

Work 2 Live

A multi-year qualitative study
of Zero Ceiling's supportive
housing and employment
program for youth
experiencing or at risk of
homelessness

Fall 2018

Research project
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Executive Summary

This document provides a summary of the qualitative research project conducted at the request of Zero Ceiling (ZC) on the ZC Work 2 Live (W2L) program during the timeframe of August – October 2018. The focus of the research project was to gain an understanding of the short- and long-term impact of the ZC W2L experience, as well as the future requirements for sustainability and growth and the alignment of the program to needs of youth experiencing, or being vulnerable to, homelessness in the Vancouver and Sea-to-Sky region in British Columbia and the communities they inhabit.

Six face-to-face focus groups were held with representative stakeholder groups including: (1) current employers; (2) potential employers; (3) housing providers; (4) current participants; (5) graduates of the program, and (6) Co-Directors. The research team used inductive coding procedures to analyze the data and the following five themes emerged: (1) participant context; (2) processes; (3) contributors to success; (4) challenges, and (5) future directions for Zero Ceiling. A sample of quotations from research participants are provided in this document to support each of the sub-themes¹.

Across the research participants, there was good alignment about the strength and value of the W2L program. Many of the components that have been identified in the literature that mark success for supporting populations experiencing, or being vulnerable to, homelessness were emulated in this W2L program, including communication and collaboration with youth, employers, housing providers and supports; ensuring individualized support; emphasizing belonging; building conflict management and interpersonal skills; and confidence building opportunities. In the spirit of supporting a strong and effective program, 37 recommendations were made to further improve the long-term viability of the W2L program. These recommendations fell across the following four key areas: (1) communication; (2) partnerships; (3) support, and (4) success measures. It is suggested that the ZC Co-Directors, in consultation with the ZC Board and through the ZC strategic plan, prioritize the recommendations provided and identify goals that could be achieved within one to five years.

¹ Additional details on each sub-theme can be found in a series of journal articles (currently in progress).

Introduction

Zero Ceiling (ZC) reduces youth homelessness and raises the quality of life for young people experiencing homelessness or unstable housing from Vancouver through the Sea-to-Sky Corridor. ZC provides housing, employment and professional support that empowers young people with effective, practical tools to live healthy and independent lives. Through adventure-based learning, ZC provides opportunities for young people to experience mountain life and cultivate healthy, purposeful direction in their lives.

This research project examined the ZC Work-to-Live program (W2L). The W2L program is a comprehensive 12-month program that provides subsidized housing, supportive employment, adventure-based learning, and ongoing professional support. Participants aged 19 to 24 benefit from stable and affordable housing, allowing them to focus on aspects of the program that promote personal growth and a healthy lifestyle. In partnership with Whistler Blackcomb, ZC provides full-time supportive employment, enabling participants to gain valuable skills and experience and develop the resources to live independently. ZC works to ensure that the support needed for participants to be successful in their jobs is provided. As part of a staff-housing package, Whistler Blackcomb also provides two residential units for W2L participants; these units are located within an extensive staff-housing complex.

The program objectives are as follows:

- that participants develop the necessary life skills to live independent, autonomous healthy lives,
- that participants access employment and independent living in a supportive environment,
- that programming is progressive and evolves alongside the needs of participants, and
- that participants successfully transition to independence upon graduation, knowing that they can always access support from Zero Ceiling as needed in the future.

Since inception, there have been 92 participants, over 14,000 nights of housing provided, over 68,000 hours worked, and over 18,000 hours of professional support supplied.

Background to this Document

The purpose of this research project was to gain an understanding of the short- and long-term impact of the ZC W2L experience, as well as the future requirements for sustainability and growth and the alignment of the program to societal needs. The emphasis of this research project fell across the identified program foci of housing, employment, participant experience, and support as it examined the transition for vulnerable youth into supportive employment.

This document provides a summary of the analysis of the data collected in 2018 and has been prepared for ZC.

