It's Everybody's Business: Engaging the Private Sector in Solutions to Youth Homelessness

By Amanda Noble

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Raising the Roof provides strong and effective national leadership on long-term solutions to homelessness through partnership and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, investment in local communities, and public education.

This report comes out of a year-long Private Sector Engagement Project, a component of our Youthworks initiative. The project’s main objective is to learn more about ways to increase private sector involvement in solutions to youth homelessness.

Also available:

- **The full report** – It’s Everybody’s Business: Engaging the Private Sector in Solutions to Youth Homelessness, is available at www.raisingtheroof.org.

- **An online toolkit** for prospective employers and community agencies that offer employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth (at www.raisingtheroof.org). This is one of the first accessible and practical resources of its kind in Canada.

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SUMMARY REPORT

It’s Everybody’s Business: Engaging the Private Sector in Solutions to Youth Homelessness

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Introduction

An issue that affects everyone is clearly “everybody’s business”.

The issue of homelessness affects everyone in society – morally, socially, and economically – therefore, genuine solutions require action in a cross-section of society, including the private sector. Homelessness is, indeed, “everybody's business”.

After years of inattention, there is a growing consideration of the ways in which the private sector can help address social problems such as homelessness. For example, many employers have the potential to provide powerful motivation and mentorship, training and employment opportunities for homeless and at-risk youth. To date, however, there is little research that outlines successful strategies to engage the private sector in doing so. Recognizing this gap, Raising the Roof sought to learn more about ways to increase private sector involvement in solutions to youth homelessness through our Private Sector Engagement Project, one component of our Youthworks initiative.

There is currently a myriad of community agencies across Canada that prepare youth for employment by helping them to secure their basic needs and develop valuable life and employment skills. While this work is vital, it relies on youth having access to jobs where they can put their newly learned skills into practice. At the beginning stages of their career, everyone needs someone to take a chance on them. This is particularly true for at-risk and homeless youth, who often lack the invaluable connections and supports necessary to find entry-level jobs.

The research for this report had two objectives. One, to learn about the ways businesses and community agencies are currently working together to provide training, employment and mentorship opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth. And two, to use that knowledge as a catalyst for change in attitude, policy and practice within the private sector, paving the way for new employment opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth across Canada.

1 Raising the Roof launched its Youthworks initiative in 2006, which is aimed at finding solutions to homelessness for young Canadians. During the first phase we released the report Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions, which gave voice to nearly 700 youth experiencing homelessness. The second phase has been aimed at advocating for the recommendations made in this report through a combination of community, government, and private sector engagement, as well as by designing a public education campaign. For more information, visit www.raisingtheroof.org.
Research participants

The full version of this report\(^2\) includes details about the methodology and literature review associated with this year-long research study. The following community agencies/employment programs and businesses were among those that shared their experiences and insights with us:

**Agencies**

- A.C.C.E.S.S. – BladeRunners, Vancouver, BC
- Community Futures Development Corporation of the North Okanagan – EMPLOY, Vernon, BC
- Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY) – Growing Opportunities, Winnipeg, MB
- St. Christophers House – Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC), Toronto, ON
- Carpenters’ Union Local 27 – CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program, Vaughan, ON
- Pinecrest – Queensway Community Health Centre – Youth Retail Program, Ottawa, ON
- Spectre de Rue – TAPAJ, Montreal, QC
- Choices for Youth – Train for Trades, St. John’s, NL

**Businesses**

- Addition Elle, Ottawa, ON
- Boon Burger, Winnipeg, MB
- Briteland, Vernon, BC
- Cobs Bread, Vernon, BC
- CUPE Local 1860, St. John’s, NL
- Eltex Enterprises, Vancouver, BC
- Highpoint Safety, Vancouver, BC
- Intact Insurance, Toronto, ON
- ITC Construction Group, Vancouver, BC
- Natural Cycle Courier, Winnipeg, MB
- Qwik Change Oil and Lube, Vernon, BC
- Shoppers Drug Mart at Richmond/Carling, Ottawa, ON
- Westbank Projects Corp., Vancouver, BC

*(a total of 31 employers were interviewed, however, some preferred not to be identified by name)*

\(^2\) Available to view at www.raisingtheroof.org, or call us for a hard copy
Who are ‘at-risk’ youth?

