



HELP WANTED ENDING SHELTERED WORK IN CANADA

Transitioning to inclusive employment for people intellectual and developmental disabilities

A photograph of a white rectangular sign pinned 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 black corner fasteners.

**HELP
WANTED**

SUMMARY REPORT

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



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

© 2021 Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society

IRIS claims copyright in this publication. You may copy, download, distribute, display, and otherwise deal freely with this publication, but only if you comply with the following conditions:

1. You must acknowledge the source of this publication;
2. You may not modify this publication or any portion of it;
3. You must not use this publication for any commercial purpose without the prior written permission of IRIS.

ISBN: 978-1-897292-22-8

Title: Help Wanted—Ending Sheltered Work in Canada: Transitioning to Inclusive Employment for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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

Acknowledgements

The Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society gratefully acknowledges the many contributions that made this report possible. People First of Canada, which is taking on the issue of sheltered work in Canada, financially supported this research with a contribution from Employment and Social Development Canada. Cheryl Wiles Pooran from PooranLaw analyzed the legal framework in Canada regulating sheltered work, and Chronicle Analytics, with René Doucet, contributed to survey design and analyzing survey results. Inclusion Canada assisted with outreach and survey dissemination, and external reviewers Ken Pike and Don Gallant provided helpful feedback and suggestions. We extend our appreciation to respondents for completing the surveys and to key informants who were interviewed for the background research.

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.



Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
What Are Sheltered Work Programs, and What Are the Issues Associated with These Programs?	1
Key Findings.....	1
Resistance to Ending Sheltered Work.....	2
Key Concerns with Sheltered Work Models	2
Why Canada Needs to Transition Away from Sheltered Work Models	3
What is Inclusive Employment?.....	3
Best Practices in Transitioning from Sheltered Work to Inclusive Employment.....	4
Individuals, families, and communities	4
Agencies, staff, and organizational leadership	4
Employers.....	4
Policy Directions.....	4
Next Steps	5

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.

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 with 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).

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.

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

The key concerns with sheltered work models are that:

- The employment practices are discriminatory and fail to meet basic employment standards;
- Most people who participate do not value their experience, and many outright reject it;

- They reinforce the isolation and segregation of people with developmental disabilities from the mainstream labour market and perpetuate negative stereotypes about disability;
- They contribute to impoverishing this group because they will never provide a path to economic security; and
- They can lead to “mission drift” of their host agencies, because the business model requires the continued segregation from the labour market of a group the host agency has a mission to support.

Why Canada Needs to Transition Away from Sheltered Work Models

Despite decades of advocacy efforts to move away from sheltered work models and focus instead on supporting people in participating in the mainstream labour market, the model continues to be in use in most provinces and territories.

Research findings suggest that moving away from the sheltered work model is necessary to:

- Increase the labour force participation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities;
- Address the isolation, exploitation, and poverty that people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities experience;
- Increase investment in inclusive employment approaches, stopping the flow of public investment in segregating practices;
- Respond to the growing demand from adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and their families for inclusive employment over sheltered work;
- Enable greater levels of independence, meaningful engagement in the community, and economic security; and
- Be consistent with Canada’s obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states in Article 27 that “labour markets and work environments should be open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities on an equal basis with other people.”

What is Inclusive Employment?

“Inclusive employment” refers to the nature of employment itself, as well as a policy goal. It means:

- Individuals with disabilities working alongside their peers without disabilities in the competitive labour market;
- Ensuring that no person is segregated or excluded from quality employment opportunities because of their disability; and

- Ensuring 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.

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; and
- 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.

Next Steps

Sheltered work programs have existed for more than 70 years, and some people have languished in these programs for their whole 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.

Key to successful transition strategies to inclusive employment is that it is 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.