Methodology

To better understand the short- and long-term impact of W2L and to provide ZC with insights into future directions, a qualitative research project was designed to draw on the inherent knowledge of those stakeholders that know the program well through a series of focus groups. This was augmented with a comprehensive literature review. An ethical review was prepared and approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board. All data collection took place between August and October of 2018 and involved focus groups with representatives of stakeholder groups.

As part of the data collection process, six face-to-face focus groups were held representing the following stakeholder groups: (1) current employers (n=3); (2) potential employers (n=6); (3) housing providers (n=7); (4) current participants (n=5); (5) graduates of the program (n=3), and (6) Co-Directors (n=2). The data that resulted from the focus groups was initially coded manually by each of the three researchers working in isolation, with the codes emerging from the data. Once preliminary codes were identified, the researchers reviewed them together and generated several sub-themes, organized under five overarching themes. Given there is only one employer, this report combines both potential and current employers as one to maintain anonymity. Both are denoted as 'Employer'.

Emergent Themes

The following five themes emerged from the data:

- Participants Context
- Processes
- Contributors to Success
- Challenges
- Future Directions for Zero Ceiling.

Each theme is briefly introduced below, followed by a sample of quotations from research participants in support of each of the sub-themes. Further discussion of the individual sub-themes can be found in an in-progress journal article.

Emergent Theme 1 – W2L Participants' Context

Many of the focus group participants discussed the unique personalities and pathways of those who are drawn to the W2L program. This is organised under what the W2L participants shared about their background and previous support, how they were referred to the program, the qualities that various stakeholders noted about W2L participants, and the positive quality of diversity that this population offered to the Whistler community.

Participant Background and Previous Support

"[I was] in an out of homeless shelters, on the street and in parkades ... I got kicked out from a homeless shelter" (W2L Graduate).

“[I was] bouncing around sleeping on a friend’s couch a couple of nights, but there is a part of me that didn’t want to do that, people want their privacy and their time” (W2L Current Participant).

“[I was] at a friend’s house and then in and out of a shelter for six months and then a subsidized shelter for housing” (W2L Graduate).

“My family doesn’t even support me to this day, and I have accepted that, but I have had lots of support workers” (W2L Graduate).

Referral

“I wanted to get out of Vancouver and ZC looked like it would benefit me” (W2L Current Participant).

“[I] saw a poster on the wall at a youth homeless shelter – there was a draw to enter your name to be picked on a trip to Whistler to ski and snowboard – I got three trips to Whistler ... and I reached out to him and got a spot” (W2L Graduate).

“...what I am going to do as I was aging out. I had just gotten into snowboarding and I brought it up with my social worker and they knew about it [ZC W2L] and then the pieces got into place” (W2L Current Participant).

Participant Qualities

“Everyone comes for a reason, but we all have individual goals and where we want to be and what we need, and it is very helpful because it focuses on what you need and how you want to succeed” (W2L Graduate).

“I am here not just to have a fantastic time; I am here to shape a life. You have to be hungry for yourself here – you get to live it every day and there is a reason why, and you enjoy it – it is not a holiday. ... This program is suitable to those who seek it out ... they are looking for a something that is better than where they are now. ...” (W2L Graduate).

“They are quite independent and are good problem solvers for the most part because they have been taking care of themselves for longer. They are generally more mature in many areas but not so much in others” (Employer).

“[They are] resilient because they have had to be... almost like a bit of an old soul in a young kid’s body. Having to consider accommodation or new employment doesn’t seem to faze them” (Housing).

“Once they start, they are driven to please the group and they respond better to recognition than most people do” (Employer).

“We can easily cater to different personalities and how different people work but we need them to want to be there” (Employer).

Diversity

“The ski industry is not particularly diverse so it is really interesting to have the ZC participants involved and if you can get them to open up and share their perspective” (Employer).