The employment programs profiled in this research provide life and employment-related skills to youth who are either experiencing homelessness or are ‘at risk’ of homelessness.

The Canadian Homelessness Research Network\(^3\) has identified several factors that make an individual at risk of homelessness, including: precarious employment, sudden unemployment, pending eviction, breakdown in family relations, abuse or fear of violence/abuse in a household, severe mental health issues, substance abuse, or behavioural concerns. These latter concerns can make youth at risk of homelessness even if they are not experienced in person, but are manifested in the youth’s parents/guardians.

Other factors that can place youth at risk of homelessness include low educational attainment, involvement in the criminal justice or child welfare systems, and discrimination based on sexuality or race (particularly for Aboriginal Persons or new Canadians of colour). In general, the more risk factors present the more at risk of homelessness an individual will be.

Why do we need to address the issue?

Barriers to employment

At-risk and homeless youth face many structural barriers to employment, including poor labour market conditions such as the growth in part-time, temporary positions with lower wages and no benefits; shrinking of the manufacturing sector; increased outsourcing of low skill-level positions to developing countries; and the gradual dismantling of public sector jobs.\(^4\)

The culmination of these factors has led to a dramatic increase in precarious employment and a new class of society that perpetually shifts between un- and under-employment and faces monumental barriers to upward mobility and escaping poverty.\(^5\) As well, the growth of the knowledge economy has led to an increase in the need for credentials, or educated and skilled workers who possess more than a secondary school diploma.\(^6\)

Youth in general (let alone homeless youth) are at a marked disadvantage in securing meaningful employment. In fact youth unemployment rates are double that of Canada’s total unemployed population at 14.7% versus 7.8% (Community Foundation of Canada, 2011).

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\(^3\) Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012). Canadian definition of homelessness. Downloaded from: www.homelesshub.ca


For most at-risk and homeless youth to obtain, and most importantly, maintain employment, it is vital that they have access to services provided by community agencies such as those profiled in this study. Most of the youth that enter these programs have unsuccessfully attempted to find or maintain employment on their own.

What does this mean for homeless youth?

With low educational attainment and work experience, homeless youth are at a big disadvantage for securing even the most menial, precarious employment positions. This is particularly true for First Nations youth, as well as youth in some regions such as Eastern Canada. It is clear that Canada must not only find workers to replace those entering retirement age, but that those workers must be equipped to work in a knowledge economy. All of Canada's youth must have access to meaningful education, training, and employment opportunities.

For homeless and at-risk youth, this means ensuring that their basic needs are met and that they have enough support and encouragement to continue their education and training. This will not only require the support of NGOs, community agencies and educational institutions, but also unions and the private sector.

The importance of youth employment programs

For most at-risk and homeless youth to obtain and, most importantly, maintain employment, it is vital that they have access to services provided by community agencies such as those profiled in this study. Most of the youth that enter these programs have unsuccessfully attempted to find or maintain employment on their own.

Some of the youth may not be able to move directly from crisis to full-time, stable employment. Instead, they may need a transitional step, or what is referred to as 'pre-employment', so that they have a chance to stabilize their lives. These programs differ from other employment programs in that they help youth address their barriers to employment while learning valuable soft and/or hard skills in a supportive environment.

Although the employment programs in this sample vary, all provide youth the opportunity to learn basic skills such as developing a resume and cover letter, preparing for an interview, and showing up for work regularly and on time. Some programs also offer other opportunities such as Health and Safety training and certification in Customer Service Excellence, that make the youth more employable. Other programs provide youth with hard skills, e.g., basic carpentry or construction – around which they can begin an apprenticeship and structure a career.

The cornerstone of these community programs is the amount of support they provide. For youth who have experienced multiple traumas and barriers in their lives, it is arguably this support that allows them to push through and stabilize their lives.

You support young people around the stuff that’s going on in their lives [and] they’re much more likely to show up to work the next day. And if they show up to work the next day, they’ll show up the next day, and the next day...

