

Makin' it Work: Skills Development, a Job and Follow-Up

Challenge

Business owners in St. John's, NL, had expressed frustration that advertisements for well-paid entry level jobs were going unanswered. At the same time, unemployed people in low-income neighbourhoods were indicating a desire to find meaningful, full-time employment. A partnership between a large local employer and a community-based organization resulted in 22 participants in the "Makin' It Work" pilot project getting on-the-job training and mentoring from local employers. At the end of one five-week and one three-week pilot project, 14 of the 22 participants moved from income support to employment.

Response

With support from the local Vibrant Communities (VC) St. John's initiative, the Community Centre Alliance (CCA) began a partnership with Delta and Holiday Inn owner Fortis Properties to develop the "Makin' it Work" model. The program provided classroom instruction in relevant essential skills, two hospitality industry certifications, on-the-job training, life skills and supports, and a guaranteed job interview. Two other key partners in the program were the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment (HRLE) and Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador (HNL). HRLE contributed financial support, helped with promotion and intake, assisted with in-class sessions and gave post-project participant support. HNL, the industry association, assisted with learning materials and the certification process, ran in-class presentations and provided follow-up support to participants.

CCA has been sharing the Makin' it Work model with other communities throughout the province that are interested in learning more about making this kind of training-to-work connection. Says Kelly Hudson, Coordinator of VC St. John's: "The success of the Makin' it Work pilot project

has created a lot of excitement. Several local businesses have indicated an interest in forming a similar type of partnership. The people who have secured positions have become real champions and are encouraging others to get involved.” Vibrant Communities St. John’s ongoing role in Makin’ it Work is to continue building partnerships with business, government and community organizations, and with people with lived experience of poverty.

The idea for the initiative came out of discussions with people living on low incomes who wanted opportunities to develop skills that would help them secure full-time jobs. “For many reasons, they weren’t interested in college, university or high school equivalence courses,” says Elva Harris, CCA General Manager. “They wanted short-term and specific skills development that would get them job-ready and that would give them the boost of confidence they needed to get into the workplace.”

Outcomes

Thanks to an 18-month, \$180,000 federal government investment, Makin’ it Work organizers at the Community Centre Alliance are keen to develop a model that includes follow-up elements for participants and employers. Vibrant Communities St. John’s will try to secure funding to pursue parallel policy discussions and partner engagement work. These efforts will ensure the continued evolution of the rules and regulations that affect – for good or ill – people living with low incomes.

Now that the Makin’ it Work’ skills-to-employment model has proven its worth, the project leadership team is focusing on learning how best to provide the kinds of follow-up support people need to remain in their new jobs once the initial excitement gives way to the routine and challenges of everyday work. Funding from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada will be used to operate a second component of Makin’ It Work in which the first set of employees hired through the program will be offered further training and mentoring.

Says CCA’s Elva Harris: “There’s a fine line between the training that employers themselves make available and providing the additional supports that people need to make a success of their new careers. We are open to offering ongoing skills development opportunities to other interested employees where past Makin’ it Work partners are working. This way, we can learn along with our employer partners what it takes to retain and advance new employees over the long term. For example, one Makin’ it Work employee found that he had a really hard time getting to his new workplace every morning. Staff at his local community centre actually drove him in a few times when he missed the bus, giving him the help he needed to establish new time and travel routines. Without that little bit of help, he likely would not have kept his new job. He went on do really well in that position.”

People making the transition to employment are often intimidated by a new workplace and face difficulties when a new job begins to present greater professional and personal challenges. Without ongoing support and training, they may fail to stick with the new job. Not only do they have to restart the job search process, but the employer loses a new employee.

Newfoundland/Labrador's Poverty Reduction Strategy IS making a difference

Efforts by the provincial government to institute the goals of its 2006 Poverty Reduction Strategy continue a long tradition of partnership and assisting fellow community members. Residents have found the following initiatives to be particularly helpful:

- Job start benefit – people receiving Income Support are eligible for up to \$250 when they begin employment, an incentive that may be used for a variety of things. Another pool of money helps cover work-specific purchases – e.g., hard hats, work boots, uniforms, office clothing.
- 30-day benefit retention – when people move from Income Support, they continue to receive benefits during their first 30 days of work. This assistance helps reduce the sense of risk people experience when moving from Income Support to paid employment. A one-month safety net helps people get everyone off to a good financial start.
- Prescription Drug Costs – residents moving off Income Support can keep their drug cards for six months. The province has also instituted a new drug program that provides coverage for lower-income families (those earning less than \$30,000 a year) as well as one for individuals and families with high (catastrophic) drug costs.
- Elimination of school fees and high school textbook charges.
- Increased funding to community centres in areas with high levels of social housing; increased funding to the province's eight women's centres.
- Development of a Guide that lists 80 social services and programs offered by the provincial government. This small booklet is a one-stop resource that describes existing programs and provides readers with contact information.
- A new spirit of working together – community organizers report a change in approach when they deal with provincial representatives. There is a true sense that government representatives are really hearing community concerns and trying to improve services.

Makin' it Work's next phase will focus on learning more about the best way to provide the 'soft' supports that help people develop essential workplace and social skills. Program enthusiasts believe that the employer community is increasingly aware of its role in finding new approaches to employee recruitment, training and retention. A growing commitment to the type of multi-partner

model exemplified by Makin' it Work means that more people in the province will get the help they need to make a successful transition to employment and new opportunities.

Says Kelly Hudson: “We believe that Vibrant Communities St. John’s overall goal of assisting 1,500 households on their journey out of poverty by 2012 can be achieved if we work together to create solution-focused dialogues, actions and initiatives. We need to engage and empower people to make meaningful changes in their lives and their communities. We must work together to inform and shape government policies that will reduce poverty. It may be that the St. John’s region’s relatively small population makes it easier to work together on common concerns, but we are also helped by the fact that government officials now recognize that engagement with community organizations is the best way to make real progress on poverty reduction.”

Anne Makhoul

Copyright © 2009 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy
1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org