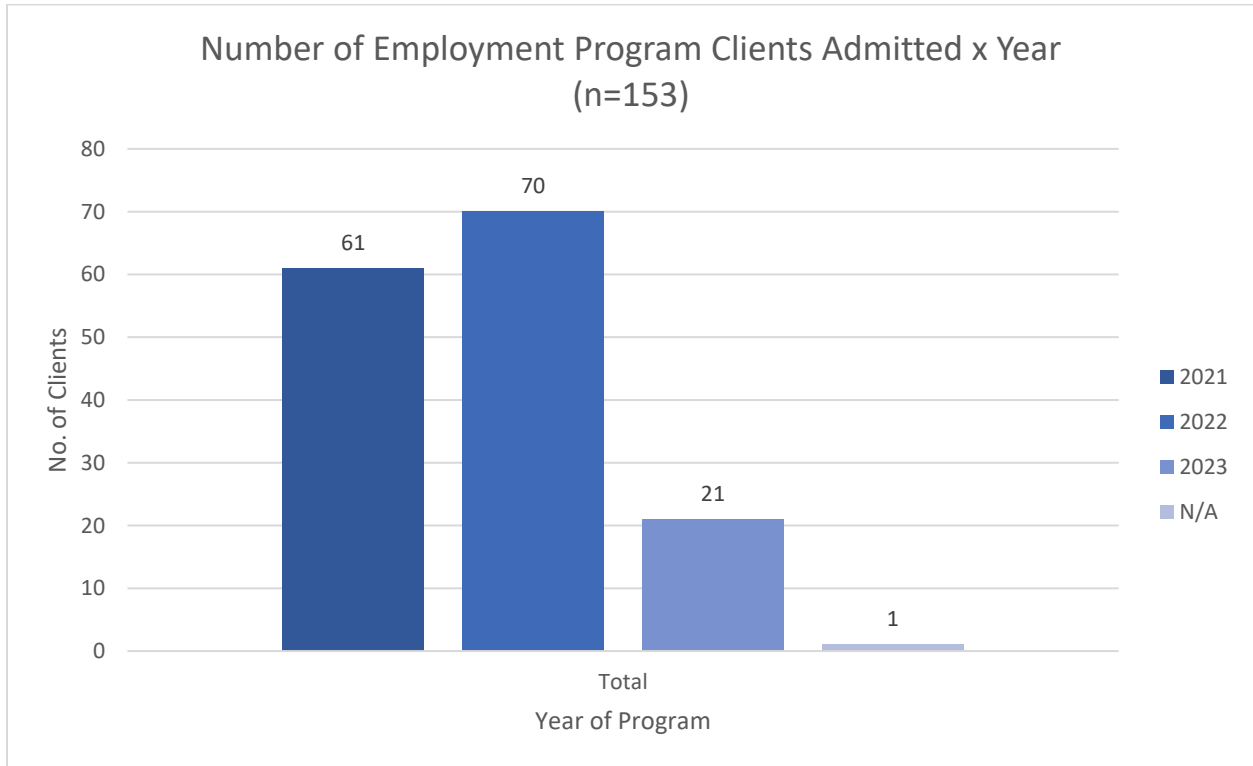


Figure #1: Annual Employment Client Admissions to the Program

The employment program experienced 13% increase in admissions after year 1, followed by a sharp decrease in the final year of programming. This decline is attributed to staffing challenges impacting operational capacity.

CLIENT NEEDS AND PERCEIVED BARRIERS

Diversity is a hallmark of the population served, with clients bringing a wide array of backgrounds and skills as well as gaps and challenges. The employment program takes proactive steps to ensure tailored support for each client from point of intake. Through comprehensive surveys, the unique circumstances and goals of each client are assessed. Program staff work collaboratively with clients, tailoring program components and external referrals to address highly variable needs, be it skills development, mentorship, or specialized pre-employment resources.