And then they start believing in themselves, and that’s as simple as it is.

Sheldon, Choices for Youth
The Private Sector

Private sector motivation

“Really [our] partnership with BladeRunners is part of our commitment to be involved in the local community. It wasn’t just about building a development... we continue to hire from the local community, [people] that are rooted in the Downtown East Side and give back in some way. And that’s something that’s really important to us, you can say you did a feel-good project, but if you’re not making a difference in the community, then what’s it all for?”

Rhiannon Mabberley, Westbank Projects Corp.

When employers were asked why they choose to give homeless or at-risk youth work experience or employment, the three most common reasons given were:

1. The opportunity to give back to their communities and help marginalized youth maintain employment;
2. Bottom-line benefits such as receiving a wage subsidy, which enabled some employers with restricted budgets to provide employment training and/or employment to a youth;
3. The positive reputation of the community agency.

Job responsibilities

Available employment positions depend greatly on the work available among the agency’s current private sector partners. Youth may work in construction and associated trades, the service sector (e.g. retail and restaurants), hospitality/tourism and administration. They may serve customers, make deliveries, work on an assembly line, repair equipment, prepare documents to mail, stock shelves, build or repair various structures, or perform general labour. Of course these are entry-level positions, but some youth have progressed to become health and safety supervisors, foremen, and store supervisors. Others have pursued an education while working with the agency.
The employers' experience

While all of the employers in this study have had at least one successful employment placement, those who partner with community agencies over an extended period of time tend to have a wide variety of experiences, both positive and negative, with their youth employees.

The challenges experienced by the employers varied tremendously in both frequency and impact but included: difficulties keeping youth interested in construction work during slow periods; challenges with the youth's adjustment to the work routine; the need to provide additional support – particularly early in the work placement; inappropriate work conduct (e.g. dress code and suitable language), poor punctuality and attendance, and difficulty dealing with irate or dissatisfied customers.

Despite the best efforts of agency staff and employers, some youth were not able to maintain their employment positions. However, a few respondents pointed out that this is not necessarily unique to the youth they hire from the employment programs, and can occur with any employee.

Despite the challenges, all of the employers interviewed ultimately felt that their efforts were very worthwhile, and indicated they would continue to work with their community agency partners.

Advice for other employers

Employers were asked to share advice with others who may be thinking about giving work experience or employment opportunities to at-risk youth. Their suggestions:

- Ensure you go through the same process you would in hiring any employee, including a thorough job interview.
- Adjust your expectations about the youth's employment history. Instead, look at the youth's attitude and willingness to learn.
- Be patient with the youth and understanding of their situations, particularly in the early days on the job. After the initial learning phase, most youth catch up with the other employees and perform at the same level.
- Try not to draw excessive attention to youth hired through the community agency. This will help ensure other employees do not feel that anyone is getting special treatment, and also respects the youth who most likely does not want to feel like he or she stands out.
- Communicate clear expectations about what is required of the youth and encourage them to ask questions.
- Treat all youth in placement as if they were future hires, investing in and training them on a wide variety of tasks so that they develop multiple skills.

One of the things I sometimes find challenging is that they come and they're really gung-ho to work, and you see tons of potential in them. And then for whatever reason, they just fade away. And you get frustrated because you put time into them, and you get concerned, because a lot of them are good kids... Some of them [are] not quite ready, they seem to think they are, they'll say all the right things and do all the right things, but then when they get there, they're not.

Mark, Eltex Enterprises
Community Agencies

The agency perspective

The eight community agencies9 who partnered with us in this project each have well-established employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth. Some of the program models are similar, but each is tailored to meet the unique needs and circumstances of the local community of homeless and at-risk youth.

The criteria for youth admission to the employment programs depend largely on:

a) The program’s capacity to meet the youth’s needs either alone or with referrals to additional support services (e.g. addiction counselling, mental health programs);

b) The ability of the youth to meet the health and safety requirements of the work (e.g. severe addictions or mental concerns can jeopardize the safety of the youth working on a construction site).