Emergent Theme 2 – Agency Processes to Support Accountability

Under the theme Agency Processes to Support Accountability, both push and pull factors that supported the efficacy of the program and the accountability of the different stakeholders were discussed. W2L graduates discussed the types of accountability that resulted from taking part in the program and the various ways that accountability was fostered and supported, including the importance of ensuring that ZC participants were placed in appropriate jobs with appropriate support to foster their success. Similarly, employers discussed the importance of having clear processes and consequences when incidents arise. This was linked to the idea that communicating clear expectations on participants, the employers, the housing providers, and the ZC staff, as well as the program itself could mitigate potential issues from arising.

Accountability

“It gives you the opportunity for self growth that maybe you haven’t had because you are always being pushed in a direction – when you get here some people aren’t ready for the freedom. There is time to spend on yourself here that you haven’t had in another life and you are very much able to separate yourself and discover who you are by choosing what you do. You can choose to discover your own path and you are given the keys to a lot of places in Whistler” (W2L Graduate).

“Family dinner and ride days; it is something that everyone is stoked about, everyone shares their day and how it is going and regardless of our moods, at the end of the day if you just go, it is so much better to put yourself through that day and get it over with instead of staying home” (W2L Graduate).

Consequences

“there is a need to have the consequence/action connection” (Employer).

“understanding that there was a job to be done and consequences have been equal for all [employees]” (Employer).

“I have had a recent incidence ... [where] advocating for the individual... has overridden our decisions. It kind of feels that the [ZC] discipline side has slid a bit” (Employer).

Consistency

“I don’t know that we have all sat down as a [employer] team to make sure that with the ZC participants we are applying rules equally to all ZC people. We need to get to this point where we sit down with the different departments – do a pre-season review to make sure we are all clear on how to approach this (and have

ZC and [employer] employee experience involved) to develop ground rules and expectations” (Employer).

“a pre-season meeting with ZC was raised where internal communication/problem solving could be put in place and consistency emphasised” (Employer).

Expectations

“Outline the expectations so ZC employees would know this and they would be treated the same as they would be to anyone else” (Employer).

“helpful if ZC could reinforce ... that the high performers are getting summer jobs – need a consistent message” (Employer).

“If we really care about these kids we are going to have to start them in a place where their comfort level and trust can be built before we put them out in the front lines....we need to make sure they are prepared for this role” (Employer).

Emergent Theme 3 – Contributors to Success

Under the theme Contributors to Success, focus group participants discussed the value of trust and relationships in making the program what it is, and identified the need for communication improvements within and between partners. While deepening connection was a core reason for communication, some participants also noted that additional opportunities for both housing and employment may exist in Whistler that have not been communicated among key stakeholders. In addition, focus group participants valued the diversity of experience that the W2L participants bring to the community of Whistler in general and, more specifically, to the work place. Loyalty to the program was also identified as a contributor to the success of the program, with both W2L graduates and the Co-Directors observing the benefits of ongoing connection.

Communication

“We do have a lot of options, but we don’t communicate that well to ZC participants” (Employer).

“[We] need more clear communication between ZC ... and other managers or departments consistently throughout the season” (Employer).

“It would be great to have a deeper relationship/communication channel to [ZC]” (Employer).

“We have employers who have housing and jobs and they sit empty because they don’t know that a ZC participant is available” (Housing).

Community

“To have a variety of people from different backgrounds in guest relations is an amazing thing ... if you can get them to open up and share their perspective it helps you in your leadership style [and] increases awareness” (Employer).

“I get asked all the time ... what do we give back ... it is a responsibility in terms of community and the benefit is that we are helping people in our community and we fill all our roles” (Employer).

“There is a lot of power in these hills ... it is this amazing community that focuses on being happy and positive living ... the people are likeminded, they have a passion and there is something running in them that is keeping them going beyond reasonable doubt, and that is why they are here. When you are constantly surrounded by that inspiration, you cannot help but feel it and respect that beauty, that nature, and it really brings that balance to your life that you don't get when you are just living in the city” (W2L Graduate).

Diversity – employer's perspective

“They bring different experiences than the others. It is so refreshing to have that in the mix as they are looking at the world in a different way” (Employer).

“I have seen different people with different situations and backgrounds come through and it was really good to learn how to deal with different people differently” (Employer).

