



HELP WANTED ENDING SHELTERED WORK IN CANADA

Transitioning to inclusive employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities

A photograph of a white rectangular sign taped to a dark, blurred background. The sign has the words "HELP" and "WANTED" printed in large, bold, black, serif capital letters. The word "WANTED" is underlined with a thick black horizontal line. The sign is held in place by four pieces of clear adhesive tape at the corners.

**HELP
WANTED**

RESEARCH REPORT

From IRIS — Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society

Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society (IRIS), Oshawa.

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Author: Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society

Research Co-Directors: Michael Bach (IRIS), Brendon Pooran (PooranLaw)

Lead Analyst and Author: Samuel Ragot, Senior Policy Analyst, IRIS

Researcher: Katie Plazier, Senior Research and Development Officer, IRIS

Edited by: Carol J. Anderson

Design and layout: Chloe Ings/Carol J. Anderson

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About IRIS

Informed by the systemic exclusion that people with intellectual disabilities and other marginalized groups face, IRIS's mission is to seed and support transformative social development. Guided by the principles of full inclusion and human rights, we carry out research to identify issues and policy options. We foster social innovation to re-imagine inclusion and design new ways to meet unmet needs. Through capacity building, we strengthen leadership and constituencies for transformative change. For more information, visit us as at <https://irisinstitute.ca> or email contact@irisinstitute.ca.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This is a report on research undertaken as part of People First of Canada’s initiative Help Wanted—Sheltered Workshops and the Steps to Ending Employment Segregation in Canada. The project aims to build awareness about the ongoing realities of sheltered work across Canada, create alternatives to sheltered work, and build capacity to shift away from this model to fully inclusive employment approaches.

The purpose of the research was to survey the state of sheltered work in Canada, identify promising practices for transitioning to inclusive employment, and point to policy and program directions to support this transition. The research included a review of the literature, key informant interviews, case studies with providers who have transitioned from sheltered work to inclusive employment, and a survey of providers of employment-related support programs, including sheltered work.

What Are Sheltered Work Programs, and What Are the Issues Associated with These Programs?

For a program to be considered “sheltered work,” it must:

- Engage people with disabilities in doing work that produces goods or services;
- Generate revenue for the provider or other parties;
- Be considered paid employment if others were doing the same work; and
- Provide less than the legal minimum wage or not include vacation pay and other benefits required under employment standards law.

Sheltered work programs are usually seen as discriminatory because they fail to meet basic employment standards, do not provide participants with valuable work experience, reinforce the isolation and segregation of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities from the mainstream labour market, and perpetuate negative stereotypes about disability.

Moreover, there are significant concerns about the fact that sheltered work programs often contribute to impoverishing this group of people, not providing them with a path to economic security and instead keeping them within the welfare system.

Key Findings

Our legal and policy review of Ontario, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and the Northwest Territories shows that all of these jurisdictions provide exemptions for sheltered work activities from minimum employment standards entitlements, including for the payment of minimum wage.

Although most jurisdictions have made some progress transitioning away from traditional congregated sheltered workshop-style programming to more-inclusive employment programs, a comprehensive and proactive policy framework to achieve this goal is lacking.

People with intellectual and other developmental disabilities face among the highest rates of unemployment of any group. There is little to no evidence that sheltered work experience has a positive impact on future employability or economic security.

The national survey of sheltered work programs (a total of 51 programs were surveyed) conducted for this research found that:

- Sheltered work still exists in Canada, sometimes by organizations providing both sheltered work and inclusive employment programs.
- These programs continue to be funded largely by provincial grants.
- Almost 50% of those surveyed are considering transitioning their day services programs to inclusive employment.
- Most people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities still do not receive equal treatment when it comes to work.
- A large proportion of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities stay in sheltered work programs for a long time (most for at least two years and some for more than 20 years).

Best Practices in Transitioning from Sheltered Work to Inclusive Employment

The research points to key steps that need to be taken at different levels of society in order to effectively transition people from sheltered work to inclusive employment.

Individuals, families, and communities

- Ensure that individuals are at the centre of transition planning, and that families actively participate to address their concerns and to raise awareness and build support among community members.

Agencies, staff, and organizational leadership

- Provide training and information resources for agencies' staff, organizational leadership, and boards in designing and managing effective inclusive employment support programs; focus on defining values, goals, and new operations required, including diversifying funding sources; and build and engage community support to create inclusive employment opportunities.

Employers

- Undertake proactive outreach and awareness raising with employers about the potential of individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and consider how best to support employers in recruiting, hiring, and supporting people on the job.

Policy Directions

The research identified six main policy directions that governments can take to help transition sheltered work programs to inclusive employment:

1. Ensure that human rights and employment standards legislation provides equal protection to people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in employment and does not permit exemptions for sheltered work.
2. Make a clear and firm policy commitment that sheltered work will no longer be a publicly funded program option.
3. Take a staged or transitional approach, to avoid “pulling the rug out” from under organizations.
4. Adopt an enabling framework for social assistance and welfare programs, ending the “welfarization” of disabilities.
5. Provide holistic, individual support and person-centred approaches.
6. Facilitate school-to-work transitions.

I. Introduction and Purpose of this Report

This report has been developed as part of People First of Canada's (PFC's) initiative Help Wanted—Sheltered Workshops and the Steps to Ending Employment Segregation in Canada. The project aims to build awareness about the ongoing realities of sheltered work across Canada, focusing on the views and experiences of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Through the development of a one-of-a-kind toolkit and trainings, PFC aims to educate and remind the Canadian public of the existence of sheltered work programs, but also offer alternatives to sheltered work and build capacity to shift away from this model to fully inclusive employment approaches.

The purpose of this report is to review the state of sheltered work in Canada: What are the rules and policies that shape these programs? How do sheltered work programs operate in different parts of the country? What are some of the practical factors organizations that want to transition away from sheltered work models should consider and plan for?

The report consolidates practical and applied findings from various phases of research undertaken in support of the Help Wanted project. It can be used by people at agencies and by families, self-advocates, and the policy sector to supplement PFC's toolkit and workshops, or on its own as a source of background information about sheltered work in Canada.

The report aims to:

- Begin to identify the nature and prevalence of sheltered work in Canada;
- Better understand the problems and concerns associated with sheltered work in Canada, and the rationale for transitioning away from these models;
- Identify key challenges and promising practices that organizations face during transition processes; and
- Point to policy and legal options to support this transition.

Part II outlines the methodology used and the limitations of the study.

Part III summarizes literature that examines problems and ethical issues created by sheltered work programs.

Part IV reviews legal and policy frameworks in five provinces and territories regarding sheltered work programs. This review helps to explain why, even after Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), sheltered work programs still exist in Canada.

Part V presents the results of a survey that IRIS conducted throughout Canada. Both quantitative and qualitative results are explored and analyzed, to help draw a picture of the prevalence of

sheltered work programs in the country and to better understand the needs of service providers and persons living with an intellectual disability and their families.

Part VI outlines the ecological model used by IRIS to present research findings about best practices in transitioning from sheltered work to inclusive employment, and to point to policy directions to mandate and facilitate the transition process.

Part VII lists some of the best practices identified in the review of the literature and by service providers that transitioned from sheltered work to inclusive employment.

Finally, Part VIII of this report outlines policy options for reform and that can support a system-wide transition from sheltered work to inclusive employment.

II. Methodology

To create a better understanding of the situation of sheltered work programs in Canada, this report draws on both qualitative and quantitative data as well as a review of literature and case studies about programs that have shifted from sheltered work to inclusive employment programs.

This mix of different research strategies helps draw a clear portrait of sheltered work programs in Canada. To make this report as concise as possible, the following sections are mostly summaries of the longer research components. The complete reports and analyses are available in the appendices.

A. Focus of the Research

People with intellectual or other developmental disabilities who participate in sheltered work programs are the focus of this research. Definitions of these terms, for the purpose of this report, are as follows:¹

- An **intellectual disability** generally means having greater difficulty than most people with intellectual or adaptive functioning due to a long-term condition that is present at birth or before the age of 18.
- The term “**developmental disability**” is sometimes used interchangeably with “intellectual disability” but may also include people with cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, or fetal alcohol syndrome.

B. What Is a Sheltered Work Program?

A clear definition of a sheltered work program is key to understanding the situation throughout Canada, as the legal and policy frameworks vary widely between provinces and territories. For example, some provinces have very precise rules limiting sheltered work, some have none, and some are actively developing and maintaining these programs.