Employment program strengths

- **Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY)** – Growing Opportunities Program provides a supportive environment that allows even the most crisis-laden youth to transition to more stable employment once they are ready to do so. A drop-in center and housing support, plus referrals to other needed services are also available.

- **A.C.C.E.S.S.** – BladeRunners program. Approximately 90% of the youth who use this construction-focused employment program are of First Nations descent, and cultural awareness is part of pre-employment and life skills training. Following training, youth are provided with necessary equipment (e.g. work boots and tool belts). Program staff are available to the youth 24/7.

- **Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre** – The Youth Retail Employment Program is designed to work with youth at various levels of ability, introducing them to the retail sector – an entry point into the workforce for many youth.

- **Community Futures Development** – EMPLOY program has a unique pre-employment program focused on teaching critical thinking skills in a way that has practical application for the youth in their work, relationships and everyday life.

- **St. Christopher House** – Toronto Youth Job Corps has the capacity to provide their youth with a variety of services that are run out of St. Christopher House. For instance, adult learning programs are available to suit various levels of ability including youth with lower literacy levels, those preparing for their GED, and one program that assists youth transitioning from high school to college.

9 Profiles of each agency are included in the full report at www.raisingtheroof.org.
• **The Carpenters’ Local 27 Training Trust Fund Inc.** – **CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program** introduces at-risk youth to trades around which they can structure a career. The Training Trust Fund partly funds the program, with the assistance of the YMCA, and HSI.

• **Spectre de Rue** – **TAPAJ program** provides work for the most street-entrenched youth, allowing them to transition slowly from the street to formal employment within a setting where other important needs (e.g., housing and harm reduction services) can also be addressed.

• **Choices for Youth** – **Train for Trades program** uses an intensive support model, where staff are available to youth 24/7. This support provides youth facing difficult life situations with the help and encouragement they need to come to work every day.

**Program challenges**

• **Striking a balance.** Agency staff must balance the interests of the youth with work availability – a particular challenge during economic recessions.

• **Uncertain funding.** The most common challenge identified by agency staff was securing long-term, stable funding. Continually seeking funding sources can divert attention from service delivery and make it difficult to retain quality staff.

• **Meaningful outcome measurement.** Agencies face increasing pressure from funders to demonstrate high outcomes, particularly regarding the number of youth employed at the end of a program. A disproportionate focus on outcomes can lead to inappropriate placements, divert attention from the more important goal of maintaining employment, and discount the less tangible benefits, such as building self-esteem, that youth also gain from participating in these programs.

• **Capacity to meet complex needs.** Some youth have particularly complex needs that agency staff do not have the capacity to address, e.g., severe mental health and addiction concerns.

• **Basic needs.** Staff noted that it can be difficult to help a youth succeed in employment when they do not have adequate housing where they can prepare for work each day.

• **Bolstering self-esteem.** After experiencing what appear to be several failures in life (for example in school or in relationships), it can be difficult for youth to believe in their abilities to do something positive with their lives or to be successful.

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I think that... one of the biggest things that we face is that people come in with such low self-esteem, and self-value... it’s really hard to sell yourself... to an employer if you don’t have self-worth.

Tony, TYJC
Advice for other agencies

- **Hire the right people.** The youth may be dealing with any number of barriers or challenges, so it is important for them to feel comfortable and not judged by staff.

- **Stay focused on the needs of the youth.** Listen when they identify areas they would like to address rather than imposing goals on them. Applaud small achievements and don't focus too much on ‘stumbles’ as these are inevitable.

- **Accountability.** Be very clear about the agency’s expectations of the youth and hold them accountable. It is also vital for the agency to hold its own work to a high standard. This may involve keeping statistics, case examples, and continually reflecting on their actions.

- **Start small.** Work out any ‘kinks’ before expanding the program and learn from other programs when possible.

- **Adapt to local context.** When adapting components of another program, agencies must take the local environment and needs into account.

We set clear expectations, and we’re very upfront and vocal about what is expected... not showing up for work on time, and not making a call – that’s not going to get you ahead in life... the chances are when they do that in the job where the employer is totally fixated on their finances or building their financial account, that’s not going to work for him...