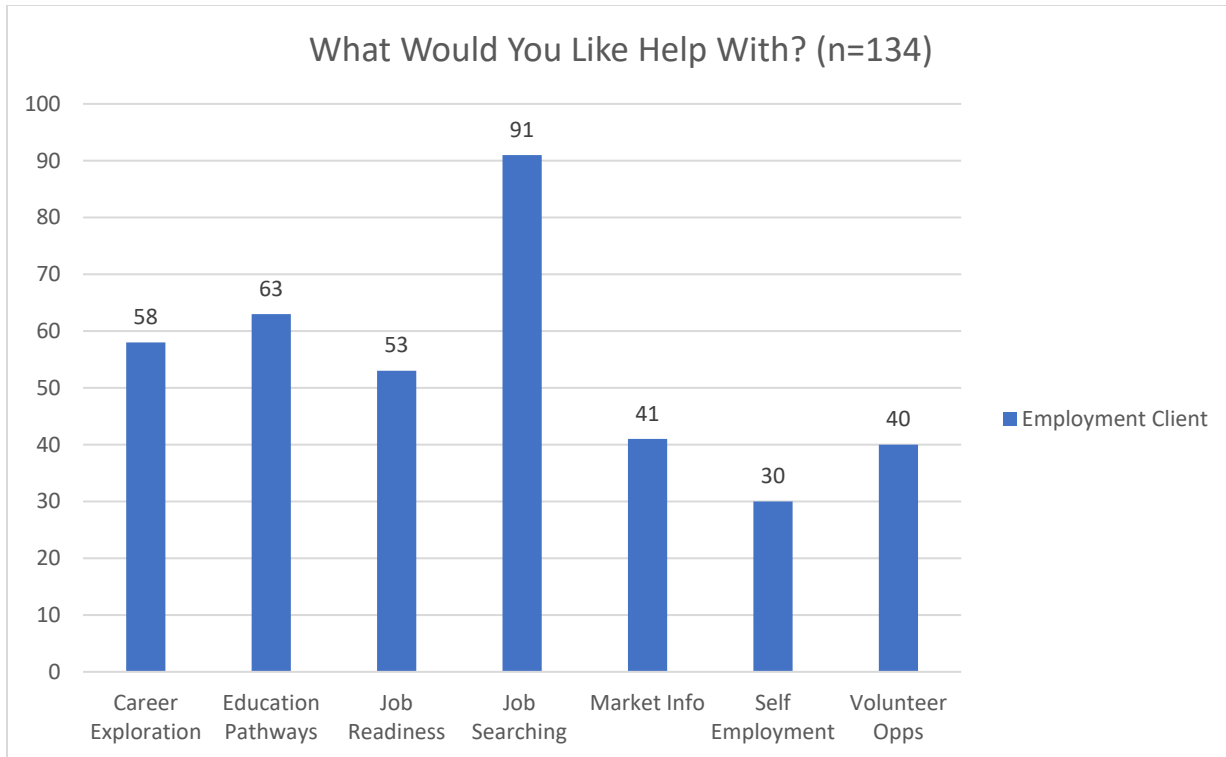


Figure #2: Employment Clients' Self-Reported Areas of Need

Clients are asked to self-report at the point of intake concerning the areas they require support with. The most frequently requested form of support for this sample was job searching, which encompasses the program components listed below.

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Education Pathways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> University/College course information OSAP applications Student placements |
| Job Searching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating resumes Interview preparation Job applications Networking |
| Career Exploration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research and evaluate career options |
| Job Readiness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills upgrading English language classes |
| Market Info | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Labour Market and Accreditation Information |