In defining sheltered work programs for the purposes of this research, we drew on both the review of the literature and the legal and policy analysis. Based on this review, we concluded that for a program to be considered a sheltered work program, it must meet a certain number of criteria, based on a set of key components of its functioning and mission (i.e., the type of program and services offered, the economic model, and the status of the participants).

In summary, sheltered work programs engage people with developmental or other disabilities in doing work that produces goods or services for the program provider or other parties, that generates revenue for the provider or other parties, and in which the person considers the work to be a “job,” or that would be considered paid employment if others were doing the same work. Moreover,

people are not remunerated for their work, or they receive stipends or wages that are less than minimum wage or wages but not vacation pay or benefits consistent with employment standards law.

Drawing on this general definition, Table 1 lays out the criteria used in the survey to identify sheltered work programs.

Table 1. Criteria used to identify sheltered work programs

Question	Response	Qualifier (and/or)
What type of program is it?	Producing goods or services for your agency	or
	Producing goods or services sold to others	or
	Work placements with third parties	or
	Mentoring or otherwise supporting individuals to participate in competitive or customized employment or in self-employment	or
	Social enterprises developed with or for participants	or
	Training programs	or
	Volunteer placements	or
	Other revenue-generating activities	and
Do any of the following characteristics apply to this program? Check all that apply.	The program generates revenue for the agency or third parties	or
	People supported in the program expect to be paid and consider the program to be their “job”	or
	If the work was performed in a different setting, it would be treated as paid employment	and
Which statement best describes the remuneration participants receive?	Participants do not receive remuneration	or
	Participants are paid wages or given stipends, honorariums, revenue sharing, or benefits (e.g., bus tickets) for the activities they perform that do not amount to the minimum wage	or
	Participants receive the equivalent of the minimum wage, but the program does not provide other benefits such as paid vacation, public holiday pay, or remittances to the Canada Revenue Agency	

If a program meets at least one criterion in each category, then it is considered a sheltered work program for the purposes of this research. These criteria were also used in the survey conducted by IRIS and designed with Chronicle Analytics, a research partner on this initiative.

C. What is Inclusive Employment?

We refer throughout this report to “inclusive employment” as the personal, organizational, and policy goal to be achieved, and that will guide the transition from sheltered work programs. A helpful definition of this term is as follows²:

- Inclusive employment refers to individuals with disabilities working alongside their peers without disabilities in the competitive labour market (with access to the same benefits and career opportunities).
- It ensures that no person is segregated or excluded from quality employment opportunities because of their disability.
- It ensures that individuals with disabilities have access to the same work, accommodations, and benefits as their non-disabled peers, with the tools they need to succeed.

III. Literature Review Highlights: Learnings for Organizations Seeking to Transition Away from Sheltered Work Models

A. Scope

The primary goal of the literature review was to provide some context about sheltered work in Canada. It highlighted some of the main problems associated with these program models. A more comprehensive version of this review of the literature is available in Appendix A.

B. What Is Sheltered Work and How Does It Operate in Canada?

In Canada, sheltered workshops emerged following both World Wars I and II to offer therapeutic vocational services to enable people living with disabilities to gain employment-related skills.³

During the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric facilities a few decades later, sheltered workshops proliferated and became an important part of society's response to providing day services to tens of thousands of people returning from provincial psychiatric institutions to live in the community.⁴ At the time, sheltered work programs were also viewed as a good way of providing training to allow people to find regular, paying work in the open labour market.

A 2008 review of sheltered work programs in Canada found that all jurisdictions except Newfoundland and Labrador offered sheltered work programs. However, the study noted wide variation in the “scope, definition, and implementation” of these programs.⁵

While there is a wide variation in practice, according to Inclusion Canada, sheltered workshops can be defined as “facility-based program[s] where adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities perform an activity that generates some degree of revenue as an alternative to working in the community as a part of the general labour market.”⁶ It's important to note that by paying participants a training stipend or allowance, sheltered workshop programs are typically not required to pay minimum wages or meet other labour market standards.⁷

For the purposes of this research, we use the broader term “sheltered work programs” rather than “sheltered workshops,” because the term is inclusive of arrangements that are not facility-based but which are “sheltered” from the requirements of employment standards (i.e., paying minimum wage, vacation, and public holiday pay). This includes social enterprises, work enclaves, and placement in mainstream employment settings that do not provide participants with the minimum wage.

C. Key Concerns with Sheltered Work Models

In Canada, people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities face among the highest rates of unemployment of any group, and there is little to no evidence that the sheltered work model has contributed to this group's employability or economic betterment.⁸

The literature review (see Appendix A) suggests that the key concerns with sheltered work models are that they:

- Operate as yet another mechanism that impoverishes people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and isolates them from broader society;
- Often result in “mission drift” for disability organizations; for example, organizations have noted that, over time, as sheltered work models became entrenched in their programming (and revenue streams), they began to focus on the business-like elements of their work rather than on their original missions as support agencies for people;
- Do not provide an adequate income and thus keep people in poverty;
- Often segregate and isolate people from their community;
- Do not enable participants to develop skills that could lead to competitive employment;
- Often leave people unsatisfied with the work that they do;
- Are exploitative of workers;
- Perpetuate negative public perceptions about the ability of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities to participate in the mainstream labour market;
- Prioritize the business nature of the work over disability agencies' primary purpose of supporting people to live a more inclusive life; and
- Leave people vulnerable to neglect and abuse.

Research findings suggest that moving away from the sheltered work model is necessary to address the isolation, exploitation, and poverty that people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities experience. To make this possible, employment support agencies must become more effective in reaching out to and engaging employers and the broader community, focusing on job readiness, helping improve participants' self-esteem, and building confidence toward securing fair and meaningful employment.

D. Why Canada Needs to Transition Away from Sheltered Work Models

Since the 1980s, communities across Canada have been advocating that disability organizations move away from sheltered work models and focus instead on supporting people to participate in “competitive employment.”⁹ Yet progress on transitioning away from sheltered work has slowed in recent decades, and the model continues to be in use in most provinces and territories.

The underlying goal for shifting away from sheltered work models is the full labour market inclusion of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.¹⁰ “Person-centred” or “one person at a time” planning and supports enable individuals to pursue meaningful work and meaningful relationships. These strategies have proven effective in transitioning from sheltered work and in improving a person’s overall wellbeing as they do so.¹¹ “Employment first” strategies focus on “integrated, community-based employment earning at or above the minimum wage as the first option for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.”¹² These policies have proven pivotal in encouraging the transition from sheltered work to labour market inclusion.¹³

Key arguments in support of continuing to shift away from sheltered work models include the following:

- Because Canada is a signatory to the United Nations CRPD, its “labour markets and work environments should be open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities on an equal basis with other people.”¹⁴
- Sheltered work programs cost significantly more than supported employment models,¹⁵ and ongoing investment in sheltered models “diverts” investment from more promising and inclusive practices.¹⁶
- Research shows that adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and their families prefer integrated employment over sheltered work.¹⁷
- Evidence also shows that, with the right supports, working-age adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities can achieve greater levels of independence, meaningful engagement, and economic benefits by working in inclusive work environments.¹⁸
- When effective supports are in place, the employment rate of people receiving disability supports in integrated employment can be as high as 87%.¹⁹ Unlike sheltered work models, when supports are truly person-centred, it means that they can also be inclusive of people with “severe” labels.²⁰

E. Resistance to Ending Sheltered Work

Based on the literature review, supporters of sheltered work argue that:

- The model provides important opportunities for participants to belong to a community, promotes social participation, and provides caretaking support for families;
- Sheltered work provides security, stability, and safety for individuals in these work contexts and mitigates the fear of loss of disability benefits when people enter the competitive labour market;
- Employers often are not aware of the potential of individuals living with intellectual and other developmental disabilities, and thereby need more sensitivity training;
- Employers see people with disabilities as potentially lacking productivity and costing them money; and
- The model provides organizations with a steady financial stream that is not easily replaced by other government funding.

IV. Sheltered Work in Canada: Legal and Policy Context in Five Provinces and Territories

To provide an overview of sheltered work programs in Canada, PooranLaw reviewed the legal and policy context in four provinces and one territory in Canada: Ontario, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and the Northwest Territories.