Brad, Choices for Youth
Geraldine, one of the founding members of TYJC, described how a youth was placed in a store and was terrified to work at the cash register. After four weeks of the youth refusing to train on cash, a meeting was held to discuss the youth's progress. Agency staff suggested that the youth be allowed to job shadow a cashier for two weeks. Today, the youth not only feels at ease performing this task, she has become such a valuable employee that she now manages a different location.
What we really find helps is their [agency staff] willingness to deal with the youth, so we don't have to... we're construction workers, we're not social workers... when I have a problem with the youth and phone Garry, I know within an hour or so he will call me back. And he deals with it... Our part is to help these youth out, but we're only involved with them 8 hours a day when they're at work; there's 24 hours in a day. The other 16, that's the organization's thing.

Mark, Eltex Enterprises

Working Together: Engaging The Private Sector

Successful partnerships

Both agency staff and employers were asked which factors they felt necessary for a successful partnership. Their suggestions included:

- **Agency support.** Employers vary in their capacity to provide support to the youth and agencies need to assist them at times. This means being readily available to the employer and the youth. Many of the youth experience personal difficulties including conflict with family, precarious housing circumstances and parenting concerns. Having agency staff available for support is crucial so that youth are better able to focus on their employment during work hours.

- **Communication.** Open, honest communication was emphasized. This includes the agency being upfront about the backgrounds, skill levels and individual barriers of the youth so that employers have a realistic picture of what is required from them, as well as any potential risks. Regular calls and formal progress meetings help ensure the partnership is progressing smoothly.

- **Keep it simple.** Several employers emphasized the need for agency staff to keep the process as uncomplicated as possible for them. Jonathan, an employer from Ottawa, emphasized this when asked what he thought was necessary for him to work with a community agency:

  The simpler the better...they brought me exactly what I needed. They had all the information laid out, they presented the program to me, they took care of any paperwork and such between me and head office, or anything that needed to be handled. There was nothing I had to go searching for, there was nothing I had to go out of my way to do.

- **Clear expectations.** Both parties agreed it is very important to be clear about their expectations of one another. For employers this meant describing what they expect from the youth in terms of job responsibilities, conduct, and dress code. It also meant being clear about what role they expect the agency to play, what barriers they are willing to work through, and which ones they are not willing to tackle. For the agencies, this meant clarifying with the employers that they would provide a supportive environment for the youth, train them in various tasks so that they develop diverse skills, and – assuming a satisfactory placement – consider hiring them.
Strategies for engagement

Agency and private sector participants were asked to suggest specific strategies for engaging the private sector in providing training and employment opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth.

- **Getting the Word Out.** Suggestions included hosting community events; placing ads in the local newspaper; inviting members of the business and political communities to speak to the youth program participants; having agency staff attend job fairs, Rotary service clubs, business improvement associations, boards of trades, and monthly trade-related meetings; asking current private sector partners to act as ‘corporate champions’, and recognizing and promoting the work of private sector partners.

**Graph A: Strategies for Engaging the Private Sector**

- **Relationship-building.** Most participants agreed that basic research on what the company does, who is authorized to make decisions, the general environment and philosophy of the business are essential and help to demonstrate genuine interest in making the business successful.

I think it’s about really learning the business...what they do, how they do it, what works for them, what’s their culture...really finding out what their mission statement is, what their bottom line is, and trying to match a youth who might be best suited for that business.

Kim, EMPLOY
Choosing a business to approach. It is important for agencies to choose the right business to approach when seeking private sector partners. Many of the programs offer wage subsidies and pre-screening services that may attract partners whose main interest is in securing free or cheap labour. Companies with an explicit social mandate or corporate social responsibility policy are a good place to start.

Highlighting the benefits of participating
- Be honest and up-front about both the advantages and disadvantages of hiring at-risk youth
- Tailor your pitch to the company. For instance, does the agency provide pre-employment training and certifications (e.g. WHMIS, Fall Protection, First Aid and Customer Service Excellence) that may appeal to the employer?
- Describe the benefits to employers, e.g.: wage subsidies, time-saving pre-screening and support services, access to trained, quality employees, youth and employer support throughout the employment period, positive public relations, and a chance to help strengthen their communities.