Table #1: Intake Survey Response Options

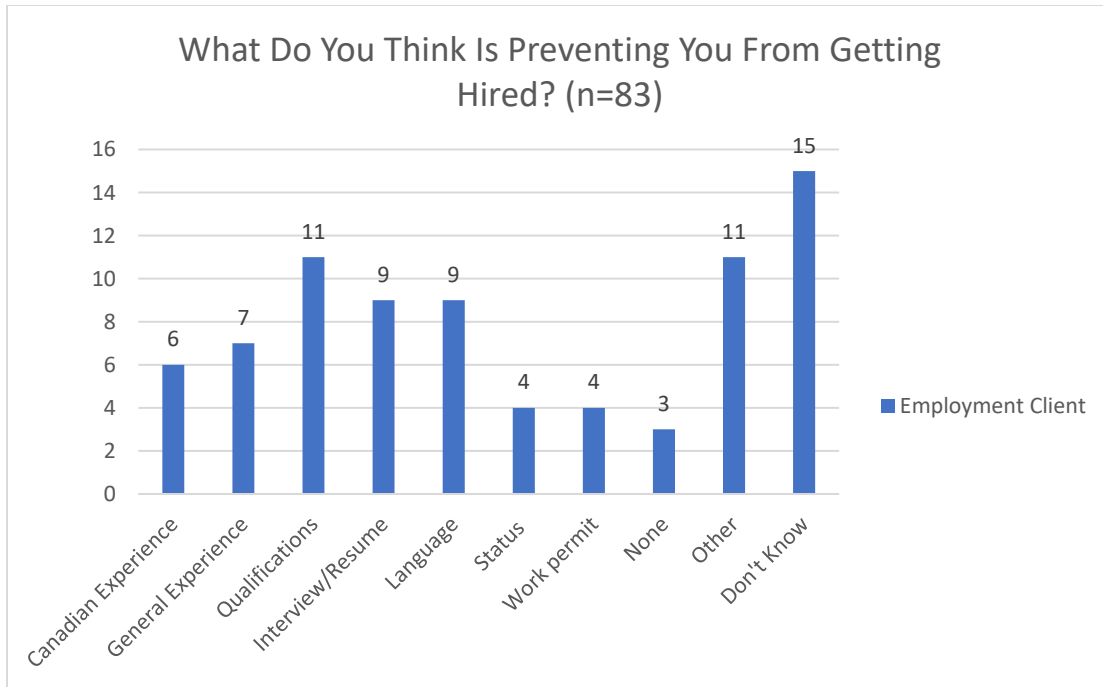


Figure #3: Clients' perceived barriers to employment.

The finding that a significant portion of clients (~18%) reported not knowing their perceived barriers to employment is a notable observation within the context of the employment program. This number is probably underrepresented, since many clients simply did not respond, and underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the refugee experience, particularly regarding their integration into the workforce of a new country. Lack of awareness could stem from various factors, including language barriers, cultural differences, trauma-related issues, or simply a lack of exposure to the intricacies of the local job market. Furthermore, clients face a myriad of challenges beyond just securing employment, such as housing stability, access to healthcare, and navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic systems, which may overshadow their ability to pinpoint specific barriers to employment.

Understanding these nuances is a critical part of tailoring the program's services effectively. It highlights the necessity of providing comprehensive support that goes beyond traditional employment assistance. By addressing these broader challenges holistically, clients can be empowered to overcome barriers they may not even be aware of and ultimately achieve sustainable employment and integration within their new communities.

“Other” barriers included age, process uncertainty, school schedules, lack of opportunities, low pay, lack of references, and COVID-19.