The analysis indicates that all of these jurisdictions provide exemptions (either express or implied) for sheltered work activities from minimum employment standards entitlements that otherwise apply to workers who are treated as “employees,” including for the payment of minimum wage. These exemptions may be an express exemption for certain forms of training or “simulated work,” as prescribed in legislation or regulation, or may flow from less formal practices of deeming sheltered work to not be “employment” at all.

Some provinces, such as British Columbia, also allow sheltered work programs for people on social assistance programs, but for a very limited amount of time and only for an “on-site training or work experience.” However, most provinces do not specify a time limit for participation in a sheltered work program. People can be in these “simulated work environments” for 20 years or more.

Most jurisdictions have made some progress in transitioning away from traditional congregated sheltered workshop-style programming to more-inclusive employment and diverse forms of work and volunteering. However, a comprehensive and proactive policy framework to achieve this goal is lacking. This is especially true in Quebec, where these programs are an important part of day activities for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and where there are a very limited number of government-funded inclusive employment programs.

Table 2 provides an overview of the legislation and policies in these provinces and the territory (see Appendix B for more detailed information and relevant sections of legislation).

In conclusion, even if protections against labour market exploitation of persons with disabilities are provided for in all provincial/territorial jurisdictions in Canada, there are still legal exceptions that allow for the existence of sheltered work programs under the cover of “simulated work” programs that may generate profit and persist well beyond what could reasonably be viewed as a “training” period. The existence of these loopholes signals tacit, if not explicit, permission, support, and promotion for sheltered work programs.

Despite advocacy efforts to end sheltered work arrangements, they still exist across the country. We expect that this is because of, at least in part, the shift away from facility-based sheltered “workshops” to sheltered work arrangements in numerous third-party settings. In these workplaces, people usually work alongside people without disabilities but are not paid or otherwise granted minimum employment standards entitlements. These work environments are more difficult to track than regular sheltered workshops. In that sense, governments could provide clear direction and

support to transition people with disabilities who continue to be supported in congregated sheltered work programs toward inclusive and community-based programming, and, wherever possible, competitive work.

Table 2. Legislation and policies regarding sheltered work programs in selected provinces and a territory

Measure/ Province	Ontario	British Columbia	Nova Scotia	Northwest Territories	Quebec
Legislation specific to sheltered work programs	<i>Employment Standards Act</i> (s 3(5) para 6)	<i>Employment Standards Act Regulation</i> (s 32(3))	<i>Labour Standards Code</i>	No specific legislation	<i>Act respecting labour standards</i>
Law guarantees that employees should receive full pay and benefits	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Definition of employment	Broad and inclusive but with exceptions	Broad and inclusive	Very narrow	Very narrow	Broad but with many exceptions
Day activities and training exceptions	Permitted	Permitted in certain contexts and time limited	Permitted for employees who are “receiving training under government-sponsored and government-approved plans”	No regulation exists	Permitted by health and social services agencies
Jurisprudence findings	Mixed. Some programming is deemed “not employment.” One case found sheltered work to be “employment”	An old case permitted sheltered work if the employer did not benefit from it and the program was free from exploitation	None	None	None

Measure/ Province	Ontario	British Columbia	Nova Scotia	Northwest Territories	Quebec
Government policies encourage a transition to inclusive employment	Policies issued prior to 2018 promote and require a transition. No official promotion or advancement on prior policy.	Yes, as sheltered work programs are very much restricted to exceptions.	No data	No data	No. Sheltered work programs are actively funded by the Quebec government and are a significant part of “employability” programs.
Government is actively working on the issue	No	No data	No data	No data	No

Governments could also make clear in policy and employment standards guidance materials the equal rights of people with disabilities in employment, including to the minimum entitlements under applicable employment standards legislation. Such resources should clearly identify permissible forms of training, volunteering, and programming, so as to prevent exploitation of the labour of people with disabilities and ensure that their equality rights are protected. In the absence of such guidance and action, governments, providers, and employers may face legal challenges related to discriminatory (and perhaps unconstitutional) legislation, policies, programs, and practices as a violation of the equality rights of people with disabilities.

V. National Survey: Key Findings

The Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion in Society and Chronicle Analytics conducted a national survey of volunteer, training, and employment support programs (a total of 51 programs were surveyed). However, due to the limited number of replies to the survey and usable data, the data do not provide a full picture of sheltered work in Canada.

That said, the data collected demonstrate that:

- Sheltered work still exists in Canada, sometimes by organizations providing both sheltered work and inclusive employment programs.
- Sheltered work programs continue to be funded largely by provincial grants (median: 100% of the sample).
- Several organizations are considering transitioning their day services programs to inclusive employment (50% of people who responded to this question [15/30]).
- Most people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities still do not receive equal treatment when it comes to work (see Figure 1 for a visual representation):
 - 61% of the participants in the programs receive either no remuneration or remuneration that is less than the minimum wage.
 - Only 34% of the participants receive at least minimum wage and vacation pay, for which remittances are made to the Canada Revenue Agency.
 - This is reflected in the fact that in only 18% of programs are participants referred to as “employees.”
- A large proportion of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities stay in these programs for a long time:
 - 71% of the participants stayed for at least two years.
 - 40% of the participants stayed for at least five years.
 - 22% of the agencies indicated that the longest time someone had been in the program was more than 20 years.

Note: The full analysis and results of this survey, including both quantitative and qualitative data, are outlined in Appendix D.

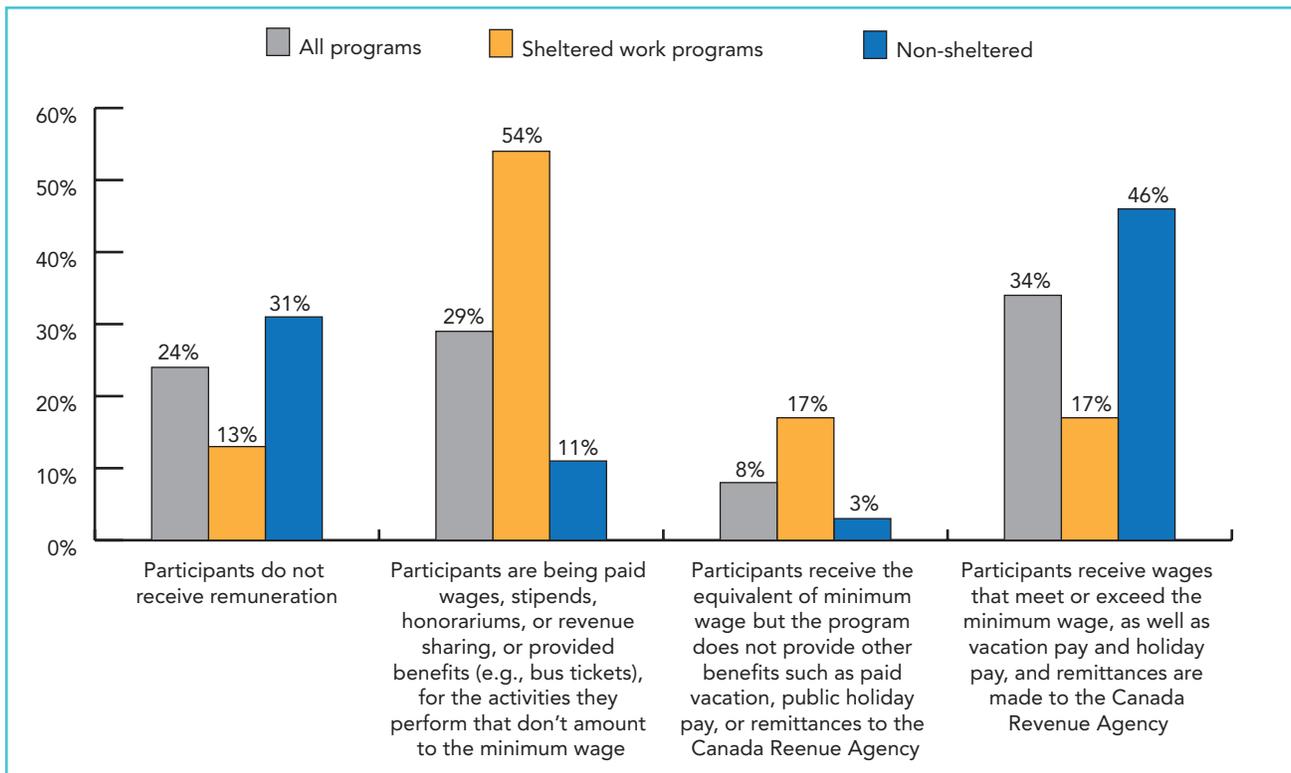


Figure 1. Remuneration of participants in all programs, sheltered work programs, and non-sheltered work programs

A. Key Findings on Surveyed Agencies

Most of the agencies surveyed operate small-to-medium-sized programs. Almost half of the agencies (43%) operate relatively small programs with up to 25 participants, whereas 39% of the agencies operate programs with either 25–50 participants (25%) or 50–100 participants (14%). Only one agency operates a program with more than 300 participants (see Figure 2).