Loyalty

“I will still book out every Tuesday to go riding with ZC to give back” (W2L Graduate).

“I don't want to see it end. I just want to see it grow” (W2L Graduate).

“Participants remain connected to the program after they have completed it” (Co-Directors).

Relationships

“I am an advocate to build the one-on-one relationship and really enforce that with ZC participants that it is not just [ZC program staff] that they can go talk to; they are with me 40 hours a week and their job is a big part of their lives through this program and they need to be able to communicate and know that they can talk with me” (Employer).

“I think it is great when we have ride day and family dinner. I like it when everyone comes together, we are like a family. Not everyone has family and we support each other like a family, and I like that” (W2L Current Participant).

“I had work – it was a huge inspiration. I don't really have any family (I have always relied on myself) but I use role models, that is what I aspire to and I would focus on that” (W2L Graduate).

Trust

“I wish sometimes that as a manager we were allowed to know a bit more about their background because sometimes you start mismanaging a person because

you don't know enough of their background and they have not yet built the trust yet for them to share it" (Employer).

"Trust is key – trusting that the employer that has their best interest in mind. We work with First Nation and Metis all the time and we understand that many of them do not have trust" (Employer).

"The goal of ZC is to transition them to give them the skills and work skills to help them find a place to live. Over the 12-month period they have had tremendous amount of support to figure out that next step (the 'what's after'). That one-year of trust has them regain a lot of faith in the Whistler community and in humanity as a whole" (Housing).

Emergent Theme 4 – Challenges

Under the theme Challenges, focus group participants discussed the impact of the location on the participants. In addition, W2L participants noted the support provided by ZC and identified some areas for improvement. Some focus group participants talked about the interconnection of housing, transportation, healthcare supports, and employment and the limited options of each of these services in Whistler. Comments from both employers and program participants focussed on the lifestyle and party scene that was a significant feature of living in Whistler.

Location

"I think it is an awesome program and a valuable thing to keep going. I do wonder if Whistler is the best environment for the participants because of the party scene" (Employer).

"The mountains have a way of helping with stress and dealing with things. I don't like the city and there are times I have gone down there for a day or two and it helps me to appreciate how good Whistler is and how amazing the community is" (W2L Graduate).

"The number of people living below a living wage has jumped significantly which puts a lot of stress on community" (Housing).

Lifestyle and Party Scene

"A lot of people come here for vacation and there is a larger party scene and it can involve you depending on the type of work you do" (W2L Graduate).

"We have a young group of people – we have a culture of partying. I have been trying to move it away from an alcohol-based [culture] to be more like just bringing people together. I would worry about the type of environment we have, how does someone who might be more at risk survive this environment. We are putting them into this environment, and we are promoting heavy drinking/high risk lifestyle and that would be the piece I would worry about and I worry about it with all of our staff and we are trying to come up with strategies to help some of our youth make good decisions moving forward" (Employer).

Support

"I don't think people understand that this is helping people who don't have parents that support them as they transition from being a child to being an adult" (Housing).

"I wanted more independent housing and living, and I got on the ZC email because I went to the adventure sessions and it was the perfect time at the perfect moment, and I said let's do this" (W2L Graduate).

"I've dealt with homelessness before and I've never been homeless away from home – usually I would have my family to rely on, so it was kind of eye opening to be here on my own" (Current Participant).

"If you are late you are written up etc. and this gives you false hope and perspective – disconnect between ZC program and the employer" (W2L Graduate).

"We were getting to the point of "is this worth it" because it was almost too much work for all of us – such consistent coaching, calling, etc. You almost need an [employer] support person for ZC participants" (Employer).

"Managers are not getting support from higher up to engage with ZC. Overall the support for ZC appears to be flagging so the question is how can ZC support [the employer] more? There is a desire to revisit the structure behind supporting the employers and employees" (Co-Directors).

Transportation

"We need a vehicle that is a Zero Ceiling vehicle. Enough of the personal vehicle use... just go get a Zero Ceiling vehicle that they can have in Whistler for transporting etc. that one of the youth workers can use for trips and adventure activities" (W2L Graduate).