OVERALL EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

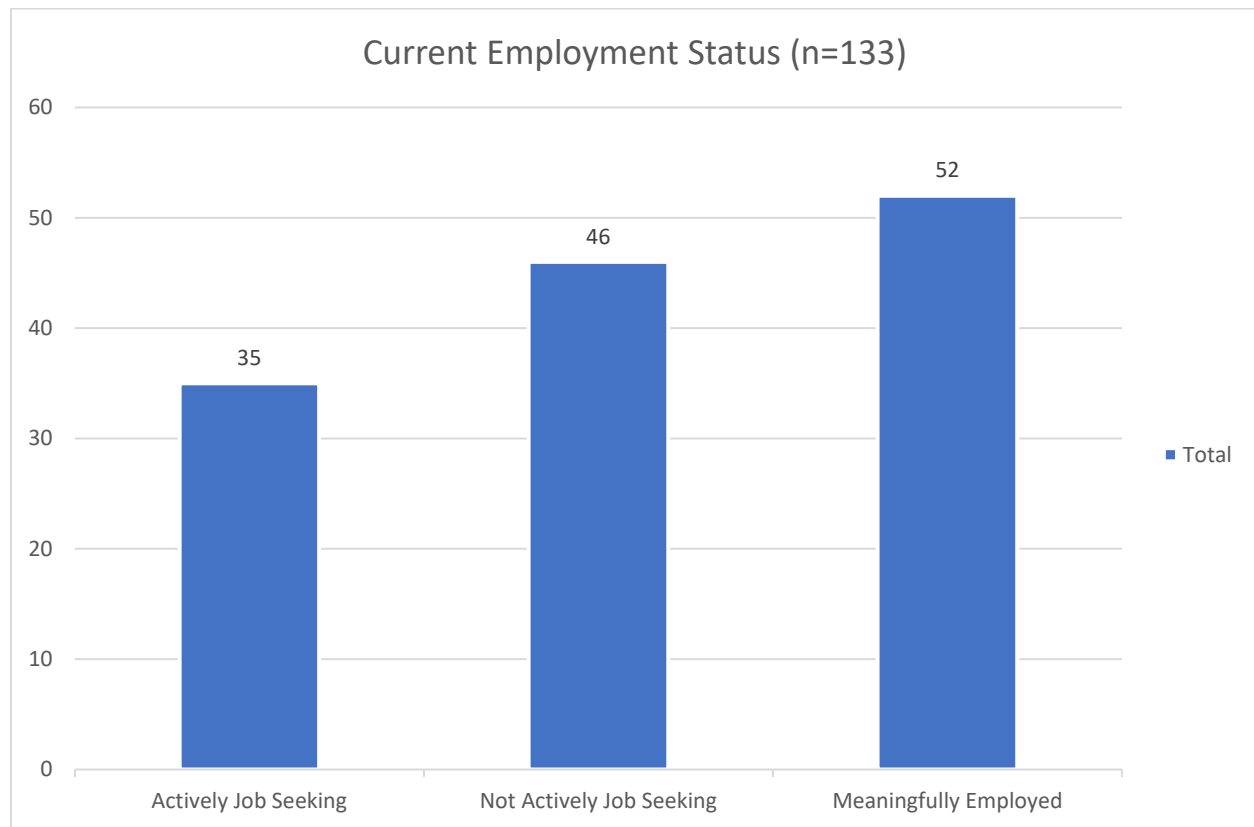


Figure #4: Employment Status at Time of Reporting

Current employment status was collected for 133 program participants. 54 (40%) of this sample had obtained meaningful employment at the time of reporting. 46 (34%) participants indicated they were not actively job seeking; this included 1 client on maternity leave, 2 who had not yet obtained a work permit and 3 who were still engaged in trainings. The number of non-active job seekers may be largely explained by the wraparound nature of the program which involves connecting clients with settlement, training, and education opportunities towards overall goal attainment. It is also possible that the number of clients waiting for work permits or still engaged in other non-employment related activities at the time of this report are an underrepresentation due to data collection limitations.

Of the remaining clients, 34 (25%) indicated they were still actively job seeking. It was expected that the percentage of clients still actively searching would be at least partially explained by later intake dates, since those with earlier intake dates simply had more time to participate in program and obtain employment prior to reporting. Average time to employment and employment outcome data stratified across years supported this and are explored in the figures below.