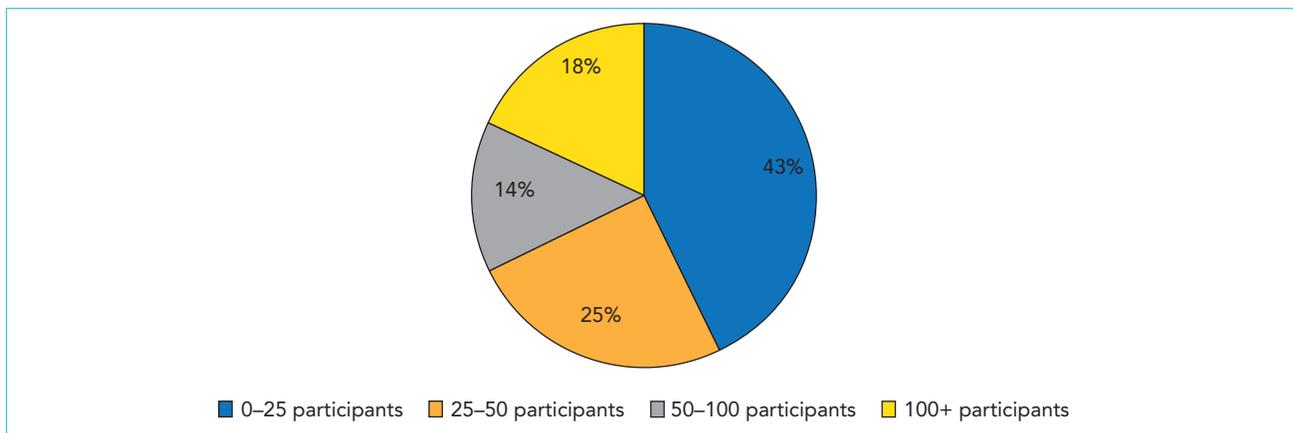


Figure 2. Size of sheltered work programs

Fifty-four percent of the agencies surveyed also operate other day program services in addition to the employment programs. Most of the agencies that replied to the survey operate either work placement (23%), mentoring individuals (15%), training (18%), or volunteer placement (21%) programs.

Finally, most organizations surveyed did not indicate that they profit directly from the work of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in their programs.

B. Improving Outcomes for People with Intellectual and Other Developmental Disabilities: Key Findings

A portion of providers delivering sheltered work programs indicated they want to transition to inclusive employment and are looking for support to help make this happen (see Figure 3).

Indeed, 21% of the agencies indicated that financial support to transition existing programs to inclusive employment is needed, whereas 22% of agencies think that funding for individual employment-related supports is required. Moreover, 14% of the agencies believe that mentoring and coaching for program staff in transitioning to a mainstream employment focus would help.

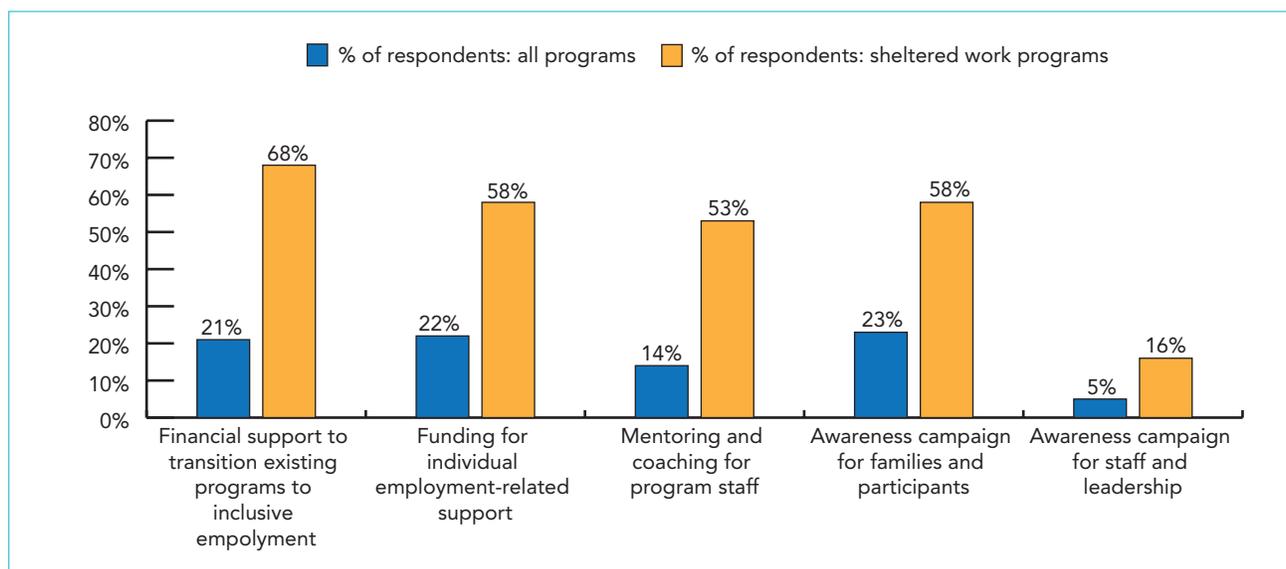


Figure 3. Agencies' needs in transitioning from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment

Interestingly, a significant challenge for agencies is some families' resistance to change and inclusive employment. Twenty-three percent of the agencies reported that they would benefit from awareness-raising programs for participants and their families to enhance the agencies' capacities to improve employment outcomes for people with an intellectual or developmental disability. That said, agencies surveyed generally do not believe that they require this awareness raising. Only 5% of agencies currently delivering any type of volunteer, training, or employment-related program think

that their board, management, and staff would benefit from awareness raising and leadership development to support transitions to inclusive employment.

However, it is important to note that among all the organizations delivering sheltered work programs, 58% indicated that they would benefit from awareness raising for participants and family members to support a transition to employment. Fifty-three percent of these programs also said that they need “mentoring and coaching for program staff in transitioning to a mainstream employment focus,” and 68% need “financial support to help transition existing programs to ones more focused on employment opportunity and outcomes.” Finally, 58% of these programs stated that they need “funding for individual employment-related supports.” These numbers are very different from the average numbers for all respondents and may suggest that there is a desire for change amongst leaders in sheltered work programs, but that this desire may find some resistance from participants and families, and be slowed by the lack of funding. These findings support the general recommendation of diverting funding for provincial or territorial sheltered work programs to inclusive employment programs over the long term.

In summary, our findings indicate that agencies delivering sheltered work programs are aware that they should bring them to an end but continue to deliver them because of families’ resistance and the lack of resources available to transition to inclusive employment.

VI. From Sheltered Work to Inclusive Employment: An Ecological Model

The next two sections use an “ecological model” to present research findings about best practices in transitioning from sheltered work to inclusive employment, and to point to policy directions to mandate and facilitate the transition process (see Figure 4). These directions can be used to guide governments, advocacy organizations, and agencies in their roles to achieve successful outcomes.

First, best practices are examined at the different levels of action and intervention, starting with the agencies wanting to undertake the transition. The importance of family awareness and support are also discussed, and the role of employers is explored further.

Second, helpful policy directions are identified and examined.

An ecological model is useful to highlight the relationship between all the parties concerned with and affected by the transition from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment. This model puts a person’s rights and dignity at the centre of efforts by all parties and identifies the different spheres in which actions are needed if successful transitions are to be achieved.

The ecological model helps to formulate effective strategies for transitioning from sheltered work to inclusive employment because it illustrates the interconnection of all spheres in which steps are needed.

This transition is a complex process that involves several key players, each with their own agendas and competing priorities. It is therefore necessary to have both a macro and micro vision of the dynamics at play.

Figure 4. Ecological model, moving toward more-inclusive employment programs



Moreover, while it is important to recognize that sheltered work is exploitative and a human rights violation that demands a rapid response in terms of legislative options and policies, it is equally important to be careful during the transition and to plan ahead so that no one is left behind.