You need partners that really understand that it's about more than getting a person on the site to do a job, it's about changing a life. When you think about it in those terms, you're more willing to roll with the punches... And you know having people on site that don't work out, that happens to the best of us. We have you know, graduates with their MBAs, Master's in Development that don't work out. It's no different than any employee. Not everyone is going to work out.

Rhiannon, Westbank Projects Corp.
I was looking for employment and I was having troubles. Every place I went to either didn’t call me for an interview or if they did it didn’t go anywhere past that. So I came here... and next thing I know I was accepted into the program... I was set up with an opportunity for employment, along with special training that would make it easier for me to get other jobs later on in my life.

Graeme, a youth participant from Ottawa
The Youth's Perspective

Youth interviewed for this study were either current participants or recent graduates in one of the 8 community employment programs profiled. They were asked to talk about why they joined the program, the benefits and challenges they faced, and any next steps they had planned. They were also asked to provide advice to both agency staff and employers working in a similar program.

Reasons for joining the program

Over half of the youth said the main reason for joining the program was they were unable to secure employment by themselves because of poor job search or interview skills, limited employment experience, and barriers such as a criminal record and low levels of education.

Many youth wanted to improve their current circumstances, including seeking an end to working in menial jobs, finding support to pursue an education, staying away from substance use, or generally searching for meaningful activities such as pursuing a career. A few youth described wanting to improve their lives for the sake of their children, so that they could give them a better life.

Benefits of participating

- **Necessities and experience.** Youth identified many benefits to participating in these employment programs. First and foremost, they were able to have their basic needs met, as many of the programs are funded to provide food and assistance and other necessities such as housing and work equipment.

- **Learning new skills.** The opportunity to learn new skills and acquire knowledge was mentioned by 42 out of 63 (66.6%) respondents. Many youth spoke about developing ‘hard’ skills such as those used in construction, and proudly described how they learned to use particular tools or perform retrofits on homes. This gave many youth a sense of self worth. Edberg a participant from Toronto stated:

  > I can go anywhere now and say I know how to do this. And the correct way; the safe way. I'm just very proud to say that I can do it. So it's been a really good program for me.

  Many youth also described learning skills such as developing a resume, job-hunting, and interview skills. After learning and practicing how to prepare for and conduct themselves at interviews, they felt much more confident.

  A number of youth also appreciated the opportunity to earn various certificates (e.g. WHMIS, Customer Service Excellence, and First Aid) as these qualifications strengthened their resumes. Youth also described learning ‘soft’ skills such as critical thinking, effective communications, and how to control anger in difficult situations. They described using their newfound knowledge in both their work and personal lives.
• **Guidance and support.** Another benefit listed by a few youth was that by joining their employment program they were inspired to pursue a particular path in life, or their lives had a newfound direction. Many youth who enter an employment program are unsure of which career they would like to pursue. Staff are available to explore potential avenues and guide the youth towards education or training that will prepare them for their career of choice.

• **Improved self-esteem.** A few youth described beginning to see themselves differently after completing their employment program. For example, one young man talked about how he can now list several positive traits about himself, whereas before he felt that he had nothing to contribute to a workplace.

• **Meeting new people.** Several youth said that joining their program helped them meet new people including staff, other participants, and work colleagues. Many youth who have experienced homelessness have not only left their homes behind, but also friends, family members and other supportive figures such as teachers, counsellors or religious leaders. Having access to a new network of support therefore cannot be underestimated.

Next steps

The youth were asked if they had any next steps planned or visions for the future. Their responses varied tremendously (see Graph B). On a positive note, a total of 36% youth indicated a desire to further their education, which for many youth was previously undesirable or seemed unattainable.