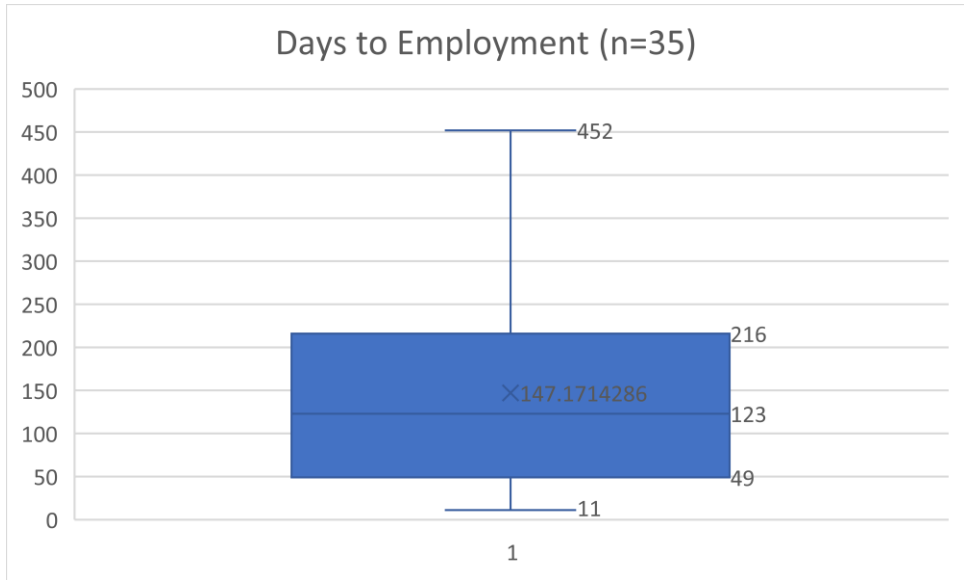


Figure #5: Average Time in Days from Intake to Employment

The number of days to meaningful employment was calculated for a subsample of clients who attained meaningful employment and provided start dates (n=35). On average, it took these clients 147 days between program start date and first day of employment, with the upper quartile of the sample taking between 216-452 days.

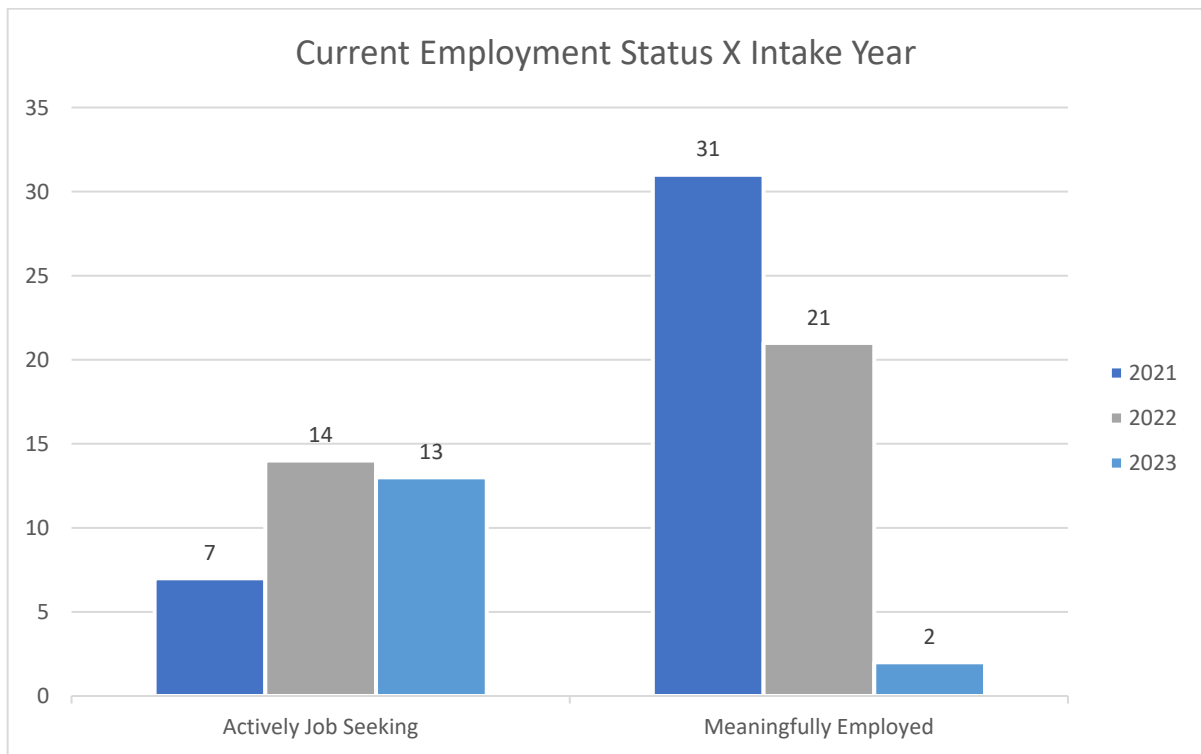


Figure #6: Active Job Seekers and Meaningfully Employed Stratified by Intake Year

As expected, the highest proportion of clients still seeking employment at the time of reporting were clients from the most recent year (62%) relative to 2022 (20%) based on the number of intakes in each.