The options and solutions presented below should be read and understood as a comprehensive strategy for change. Each community and each agency must plan a transition that engages all stakeholders, including people with disabilities currently using the programs. It should be rooted in the needs of those served and include a realistic timeframe.

The motivation to transition does not appear to be the problem. Above all, agencies and communities need knowledge, leadership, mentoring, and financial resources to help them proceed with a transition from sheltered work to more-inclusive employment. However, all these resources should come with accountability—during and after the transition process—to the government, funders, boards, the community, and, ultimately, to people living with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

VII. Best Practices in Transitioning from Sheltered Work to Inclusive Employment

A. Individuals, Families, and Communities

1. Individuals must be at the centre of the decisions being made

Individuals living with intellectual or developmental disabilities should be at the center of the decision-making process. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. The disability community has long held to a “nothing about us without us” philosophy and that there should be a constant effort to put individuals’ interests, wills, and preferences at the very core of any strategy for change.

Sheltered work has existed for decades and people have languished in these programs for just as long. The current push for change in Canada is deeply rooted in people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities’ desire and requests to be included in society and in the mainstream workforce.

At every step of the way, people should be consulted, included, and listened to.

2. Families must be part of the shift toward inclusive employment

Families are an important part of the transition from sheltered work to inclusive employment, both because they can help to lead the shift but also because they can sometimes be reluctant in supporting this transition because of the potential instability that may result for them and their family member.

Families should be engaged in the transition process to be reassured and reduce the resistance they can show.

Researchers suggest that early and ongoing engagement of parents and families is essential for transition success²¹ because it creates momentum and can help dissipate fears of change, both for individuals and for their families.

It is common for families to be among the most resistant stakeholders in transition processes.²² Building networks to provide opportunities for families to share their experiences and support one another during the transition has proven to be a helpful strategy.²³ This is especially true for families that do not receive adequate services and that see sheltered work programs as a necessary form of respite.

One of the reasons for families’ resistance is often linked to the fear of losing eligibility for social assistance and other benefits programs when people with intellectual or developmental disabilities join the workforce. Adequate information must be provided to the families and to the individuals engaged in a transition from sheltered work to inclusive employment about the impact on their eligibility for these programs. There is also a greater need for reform when it comes to these

programs. The “welfarization” of disability has created many problems, creating “poverty traps” and limiting people’s opportunities and incentives to join the paid labour market.

This is especially true for people living with intellectual or other developmental disabilities, because if they lose their jobs, they risk having difficulty regaining eligibility for social welfare programs, or may experience long wait periods before benefits begin. This uncertainty, created by poorly adapted social welfare programs, is a cause of concern for families across the country.

The literature surveyed suggests that when families and other stakeholders are engaged, they can become important advocates for ensuring that meaningful employment and decent pay are the first options for people with intellectual or other developmental disabilities.²⁴ Such partnerships must be established early in the transition process and be designed to reduce the associated fears of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and their families.

3. Raising community awareness

The survey respondents and the case studies pointed to the importance of community awareness and support for the transition. In one case study in Quebec, community support was a key factor in the survival of the agency and its success in creating inclusive employment opportunities for young adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

Not only can community support help create inclusive jobs, it also can help convince governments to fund inclusive programs and support agencies to develop more inclusive programs.

Community awareness also helps to reduce discriminatory behaviour and mistreatment toward people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in the community more broadly.

4. Transportation and accessibility

The survey results underline the importance of transportation networks and services. Even in urban settings, it is sometimes difficult for individuals living with intellectual and other developmental disabilities to have access to workplaces that are not in the city core. This problem is more acute for people living in rural environments, where limited transportation services exist.

Although this issue is not specific to sheltered work programs or inclusive employment, it is nonetheless an important factor for individuals who want to transition to inclusive employment.

B. Agencies, Staff, and Organizational Leadership

First and foremost, many organizations and agencies surveyed desire to transition their sheltered work programs to inclusive employment. However, many of these organizations report a need for resources and help to successfully do so.

This section presents some best practices for organizations that are committed to transitioning their sheltered work programs to inclusive employment.

1. Training and information resources on how to design and manage effective employment support programs

One of the key takeaways from the survey was that agencies need help and support to shift from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment. Almost 50% of the agencies running sheltered work programs said that they need training and information resources on how to design and manage effective employment support programs.

This is especially important because these agencies have relied on sheltered work programs for a long time, both in terms of public government funding and as a way to offer respite for families. Redefining the mission, values, and goals of the agencies’ programs is a big step, and support should be offered for this purpose. For example, it could be helpful to create a guide for a successful transition from sheltered work to inclusive employment, but also to create some sort of forum or support network with organizations that transferred their programs successfully, to share their best practices and ideas.

2. Model for a successful transition

Based on the survey results, literature review, and case studies, we suggest that the model outlined in Figure 5 be used to delineate the key drivers for successful transitions from sheltered work to inclusive employment.

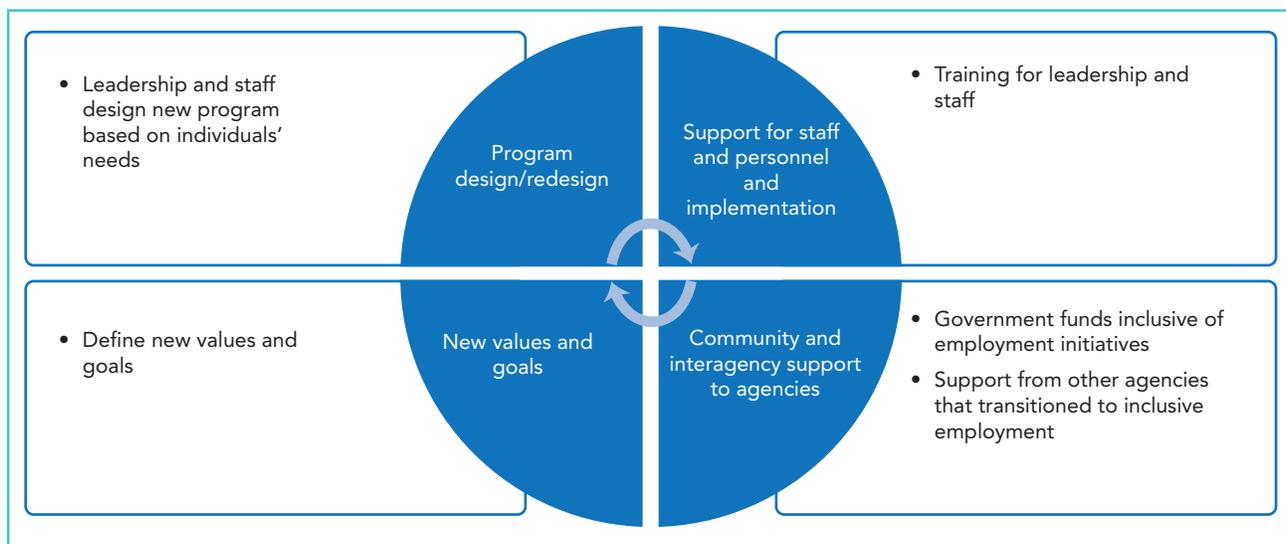


Figure 5. IRIS’s model for agency transition toward inclusive employment

As can be seen in Figure 5, the transition is not a linear process and does not occur in a vacuum. In this model, the process of transition is iterative. All steps are connected and should be ongoing, with continuous feedback from each step informing the other steps.

3. Awareness raising for leadership, staff, and board members

The first step in a systemic and sustained transition from sheltered work is to acknowledge the problem. Organizations and agencies must first realize and accept that there is a need for change in their employment programs. This is not always easily accomplished, however, as it means changing values, ideas, and ways of functioning for these organizations. It could also mean having to adapt to new financing sources and program criteria.

The desire for change should be present at all levels of the organization, from staff to management and executive leadership to board members. A united community committed to the transition is a strong predictor of success.

4. Defining values and goals

Once awareness has been raised in the organization and there is a commitment to change, the organization must demonstrate clarity about its values and goals²⁵ and acknowledge and allow time for the complexity of working through organization-wide paradigm shifts. This also means that both leadership and staff should be ready to adopt any necessary attitudinal changes, including embracing change and the unknown.²⁶

Moreover, leadership and staff need to acknowledge that transitioning from sheltered work models involves transformation at all levels of an organization.²⁷ Not only should agency leadership, staff, and the board of directors be included in defining the values and goals, they should also be convinced that the transition is needed and endorse these values and goals. Participants should also be included in this exercise, as they will be the ones benefiting from the new programs.