As previously mentioned, it is not always realistic to expect a youth’s life to change completely after finishing one employment program. In many cases joining an employment program is a first step for at-risk youth, or the beginning of a path where the direction is still largely uncertain. It is not possible to deduce the true impact of these employment programs, particularly while they are still in the program or immediately afterwards (this research was conducted either near the end or very recently after program completion). Longitudinal research which follows youth over an extended time frame would be useful to observe the life path youth choose in the years following an employment program, even if a causal link cannot be established.
Advice for employers
Youth participants were asked to reflect on their experiences at their employment placement, and to provide any advice for employers hiring a youth from a similar program. These were the most frequent suggestions:

- **Provide sufficient training.** Provide guidance on all tasks, ensure that the youth feels comfortable asking questions, and be very clear about your expectations. Providing adequate training helps youth to gain a sense of confidence in their ability to do the job, and to acquire new skills.

- **Give youth a chance.** Give participants from employment programs a genuine chance. This means not only providing them with an employment opportunity, but also allowing them to prove themselves once hired. Several youth conveyed frustration at trying to get their ‘foot in the door’, or having someone hire them for the first time.

Advice for other agencies
Interestingly, when youth were asked if they had any advice to give to staff working in a program similar to the one in which they participated, only one theme emerged. Twenty-one youth (33.3%) talked about the importance of staff providing a supportive and non-judgemental environment. This included being available to have conversations with youth about both ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ topics, and ensuring that they listened in a supportive and understanding manner.

One youth suggested that agency staff provide guidance to youth who may not have had parents or guardians to direct them and give them advice about life. This guidance extends to many realms in life including employment, health, relationships and overall well-being.

Cindy, youth participant from Vernon, B.C.
Conclusion

Many community agencies, including those profiled in this research, work diligently to ensure at-risk and homeless youth have their basic needs met and acquire the skills necessary to maintain employment. This work, however, depends on the existence of employers who are willing to take a chance on a youth whose life opportunities may have been limited, and to provide a job or apprenticeship where the youth’s new skills can be put into practice. Private sector engagement, therefore, is crucial in providing at-risk youth with pathways into the labour market.

Increased employment opportunities will not single-handedly solve youth homelessness, and it is not the intention of this report to contribute to the misguided notion that ‘getting a job’ is the only barrier preventing young people from moving forward in their lives. A well-coordinated strategy must include emergency services (shelters, drop-ins), mental health and addiction supports, and structural changes such as an increase in affordable housing, universal access to post-secondary education, and the availability of quality jobs that pay a living wage. This report has focused on one important – and thus far overlooked – component in that overall strategy: engaging the private sector.

While the private sector has been largely marginalized from discussions on social concerns, other sectors can and must work together to provide the tools and the resources to support private sector participation. This report has outlined several strategies for doing so. Our research also demonstrates that while the private sector may benefit greatly from hiring at-risk youth, businesses and corporations that do so must be cognizant of the associated challenges. Many youth are working to stabilize their lives, so it is inevitable that some placements will not work out. Like all young people, at-risk youth – even those with great potential – will make mistakes. Conversely, this research has also demonstrated that many youth hired through employment programs become highly skilled and loyal employees.

Homelessness affects everybody in Canada; all segments of society – government, community agencies, and the private sector, must work together towards a solution. Engaging the private sector in no way lessens the responsibility of the government to address the issue. In an era of fiscal restraint there has been increased pressure on governments to withdraw spending on social programs such as employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth. This, of course, will only make the problem worse, as the agencies profiled in this study require long-term, stable funding from public sources as well as solid partnerships with the private sector. Our call for increased private sector engagement assumes that there will be continued, if not increased, public funding.
Homelessness affects Canadians morally, socially, and economically. If we wish to live in a peaceful, productive and relatively crime-free society, we need to address the exclusion and deprivation of some, including homeless and at-risk youth, which leaves them with few options but to turn to alternative, sometimes criminal, means to survive.

Homelessness is also extremely costly to society. The costs of emergency shelter, social services, additional health care costs, and the use of the criminal justice system to ‘address’ homelessness is much more expensive than putting money into preventive measures such as affordable housing and income security.\textsuperscript{10, 11} By ensuring that all of our citizens have access to housing and employment, not only are the costs of services drastically reduced, but there are more people to contribute to our tax base and stimulate the economy through increased spending. Furthermore, the costs incurred in terms of the lost potential of these youth are incalculable. With demographic shifts occurring, such as the mass retirement of the baby-boomer generation, society needs a skilled and knowledgeable population of youth to take their place. On a moral level, the way in which a country takes care of its vulnerable citizens reflects its priorities and values; it is a statement of the kind of country we want to live in.