Program staff were able to collect more detailed employment information such as the targeted field, hours of work, and referral source for a subsample of clients who had achieved employment at the time of reporting. There was a high degree of variability, with some clustering in the PSW field.

| Targeted Field | No. of Clients |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| Administration | 3 |
| Cleaning | 2 |
| Construction | 4 |
| Cooking | 1 |
| Customer Service | 1 |
| Education/Communications | 1 |
| Engineering | 3 |
| Healthcare | 2 |
| HEO or Truck driving | 1 |
| Hospitality | 1 |
| Non-profit, shelter | 1 |
| PSW | 7 |
| Research Analyst | 1 |
| Retail | 4 |
| Risk Management | 1 |
| Sewing | 1 |
| Social Services | 3 |
| Staffing | 1 |
| Summer job | 3 |
| Survival | 1 |
| Utilities/Telecom/IT | 1 |
| Grand Total | 43 |

Table #2: Employment Fields

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

A total of 40 organizations were involved in delivering pre-employment services to 39 employment clients, some of whom received more than one service type. These included employment training (41 clients), volunteering opportunities (6 clients), self-employment supports (7 clients), and language training (3 clients).

Of the 14 clients who received training and obtained a job, 7 reported that this was a direct result of participation.

All clients in the “Actively Job Seeking” subgroup who did not receive pre-employment training at the time of this report had indicated at time of intake that they desired this assistance.

MENTORING PROGRAM

| Mentoring Program Referrals | Time Period | | | | | | | | Grand Total |
|---|-------------|----------|----------|------------|----------|----------|----------|------------|-------------|
| | 2021 | | | 2021 Total | 2022 | | | 2022 Total | |
| | Qtr2 | Qtr3 | Qtr 4 | | Qtr1 | Qtr 2 | Qtr 3 | | |
| Program | | | | | | | | | |
| COSTI | 3 | 1 | 2 | 6 | | | | | 6 |
| COSTI netWORKS | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | | | | | 4 |
| COSTI Youth Mentoring | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Jumpstart Refugee Talent | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 13 |
| Skills for Change | | | | | | 1 | | 1 | 1 |
| Together Project | 4 | 2 | 1 | 7 | | 1 | | 1 | 8 |
| TRIEC | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 | | | 1 | 5 |
| Up With Women | 1 | | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Toronto Arts Council Newcomer & Refugee Mentoring | | | | | 1 | 1 | | 2 | 2 |
| Grand Total | 13 | 6 | 5 | 24 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 12 | 36 |

Table #3: Mentoring program referrals

A total of 29 clients were referred across 7 mentorship programs beginning in the second quarter of 2021 and tapering in the third quarter of 2022. Several clients received more than one concurrent referral based on assessed need and fit.

Of the 29 clients who received mentorship services, 18 (62%) had obtained meaningful employment at the time of reporting (see 'Program Components and Employment Outcomes).

WORKSHOP PROGRAM

A total of 109 clients attended workshops, 32 of whom were also engaged in other components of the employment program. Program staff delivered a total of 177 days of workshop training, spanning 14 areas.

| Workshop | # Days |
|---|--------|
| Career Pathways in Canada | 63 |
| Developing your Soft Skills | 15 |
| Elevate! Job Searching for Newcomers | 17 |
| Employment Pathways Information Session | 14 |
| How to Build a Resume | 10 |
| How to Present Yourself to Employers | 5 |
| Information Interviews | 7 |
| Information Session with Guest Speakers | 11 |
| Interview Skills | 4 |
| Job Searching and Networking | 16 |
| Monthly Drop-In session | 3 |

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Resume Building Workshop | 7 |
| Sharpening your Soft Skills | 4 |
| Use of Technology in Job Searching | 1 |
| Grand Total | 177 |