Survey respondents indicated that awareness raising and leadership development among the agency board, management, and staff is a key step in defining new and shared values and goals. This should not be overlooked, as it is an important driver of successful transitions.

When asked what kind of new values, goals, and services agencies would like to develop, survey respondents indicated that they would like to do the following:

- Create employment readiness and training services
- Create new individual programs
- Close segregated services

- Develop and find new job opportunities
- Develop social enterprises

Once the vision and goals are clearly stated and formulated, well-planned data collection and monitoring systems must be in place to help track progress during the transition.²⁸

5. Redesigning programs based on flexible timelines and funding options

It is crucial that organizations that desire to transition their programs do so based on flexible funding options and timelines.²⁹

Transitioning from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment can be a lengthy process. This is especially true because governmental funding may not necessarily be available immediately or within a time-frame that aligns with an organization's schedule for moving toward inclusive employment. It is important that organizations and agencies work collaboratively and incrementally with funders to establish effective transition plans, including diversified funding sources where possible.³⁰

Equally important as governments not “pulling the rug” out from funding is the fact that agencies must have flexible timelines to accomplish the transition from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment.

Organizations need flexible timelines and capacity to adapt transition planning and implementation to the available funding. In this sense, implementing a strategic plan that includes clear timelines for the transition process can be helpful.³¹ Once such a timeline is established, ideally the organization can meet the targets so they can deliver on raised expectations.

6. Supporting and training staff

For a transition to inclusive employment to be successful, staff must be trained and supported in meaningful ways.

Our review of the literature suggests that the empowerment of staff members and teams is a key factor in the success of transitioning to inclusive employment.

For example, supporting job growth and change for team members, supporting their creativity and innovation, and encouraging ongoing development and learning opportunities help staff feel comfortable with the transition.³² In other words, organizations and agencies need to create ongoing opportunities for staff retraining within the new policy context.³³

A successful transition from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment requires extensive staff training and support.

It is also important to explicitly acknowledge past successes and clearly state that the decision to move away from sheltered models does not reflect negatively on staff. Staff members should feel valued for their past contributions, even as the organization moves toward new visions and ways of working.³⁴

To help ease the transition for the staff and leadership, it is suggested that focusing on the ultimate goal—not the closure of the existing program, but person-centred and inclusive employment—is also a useful strategy.³⁵

7. Relying on the community and building awareness

Both the review of the literature and key informant interviews point to the importance of relying on and working with local communities as a key success factor.

Ongoing communication with stakeholders and maintaining strong, diverse networks were key to the successes reported in numerous studies and accounts.³⁶ Not only must leadership and staff share the vision, but communities and stakeholders must also acknowledge the importance of transitioning to inclusive employment.³⁷

Community support can be helpful on a number of levels:

- Politically, having community support helps proponents of policy change convince governments;
- Financially, the support of communities through funding campaigns can be a good way to make up for the loss of funding that was linked to sheltered work programs; and
- Socially, raising awareness about the abilities and capacities of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities helps to foster inclusive workplaces and employment opportunities.

Finally, the impacts of transitioning from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment go beyond the individuals and families immediately involved. Successful transitions also have positive impacts on the perception of people living with disabilities and the social expectations for their inclusion in all aspects of community life. When participants with an intellectual or developmental disability are multiply disadvantaged by gender or racialized stereotypes, transition plans should take these other structures of exclusion into account in designing individual and organizational solutions.

Community awareness, participation, and support are key to a successful transition.

C. Employers

1. Employer-awareness strategies

One of the most frequent comments in the survey was the importance of raising awareness with employers. As well as community awareness, employers need to have sensitivity training if they are to fully realize and

Much like the rest of society, employers need awareness training and help to create more inclusive workplaces.

acknowledge the employment potential of individuals with intellectual or other developmental disabilities.

In the last few years, several initiatives have been started and employers have been gradually made more aware of the value of persons with disabilities; however, a lot of work still needs to be done.

For people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities to be able to fully transition from sheltered work to inclusive employment, there must be inclusive workplaces in the first place. Therefore, employers must be open to inclusive employment and recognize the value of this workforce.

2. Support for employers who hire individuals with a disability

Another strategy for creating a more inclusive workplace is the development of programs for employers who want to hire an individual with a disability.

Employers frequently report a lack of awareness and confidence about how to best include individuals with a disability in the workplace. A need for robust strategies and programs to help employers create effective “demand” for employees with an intellectual disability still remains. Proactive encouragement is needed for employers to recruit individuals and for individuals and families to search out and take advantage of these opportunities. Efforts are also needed to get employers to understand the economic value to their business of increased efforts to hire a more diversified workforce and to address the stereotypes and misperceptions that employers have about the abilities of persons with an intellectual disability.

Employers and workplaces need to receive support to hire individuals with a disability. Coaching and mentoring are interesting new developments that shift the responsibility of workplace inclusion from individuals living with a disability to the entire workplace. This is a promising practice.

Recent developments have seen the creation of mentoring and coaching programs in the workplace, notably through the Ready, Willing & Able program³⁸ and through other provincial/local programs. Preliminary conclusions suggest that this kind of support to employers and the workplace is beneficial to all parties and helps promote inclusion because it does not focus on the individual with a disability’s limitations but rather addresses workplace environmental factors and the other individuals in the workforce, shifting the responsibility for successful inclusion from the individual to the employer and the workplace environment.

VIII. Policy Directions

The research points to six key policy directions (outlined below) that governments can take to help transition sheltered work programs to inclusive employment:

1. Ensure that human rights and employment standards legislation provides equal protection to people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in employment and does not permit exemptions for sheltered work.
2. Make a clear and firm policy commitment that sheltered work will no longer be a publicly funded program option.
3. Take a staged or transitional approach, to avoid “pulling the rug out” from under organizations.³⁹
4. Adopt an enabling framework for social assistance and welfare programs, thereby ending the “welfarization” of disabilities.
5. Provide holistic, individual support and person-centred approaches.
6. Facilitate school-to-work transitions.

1. Ensure that human rights and employment standards legislation provides equal protection to people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in employment and does not permit exemptions for sheltered work

Based on the definition of sheltered work programs and the review of the literature, case studies, and current legal framework in the provinces and territory reviewed, it is clear that sheltered work programs are a form of exploitation of people with disabilities. Legal analysis of this issue (see Appendix B) indicates that programs designating people with disabilities as “trainees” or “non-employees” and denying them employment standards entitlements may violate a person’s right to equality in employment, particularly where the people in question work alongside “employees” and/or perform profit-generating work or work that would otherwise be performed by an employee.

Moreover, Article 27 of the UN CRPD,⁴⁰ to which Canada is a signatory, recognizes a right to inclusive employment:

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. States Parties shall safeguard and promote the realization of the right

to work, including for those who acquire a disability during the course of employment, by taking appropriate steps, including through legislation...

Although “sheltered work” is not referenced explicitly in the CRPD, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities monitoring states parties’ implementation of the treaty has consistently found that sheltered work violates the rights protected. In its concluding observations on Canada’s first report on implementing the CRPD, the Committee stated⁴¹:

The Committee is concerned [...] about the absence of strategies to end models of sheltered workshops and ensure access to the open labour market for persons with disabilities, in particular women and young persons with disabilities. The Committee notes that there is a steady increase in both the number and proportion of complaints of discrimination in employment related to disability.

Although most organizations do not necessarily profit from the work of individuals in sheltered work programs, some do receive ample funding both from revenue-selling goods and services produced through sheltered work and from government financing of these programs. The results of the survey for this study demonstrate that in almost half of these programs, in different settings, participants would be considered as employees and would thus receive at least the minimum wage.

The duration of the participation in these programs is also a source of concern. Survey results indicate that many people are long-term participants in these programs:

- 37% of participants stayed between two and five years.
- 26% stayed between 5 and 10 years.
- 21% stayed between 10 and 20 years.

The sheer length of participation may indicate that programs are not actually about getting work experience and receiving training to join the workforce—that, in fact, they may simply amount to a spot in a day services program, in which the labour of participants may generate revenue that offsets the costs of operations, which may be a benefit to the agency and its funder, the government.

Considering the findings presented in this report, governments need to recognize that individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities have the same rights as the rest of the population, including protection against workplace discrimination and exploitation in all forms.