"We can't take these kids and put them in Pemberton. We tried and it didn't work. They need to be in the core" (Housing).

Housing and Employment

"Right now, they are at the mercy of [the employer] which is great because they have been generous and the transition in ownership seems to be okay but at some point, you do not know when this will evaporate. It would give longevity and security to the program if they had independent housing and move the skills sets out into the community" (Housing).

"It also makes you really appreciate having housing when you come here and have a job because you begin to realize that over 50% of the community doesn't have their own bedroom" (W2L Graduate).

Emergent Theme 5 –Future Directions for Zero Ceiling

Under the theme Future Directors for Zero Ceiling, focus group participants envisioned the possibilities for the W2L program as it moves forward, as well as the importance of strengthening communication and employment expectations. Some W2L participants spoke about their desire to stay in the community and contribute back, demonstrating a strong connection to the program and the experiences they had as participants in it. Some focus group participants talked about various goals of the program and the tensions inherent in a program model where housing is tied to employment.

Communication

“We should totally set up a pre-season meeting with ZC ... and we should internally set up some communication/problem solving about this – consistency is key” (Employer).

“[We] need more clear communication between ZC and other managers or departments ... throughout the season” (Employer).

“[We] need to know more about ZC. The mandate needs to be very clearly defined – it is not a hand out but it is a hand up. It is a transition into adulthood...There is a great lack of understanding of what ZC is and what it does and who it serves and what they are like” (Housing).

“There is a need for a more structured way of working with employers” (Co-Directors).

“There needs to be a way to explicitly tell them they have completed...there needs to be a tool to identify specifics of “where W2L participants are” at each point in time” (Co-Directors).

“How can ZC make the working relationships easy for potential new partners” (Co-Directors).

Employment

“I wanted to start teaching kids and ZC has a deal with Whistler and you can get your snowboard instructor really cheap and so that has been a great help” (W2L Current Participant).

“[The employer] is all kind of connected – it puts you in an awkward position when it all is one – housing; ski pass and job all connected – I don’t think that it should be” (W2L Graduate).

“It would be a big benefit if the job wasn’t tied in with the mountain. It holds a heavy fist over your head, and it is the catch – you want to grow but you need to have a job” (W2L Graduate).

“I would also welcome more cross pollination with organizations so that if we have internship abilities, we work together to allow them to take part of the internship and have some flexibility in their work elsewhere to do so” (Employer).

“There is a need to diversify and increase the employers pool” (Co-Directors).

Housing

“If they lose their job then they lose their housing and that is a stressful point in their life” (Housing).

“I have employees that live next door to [some] ZC participants, but it is disgusting – dirty, trash everywhere, smoking etc.” (Employer).

“if I were to live in a place on my own it would be a bit weird – I like that community aspect of it” (W2L Graduate).

W2L Participant Goals

“Drive and will to continue and succeed – desire to have a career versus coming in for a season and then transitioning out. For tourism it opens a whole new world to them” (Employer).

“Self motivated, reliable ... it is about attitude, ... because we have the tools to give them the skills” (Employer).

“I would like to finish my degree in Philosophy and would like to advance my career in Vancouver” (W2L Current Participant).

“[The employer provides] an entry-level job ... [it] is great if you have never had a job before but if you are trying to reach your full potential and trying to make more than minimum wage, especially this town, you are cut off. Stop focusing on entry-level jobs” (W2L Graduate).

“My goals changed since I got here, I’ve got my ski instruction and I’m working toward my first aid ... I was able to get my passport etc. ... at the end of the year you have so many more contacts than others who come to this because you spent the year focusing, making contacts and it sets you up to go anywhere and do anything” (W2L Graduate).

Recommendations

Building on the data, and consistent with the literature we reviewed (provided in a separate document and within the in-progress article), the following recommendations are made. We recommend the ZC Co-Directors, with input from the ZC Board, prioritize the following recommendations for implementation, considering what can reasonably be accomplished in the next six months to more far-reaching goals that could be achieved within one to five years.