Table #4: Workshop summary

PROGRAM COMPONENTS AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

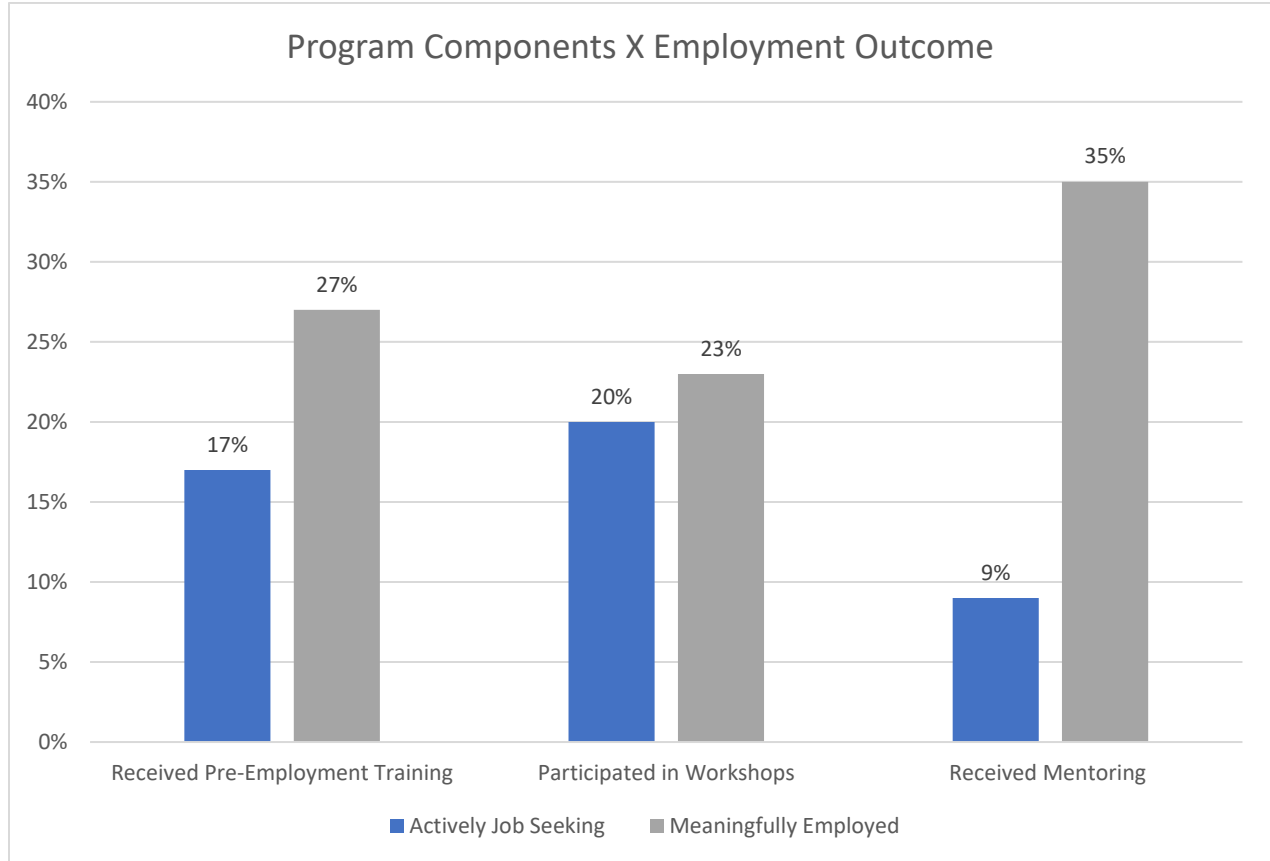


Figure #7: Percentage of Clients Engaged in Individual Service Components by Employment Status

It is interesting to note proportional differences between the subsample of clients who were able to find meaningful employment and those still actively seeking employment at the time of reporting with respect to the services they had engaged in. This has been a focal point of inquiry for CRWC, since the model for the employment program has been predicated on evidence that tailored services lead to improved outcomes for clients. Indeed, across each component, those meaningfully employed had higher levels of service engagement. The most pronounced group difference by a significant margin was observed for clients who had been connected to mentorship services, with 35% of those in the employed group having received a referral, versus only 9% of active job seekers. This suggests mentorship may be a particularly potent factor for success among this population.

Upon further examination, it was observed that clients who successfully found employment opportunities were nearly twice as likely to have participated in at least one of these components (58%) than those who were still actively seeking employment (31%). Interestingly, receiving an additional component over and above the first did not appear to have an additive effect on employment outcome.