2. Make a clear and firm policy commitment that sheltered work will no longer be a publicly funded program option

A commitment from provincial or territorial governments is needed to divert people from these programs and eliminate funding for sheltered work programs. This is an important driver of change because, as the survey data show, almost all sheltered work programs are currently being funded by provincial or territorial governments.

Discontinuing funding for sheltered work programs (on a graduated basis) would address the very real risk of exploitation some people currently experience and promote and validate the value of people with disabilities and their contribution to the labour market. Done well, this transition can have long-lasting, positive impacts on workforce participation. The literature review and case studies suggest that the most successful strategies in this regard include progressively defunding the programs and diverting the funding to more inclusive employment and day services.

This is especially important because sheltered work programs often are the only day activities available for some people living with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. In other words, people will need to have satisfying alternatives that give them real opportunities to develop skills through on-the-job training and other options.

Equally important is the fact that a number of these programs are a form of respite for families. It is crucial to address this need for family respite, including during the transition from sheltered work programs to other new programs and services. To do this will require additional funding and support for both families and service providers. These funds could come in part from diverted funds for sheltered work programs.

It is also important to note that some service providers receive abundant funding for sheltered work programs under the cover of day services and activities that are offered to persons with an intellectual disability. The funding these service providers receive might also be used to fund other programs they deliver.

a. The Quebec example: Massive budgets for sheltered work programs and almost nothing for inclusive employment

To illustrate the importance of diverting resources from sheltered work to inclusive employment and the opportunities to do so, IRIS analyzed the budgets of the Health and Social Services ministry in Quebec. This ministry is responsible for providing people with disabilities work programs when they reach 21 years of age and are deemed not to be able to work in the regular workforce. (Note: The choice of the province of Quebec is due to two factors—first, the Health and Social Service ministry’s budgets are easily available online⁴²; and second, Quebec was the province with the most sheltered work programs in our survey.)

Sheltered work programs are often the only day services for people with intellectual disabilities and respite for families. A “divert-and-defund” strategy must be accompanied by the development of new, inclusive services for individuals and their families.

Organizations hosting sheltered work programs will need help and funding to transition their programs toward inclusive employment.

In 2019–20, in Quebec, the health and social services agencies spent \$4,153,359 for its own sheltered work programs (*ateliers de travail*), a significant \$12,819,878 in support of other sheltered work programs (*support des plateaux de travail*), \$2,974,576 in support of internships (*support des stages individuels*), and only \$372,500 to support regular employment integration for people with an intellectual disability or on the autism spectrum (see Table 3).⁴³ It should be noted that the support for internships is not considered to be inclusive employment, as these internships are usually “internships for life,” meaning that people will stay in these programs for years or decades at a time, accomplishing regular work but never receiving any paycheque or transition to regular employment.

As outlined in Figure 6, over seven years, from 2013–14 to 2019–20, services with paid participants represented only 1.66% of the total budget for work services offered in the health and social services network in Quebec.

These data illustrate the need for provincial and territorial governments to adopt a divert-and-defund strategy.

Table 3. Funding of work-related programs in Quebec’s Health and Social Services budgets

Program	Sheltered work programs			Inclusive employment programs	Total
Year	Workshops for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities or autism spectrum disorders directly in health and social services institutions; not paid	Support for individual internships (intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder) either in a regular, adapted, or community work environment; not paid	Sheltered work programs (intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder); not paid	Employment integration (intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder); users are paid	
2013-14	\$7,225,291	\$6,008,056	\$9,047,863	\$346,416	\$22,627,626
2014-15	\$6,723,645	\$5,067,534	\$7,620,283	\$340,970	\$19,752,432
2015-16	\$4,697,396	\$4,058,395	\$7,540,068	\$238,641	\$16,534,500
2016-17	\$4,669,276	\$4,082,513	\$10,642,775	\$522,710	\$19,917,274
2017-18	\$4,201,802	\$4,313,128	\$11,176,042	\$127,514	\$19,818,486
2018-19	\$4,266,352	\$3,403,013	\$12,419,478	\$360,625	\$20,449,468
2019-20	\$4,153,359	\$2,974,576	\$12,819,878	\$372,500	\$20,320,313
Total	\$35,937,121	\$29,907,215	\$71,266,387	\$2,309,376	\$139,420,099

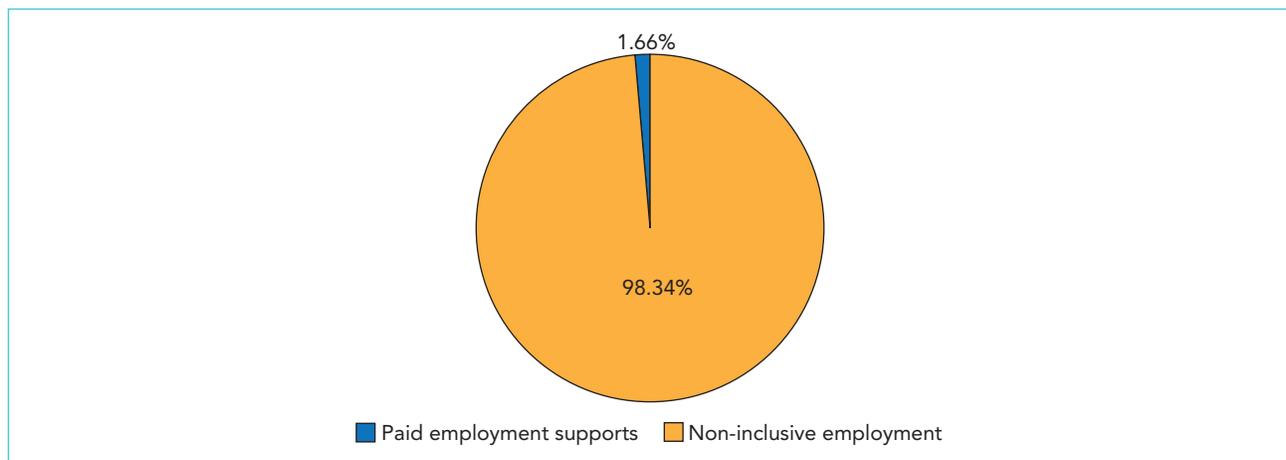


Figure 6. Percentage of employment programs in the total employment budgets for intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder, Quebec Health and Social Services ministry budgets, 2013–2014 to 2019–2020

b. New Brunswick: An effective transition process

The province of New Brunswick is a good example of how an effective transition process from sheltered work to inclusive employment can work. In the last two decades, community agencies, supported by the provincial government,⁴⁴ have advocated for an end to sheltered work programs and have developed an individual-based approach to employment services to include people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in the workforce. One notable program is ADAPT: Adult Development Activities, Program and Training program,⁴⁵ which was renamed the Employment and Support Services Program in 2019.⁴⁶ This program aims to increase the participation of people with disabilities in the workforce and to raise awareness with employers.

Proponents of inclusive employment believe that employment should be the first solution for people with disabilities. Several organizations have been promoting the “employment first” philosophy and have sought funding for this purpose. Supporters of this model argue that:

Some small data sets from New Brunswick point to potential significant cost savings to government programs when efforts are increased to support people with an intellectual or developmental disability to gain more independence and paid employment. Further tracking of these savings would be warranted as the new employment-first model is implemented.⁴⁷

Preliminary results suggest that this strategy has been effective in securing inclusive employment for people with developmental disabilities in workplaces across the province.⁴⁸ Proponents also argue that this is a good way to help address workforce shortages in the province and could be very beneficial to the local economy.⁴⁹

New Brunswick’s approach to transitioning from sheltered work and day programs is supported by new policy standards that were introduced in 2019. These standards provide clear direction to day program agencies to adopt an employment-first mandate and approach. The new standards also set out a mandate to eliminate the use of stipends for service users.

The policy change was accompanied by the development of a new service delivery model for agencies (based on an employment-first orientation), a new planning template for individual support (the Individual Employment and Support Plan [IESP]), access to individualized funding for employment supports, a commitment to agency staff training (involving person-centred planning approaches, job development, job coaching, and job readiness), supporting agency change through a comprehensive set of employment-first “indicators,” and direct agency support through a model of consultation and change management.

Although this transition process is still ongoing, there are clear signs of agency change to support employment for real pay. Some issues, such as a new funding model for agencies to enhance the work of supported employment and the role and design of social enterprises, remain to be resolved.

The New Brunswick experience demonstrates how ongoing mobilization of the community and effective partnerships with the government can achieve a transition from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment.