Communication

1. Share potential employment opportunities for W2L participants (this includes potential employment opportunities before they begin the program in preparation for beginning, while they are in the program to ensure they have the right fit and after the program so they have an idea of what they can do once they graduate);
2. Describe the limits to support that W2L participants could receive as part of the program;
3. Clearly articulate boundary-setting for W2L participants as they transition to graduate status;
4. Outline W2L employer expectations for both W2L participants and for employers;
5. Define program expectations for W2L participants;
6. Establish continuing communications with participants and graduates;
7. Share success stories with referral agencies;
8. Ensure clear communication with referral agencies on characteristics of a successful W2L participant;
9. Communicate to referral agencies and potential W2L participants about the challenges of Whistler (e.g. party scene and the lack of support structures for mental illness and drug use) as a location for some individuals.

Partnership

10. Build relationships with, and networks of, potential employers;
11. Create a W2L introduction and orientation package;
12. Create an annual survey for W2L employers in order to gather feedback;
13. Assess and document W2L participant housing needs;
14. Work with partners to foster common socialization expectations for W2L participants;
15. Explore separating housing from employment where possible;
16. Review responsibilities and expectations required by housing providers and ensure they are clearly communicated, alongside consequences of failing to meet them;
17. Establish process for a scheduled check in with housing and employment partners;
18. Enhance life skill development opportunities for W2L participants (for example: housekeeping, laundry, etc.);
19. Consider ways to strengthen referral agent partnerships and expand referral agent network;
20. Explore different models for referral agent partnerships;

21. Review the Canadian Homeless Research Network framework (2013) and associated toolkit (2015), and adapt it to the W2L setting where appropriate;
22. Identify community-based social enterprise that could complement the W2L program.

Support

23. Assess existing training practices and identify gaps and overlaps (ZC employer(s)/ZC partnerships);
24. Create succession plan for ZC Co-Directors;
25. Ensure adequate budget for annual skill development and training of ZC staff, mentors, volunteers, and ZC board;
26. Create a financial opportunity for ZC graduates to act as mentors for the W2L program;
27. Establish a more formalized support structure so that it is clear what is included in support from ZC to W2L participants;
28. Obtain additional funding to adequately support the requirements of the W2L program.

Success Measures

29. Work with W2L participants to identify and set individual goals for their participant in the W2L program;
30. Establish evaluation criteria that address and track the goals that the participants set for themselves;
31. Match the housing requirements to the needs and level of independence of the individual participant where possible;
32. Consider using various indicators or tools to track participant efficacy;
33. Review literature on outcomes measurement and identify appropriate criteria for W2L program (such as resilience, self-esteem, employment readiness, etc.);
34. Review the goal of the W2L program and identify specific outcomes that participants should meet upon completion
35. Ensure programming is designed to support these outcomes;
36. Track participant achievement against outcomes;
37. Develop a tracking mechanism to identify participants capabilities when entering the program and again when they have completed the program.

Conclusion

The team of researchers appreciates the ongoing support provided for this research project. We are grateful for the enthusiasm of all participants associated with the ZC W2L program and look forward to continuing our research of this impactful initiative. This second round of data collection and analysis demonstrates the commitment of the various stakeholders to the goals of the ZC W2L program through the thoughtful, improvement-oriented feedback. The recommendations made in this document are provided with an understanding that in some of the areas discussed, ZC has already made great strides; it is our intent to identify areas for further development, as well as some new areas for exploration and implementation. It is also recognized that some of the recommendations require the administrative support of an already overstretched staff. We witnessed a significant amount of support for the program by all the stakeholders we talked to and we look forward to seeing the progress made by ZC in the coming year as new partnerships are made and existing partnerships strengthened, all in an effort to reduce youth homelessness and raise the quality of life for some of the vulnerable young people in British Columbia. Based on the 2018 round of data collection and analysis, journal articles will be submitted that further expand on the sections of this report.