This may reflect the nature of the employment program, which is tailored to individual need, making employment outcome less a function of number of components received and instead the result of whether these components were matched to the client's overall profile at intake based on the areas and gaps that were highlighted. While data was too limited in this case to examine this point any further, it would be of benefit to examine this question in future analyses.

IMPACT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Employment outcomes reported are promising and found to be in line with those achieved by the GtC program, with 61% of clients who were actively job seeking achieving employment by the time of this report. These numbers are even more encouraging when broken down by program year and time to employment, which revealed that clients with earlier intake dates were more successful in this regard. Nearly 82% of clients actively seeking employment in 2021 had achieved this outcome by program conclusion. This number declined with later intake years, corresponding with staffing challenges that arose in 2022 and impacted program capacity. These challenges were reflected in program staff surveys, in which caseload was identified as a key challenge in achieving the best possible outcomes for clients. The CRWC program is currently reliant on one employment worker with a caseload that can reach hundreds of clients, making it particularly vulnerable to labour disruptions. To sustain the impact demonstrated in its first year of programming, it will be important for the CRWC to secure funding to help expand its reach through additional supports to mitigate these disruptions.

Supporting the view that wraparound services and active engagement with components such as pre-employment training, workshops, and mentoring would result in higher likelihood of employment as an outcome, it was observed that clients who had participated in these activities were almost twice as likely to find employment. Mentorship services were found to have a particularly important impact, with those clients who found employment almost four times as likely to have received a referral for mentorship services than those who did not. As part of this report there was a strong desire to investigate additional mediating factors on individual outcomes, namely demographics (age, home country, gender, number of years in Canada) and the level of settlement services provided through CRWC, which forms a cornerstone of the program and its approach. As discussed, there is evidence from other comparable program data showing that these additional supports can have a substantial impact on success rates. While demographic data was collected as part of the OTF survey disseminated to clients, response rates were too limited as to be comparable with the data reported herein. It was unfortunately not possible to link this information with the relevant subsample of employment outcome data collected by CRWC program staff due to the anonymity of the survey data.

Program staff did collect settlement data as part of their process, however there were challenges associated with missing data and difficulty linking disparate program datasets. CRWC does not currently have a centralized client information system and relies heavily upon program staff to manually input and link spreadsheet data across program components. It would be highly advantageous to secure funding to implement such a system to help improve tracking and monitoring of outcomes and to understand the relationship between services. Other barriers associated with missing and incomplete data are owed to the client population itself and the relative accessibility of collection methods. The low number of respondents to OTF surveys compared with data collected by program staff throughout programming likely reflects this accessibility for clients. Surveys were offered in English and were reliant upon clients to complete them independently. Program staff note that clients are often reliant on workers to provide hands on assistance to complete such forms and to assist with translation.

Based on the challenges identified in the evaluation of the refugee employment program, areas for improvement were identified and outlined below.

Enhance Discharge and Tracking Process:

- Implement a comprehensive tracking system that allows for better monitoring of client engagement and progress within the program.
- Develop a standardized protocol for documenting reasons for client disengagement, such as participation in other settlement services, education pursuits, or personal priorities.
- Conduct regular check-ins with clients who are not actively seeking employment to understand their current needs and barriers to participation.

Client Follow-Up Interviews:

- Introduce follow-up interviews to gather in-depth feedback from clients about their experiences with the program and to assess whether they have achieved their goals.
- Prioritize language accessibility by providing translation services for follow-up interviews to ensure inclusivity and participation from all clients.

Track Client Interactions and Impact:

- Implement a client information system to centralize data on client interactions with the program, including inquiries, appointments, and services accessed.
- Analyze the correlation between the frequency of client interactions with the program and employment outcomes to determine the effectiveness of different engagement strategies.
- Allocate resources towards improving response rates for surveys and data collection methods to obtain more robust insights into client experiences and outcomes.

By implementing these recommendations, the refugee employment program can strengthen its capacity to track client progress, gather meaningful feedback, and tailor services to better meet the needs of refugees seeking employment integration.