For all these reasons, we hope that through our work the most important message of all can be heard – homelessness is everybody’s business. Our work has demonstrated that there are ways to increase the engagement of the private sector in solutions to youth homelessness. We have also learned that, in many cases, employers would like to contribute but do not necessarily know how. Although there are challenges in engaging the private sector, it is ultimately a worthwhile initiative, one that can help tens of thousands of youth reach their true potential.

\textsuperscript{11} Gaetz, S (2012). \textit{The real cost of homelessness. Can we save money by doing the right thing?} Toronto, ON: Homeless Hub.
change in attitude
Report Recommendations

The recommendations below are discussed and supported throughout this report. Underscoring our conviction that youth unemployment is “everybody's business”, we have organized the recommendations by major stakeholder groups. We recognize that many of the initiatives/actions will require cooperation/coordination between all of the groups; these groupings simply indicate the recommended logical or primary leadership for each recommendation.

Government

i) **Institutional Obligation**
   That government-issued public tenders include a stipulation that bidders commit to hire or provide apprenticeship opportunities for at-risk youth, including a suggested goal regarding the number of opportunities.

ii) **National and Local Coordination**
   - Development of a Canada-wide supportive network, with points of contact at the local community level, to strengthen the coordination of services nationally and locally. Replicable model examples:
     - Toronto Youth Employment Program, www.toronto.ca/yep/index.htm
     - First Work, www.firstwork.org
     - London Economic Development Corp (and others), www.hireonelondon.ca
   - In collaboration with community agency employment programs, develop agency service standards to ensure a consistent approach when engaging with the private sector around employment/apprenticeship opportunities.

iii) **Funding**
   - Secure long-term, stable and flexible funding that:
     - provides community employment programs with reliable resources that enable continuity of services and retention of program staff;
     - supports collaboration/reduces competition between community employment agencies;
     - supports certification of job developers – a pivotal role in developing private sector/community agency partnerships;
     - supports community agencies to provide comprehensive youth training in employment preparedness and maintenance to increase the probability of a successful employment experience;
     - provides for a wide variety of employment programs so that youth at various levels of readiness are able to access appropriate services
– provides sufficient resources for long-term follow-up support for youth, helping to ensure both immediate and long-term employment success;

• Improve government wage subsidies to community agencies so that they can enable/encourage more private sector employment and apprenticeship opportunities.

iv) Education

• Increase awareness and educational opportunities for high school students about emerging labour market needs, thereby helping them make informed choices and plan for the post secondary education they will need to secure employment.

• Increase private sector awareness of the need for their involvement in addressing social concerns such as youth unemployment/homelessness.

• Encourage/facilitate partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector that focus on skills development and mentorship of youth.

Private sector

• Encourage employers to develop policies that address community hiring of at-risk/formerly street-involved youth and set out minimum workforce percentage.

• Invest in workforce development training services/facilities for at-risk youth to complement the work of community agencies, provide a valuable source of appropriately prepared employees and to promote more, successful, employment experiences for the youth and their employers.

• Commit to providing a supportive workplace environment that encourages the youth’s further skills training and education.

Community agencies

• Establish more formal collaboration/networks with other community agencies to share best practices for approaching and developing partnerships with the private sector.

• Develop a compelling business case for potential private sector partners.

• Support the longer-term education and training of at-risk youth to facilitate their sustained success in employment.

• Ensure that employment-related programs are evaluated to demonstrate outcomes (to private sector partners and funders/supporters).

• Commit to agency service standards that are made available to private sector partners before engagement around any employment or apprenticeship opportunities.

References

Please refer to the full version of this report (available at www.raisingtheroof.org) for a complete list of references.
Thank you

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thank you
it’s everybody’s business

A companion piece to this report, our on-line toolkit for employers and community employment programs is a source of practical information advice and resources. Find it at www.raisingtheroof.org.