3. Take a staged or transitional approach to avoid “pulling the rug out” from under organizations

Putting an end to sheltered work programs can’t happen in a vacuum. It must be staged and the transition to inclusive employment services must be carefully planned, to make sure that both people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and their families still have access to services and respite.

The transition from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment should be done gradually and be rooted in the community.

Although defunding and diverting funds is essential, governments cannot just pull the rug out from under organizations hosting sheltered work programs. These organizations must be supported in the transition to inclusive employment.

As noted above, agencies and organizations wanting to move toward inclusive employment should have precise, but flexible, timelines to achieve this goal. This means that while pulling the rug out from under organizations is not an option, there still should be expectations of real change that is well planned and implemented. Funders should follow up closely on the progress made by the agencies and organizations and be transparent in their expectations and timelines for changes in funding rules.

Moreover, agencies that have committed to inclusive employment should be supported by funders to accomplish the transition from sheltered work programs. This is important because, as highlighted in Part VII (best practices), the transition process can be long and requires extensive resources in training, organizational changes, and community involvement. Awareness campaigns both inside and outside organizations and agencies that promote attitude change, new skills development, and enhanced capacity for staff, leadership, and boards of directors are important success factors. Organizations and agencies should be funded to take these steps and make sure they are successful.

In other words, not only should governments and funders not pull the rug out from under the organizations and agencies, they should help them through the transition process, notably in funding the additional awareness and training campaigns. Mentorship and shared experience spaces could also assist agencies and organizations in the transition process.

Steps must also be taken to support families, reassuring them that services will still exist and that their family members will not be penalized by the transition to inclusive employment. This may require some adaptation to the social support and welfare programs.

Finally, government and other funders should collect data about employment programs, including remaining sheltered work programs and their funding. It is currently very difficult to gather data about these programs and the level of funding provided by the provincial and territorial governments. An adequate data-collection strategy would help measure the progress made in transitioning sheltered work programs to inclusive employment programs, and help inform the design of future public policies in this area.

4. Adopt an enabling framework for social assistance and welfare programs, thereby ending the “welfarization” of disabilities

The transition to inclusive employment requires changes to social assistance and welfare programs in all provinces and territories. These programs were designed to respond to short-term needs, compensating for a short-term lack of work or employment insurance. As such, they are not particularly well suited to people with disabilities and often lack active measures to help in the transition to regular employment.

Rare are the programs that allow persons with disabilities to work and still receive financial assistance. Programs create a “poverty trap” when people are allowed to keep only minimal earnings from inclusive work but their income assistance is insufficient to make ends meet. Sheltered work programs were designed to

The “welfarization” of disability has created “poverty traps” for people living with disabilities who are on social assistance programs. These programs need to be adapted to encourage and support people with disabilities to experience inclusive employment and take their rightful place in the workforce.

fit within this scheme. Assuming that people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities would not participate in the regular workforce, but that they would benefit from having day activities, the programs filled that niche without conflicting with social assistance and welfare program eligibility criteria.

It will be important in the context of a transition to inclusive employment to address these disincentives to employment and improve economic security.

5. Provide holistic, individual support and person-centred approaches

To ensure that the transition from sheltered work programs to inclusive employment is successful for the person and the organizations, it is important to ensure that participants of sheltered work programs are involved in the development of new organizational visions and changing values.⁵⁰ There can be no services about and for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities without their participation in the design process.

There is a general push toward individualized services and more personalized approaches for people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Inclusive employment is an important part of these approaches.

One of the ways to ensure that participants in sheltered work programs succeed in their transition to inclusive employment is to adopt an individualized support approach and individualized employment supports. For example, the review of the literature suggests that there is a value in maintaining some of the social networks of pre-transition programs for both participants and their families.⁵¹ These networks help participants transition from sheltered work to inclusive employment, notably by maintaining meaningful relationships and helping to safeguard against isolation.⁵²

Implementing individualized employment supports for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities is essential to enabling active participation in the workforce. As the Training and Employment Support Services (TESS) model in New Brunswick has shown,⁵³ individualized employment supports, based on individual needs and exempt from any sort of income test or restriction, are an effective approach to making the workforce more accessible and inclusive for everyone.

Fostering positive social environments in inclusive employment settings was also found to be important.⁵⁴ This is especially true because employers often report that they do not know how to include people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in the workplace. Survey results suggest that employers and colleagues need training to do so. Workplace awareness is an important part of successful inclusion and requires that responsibility for inclusive outcomes shifts from the person being included to all those in the workplace environment.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that some participants may choose not to participate in mainstream, inclusive employment. Organizations should be prepared to work with these individuals using person-centred approaches to access other day programming and non-work supports.⁵⁵

6. Facilitate school-to-work transitions

An important component of a successful transition to inclusive employment is a well-planned school-to-work transition. Survey respondents highlighted this issue as a major factor for success in workforce inclusion.

Respondents suggested that schools should prepare individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities for the realities of inclusive employment and develop their work and social skills accordingly. Researchers also suggest that career planning and counselling, on-the-job experience while in school (part-time/weekends), and intentional transitional planning are good instruments for youth living with disabilities and can help prepare them for an active work life.

Key to these efforts is the fact that educators and parents must believe that their children will in fact enter the workforce. Schools need to stop preparing students to enter workshops. A supportive environment based on the capacities of the person—not on their limitations—is paramount in the development of the person’s work and social skills.

This need has been highlighted in public policies around the country. For example, Quebec has developed the *Guide for supporting the transition from school to active life (TSAL)*⁵⁶ to help schools and other partners facilitate the transition from school to active life of young adults with disabilities. Other examples include Ontario’s 2002 *Transition Planning: A Resource Guide*⁵⁷ and the Regional Assessment and Resource Centre (RARC)’s website, which provides resources and information to help schools and parents accomplish a successful school-to-work transition.⁵⁸

However, despite provincial and territorial government efforts, a 2016 report from the Canadian Career Development Foundation found that “no province has successfully enacted a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy” and that “student access to transition support is spotty at best and no active system exists to support Canadian youth in their school-to-work transitions.”⁵⁹ In fact, these programs are usually “hit-and-miss,” as some provinces have great success and others a lot less. For example, the New Brunswick government operates a successful program, in collaboration with the New Brunswick Association for Community Living (NBACL). This program grants funds to the NBACL to operate a transition-to-work program that is active in many high schools and supports over 250 students per year.⁶⁰ Per NBACL numbers, the program is highly successful and has a rate of students leaving school and entering the workforce of over 65%.

Results from the survey and case studies highlighted the need for more effective school to work transition strategies. The need is clear: a 2011 research study found that individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities are more likely to work in sheltered work programs than their peers with other disabilities.

Ultimately, the lack of coherence in policies and programs between the provinces is found to have a deep impact on individuals living with disabilities who are trying to enter the workforce, notably on their mental health.⁶¹

These findings suggest that more comprehensive transition policies are needed to help students with disabilities better prepare for the school-to-work transition. This is especially true for students with intellectual or other developmental disabilities, who are more likely to participate in sheltered work programs than other young adults living with disabilities.⁶³

IX. Conclusions, Next Steps, and Recommendations

Sheltered work programs have existed for more than 70 years, and some people have languished in these programs for their entire working-age and adult lives. However, and despite decades of discussion about transitioning from sheltered work to inclusive employment, sheltered work programs still exist and are actively funded by some provincial and territorial governments. This is largely due to the lack of a coherent and comprehensive pan-Canadian policy framework to mandate, guide, and support the transition to more inclusive employment.

This research was motivated by the absence of such a framework and points to evidence-informed policy directions that fill the current gap. The different success stories and case studies presented in this report prove that such a transition is possible and needed. They demonstrate that an effective transition and closure strategy will require additional resources and a diversion of investment from sheltered work programs toward inclusive employment, including support for people with intellectual or other developmental disabilities and families to adapt to these new expectations.

Key to successful transition strategies to inclusive employment is that they are person-centred, family- and community-supported, policy mandated, and provider led, with all stakeholders represented and engaged. This is especially true because, across the country, people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities have long asked for an end to sheltered work programs. People's participation is also paramount, as “nothing about us without us” has been at the centre of the disability community's actions and practices for years.

Disability community organizations continue to call for a more inclusive society and workforce. With greater clarity and evidence about the pathway to a successful transition, growing advocacy demands, and some promising commitments by governments, now may finally be the time to deliver on the promise of inclusive employment for all. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities should not have to wait any longer to redress the long-standing employment discrimination so many of them face.

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