

Zero Ceiling: An exploration of young people's experiences of homelessness and the Work 2 Live program.

This research is part of a multi-year qualitative study of Zero Ceiling's supportive housing and employment program for youth experiencing homelessness.

© 2020 Royal Roads University

Program delivered by:
Zero Ceiling

Research project conducted by:
Drs. Jo Axe; Elizabeth Childs; Kathleen Manion
Royal Roads University

Contents

Acknowledgement	3
Acronyms	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
Methodology	8
Findings	10
Focus 1 - Participant Perspectives	10
Participant Life Stories	10
Participant Needs & Successes	15
Focus 2 - Zero Ceiling Context	19
Whistler Context	19
W2I Program Context	21
W2I Program Purpose And Approach	22
Program Vision & Values	23
Advice For Participants	25
New Opportunities	27
Partners	30
Governance	30
Program Successes And Vulnerabilities	33
Obstacles To Success	34
Success Contributors	37
Program Benefits	39
Recommendations	40
Conclusion	42
References	43

For more information on the Zero Ceiling Work 2 Live program, please visit zeroceiling.org or email info@zeroceiling.org.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to express their gratitude to the **Skwxwú7mesh** (Squamish) and **Lilwat** First Nations upon whose ancestral lands the village of Whistler is located, and the Xwsepsum and Lekwungen families upon whose lands Royal Roads University campus is situated.

The researchers would like to thank Zero Ceiling for their support in connecting the researchers with the research participants, and the research participants who each gave their time for interview discussions. The research team continues to appreciate the ongoing support provided by ZC and its partners to undertake this research project. The time provided by participants for the research is invaluable, including the time and effort provided by ZC staff. We look forward to continuing our research of the ZC W2L program.

Acronyms

MCFD Ministry of Children and Family Development

W2L Work 2 Live

ZC Zero Ceiling

ZCBM Zero Ceiling board members

ZCG Zero ceiling graduated participants

ZCP Zero Ceiling current participants

ZCS Zero Ceiling staff



Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of a case study qualitative research project on the Zero Ceiling (ZC) Work 2 Live (W2L) program between August and November 2019. This research builds on previous research on the program dating from 2017 up to the time of data collection in 2019. The focus of this research project was two-fold: to explore the experiences of participants, and to examine the W2L program. Data was collected through 21 in-depth interviews with graduates of the program, current participants, staff, and board members.

The analysis of the research led to several themes that were collapsed under two foci. Focus 1 was Participant Experience. The themes under this area were organised under Participant Life Stories and Participant Needs and Successes. Focus 2 was the ZC Context. The themes under the second focus were organised under several areas:

- Whistler;
- The ZC Program;
- Advice for Participants;
- New Opportunities;
- Partners;
- Governance; and
- Program Successes and Vulnerabilities.

The findings resulted in several recommendations for ZC W2L program's continued improvement, including advice for the Board, support structures needed for W2L program participants, and general program observations.

The research builds on and expands what is known regarding youth homelessness on the west coast of Canada.



Introduction

This report provides an overview of a case study qualitative research project on the Zero Ceiling (ZC) Work 2 Live (W2L) program between August and November 2019. This research augments previous research on the program that has occurred annually since 2017. The focus of this element of the wider research project was to explore the experiences of current and previous participants in the program. This included their experience prior to entering the program and the short- and long-term impacts for them of their ZC W2L experience. This research builds on what is known regarding youth homelessness on the west coast of Canada and further contributes to that body of knowledge.

The underlying purpose of the research is to support the continuing development and improvement of the W2L program. This is in keeping with a participatory action-oriented research design (Reason & Bradbury, 2006; McIntyre, 2008) where the research “investigates reality in order to transform it” (Kemmis, 2008, p.132). The research asked the following: how does the W2L program

contribute to participants current lives, why do program participants stay in the program, how do participants give back to their communities/families, what do they wish to see changed in the ZC program, how do program graduates move forward and how are they are doing after the program.

The research findings will contribute to program changes that support W2L outcomes and improvement to meet the needs of current and future participants. In particular, ZC wanted to be able to use the findings to provide a way to better communicate the needs and experiences of participants, as well as the program benefits. It was expected that this would provide ZC with information to share with the employment providers so that the employers would have an in-depth understanding of the ZC participants. This would allow for the development of support structures for the ZC participants as they transition into adulthood. ZC also expected that the research would result in the identification of key indicators of participant success that could be built into a monitoring framework.

Context- The ZC W2L Program

The research focuses on the ZC W2L program. With a mandate to end youth homelessness, ZC has been working for over twenty years to reduce youth homelessness and raise the quality of life for young people experiencing homelessness from Vancouver through the Sea to Sky Corridor in Western Canada. The W2L program offered by ZC is a comprehensive 12-month program that provides supportive housing, supportive employment, life skills, case management, outdoor adventure, and a supportive community. Participants, aged 19 to 24 years old, are offered stable and affordable housing, allowing them to focus on aspects of the program that promote personal growth and a healthy lifestyle. In partnership with key employers in Whistler, ZC enables participants to gain valuable skills and experience and develop the resources to live independently.

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 ZC as needed in the future.

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



Mission Possible

Methodology

This action-oriented case study qualitative research (Kemmis, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; McIntyre, 2008) provided an opportunity to gather primary data between August and November 2019.

Methods

Twenty-one interviews were held with representative stakeholder groups including: six current participants (ZCP); seven graduated participants (ZCG); four ZC staff (ZCS); four board members (new, ongoing, and outgoing) (ZCBM). Interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and video conference format depending on the preference and availability of the participant. Interviews with previous and current program participants focused on understanding their trajectory into the program, the experience in the program, and what they had done after the program. Interviews with staff and board members focused on gaining an understanding of the program's structure and governance, where the program had changed, as well as its successes, its challenges, and areas for program development.

Recruitment

All current and previous program participants were sent a request to participate in the research project and those interested in doing so self selected. In addition, these perspectives were supplemented with interviews that were conducted with some board members and all staff.

Ethics

All research was conducted in accordance with the Tr-Council's ethical standards for research. All participants provided informed consent and the data was managed in accordance with ethical standards. An ethical review was prepared and approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board.

Analysis

An inductive coding procedure was used to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Analysis was done separately by the three researchers coding within NVivo Pro 12 (a software package for qualitative data analysis). Themes were identified and collapsed under the two foci of participant experience and Zero Ceiling context.

Focus 1 - Participant Experience

The themes under the first focus were organised under two areas:

- Participant Life Stories; and
- Participant Needs and Successes.

Focus 2 - Zero Ceiling Context

The themes under the second focus were organised under several areas:

- Whistler;
- The ZC Program;
- Advice for Participants;
- New Opportunities;
- Partners;
- Governance; and
- Program Successes and Vulnerabilities.



Laurence Crossman-Emms



Findings

The findings were organized under two foci. The first pertained to young people and their lives, and the second referred to ZC, W2L, governance and the context for the program. The first focus provides detail on the youth in the program, outlining participant perspectives. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, the findings under this focus have been summarised and some personalised details have been removed. The second focus explores the ZC context.

Focus 1 - Participant Perspectives

This research focused on the participant’s perspectives and experiences. In order to maintain anonymity of participants, the following section summarises details and highlights trends across the participants.

Participant Life Stories

Based on the information shared by participants, the following themes emerged: early experiences of homelessness, elements of their life stories, and the program participants’ needs.

Earlier Experience of Homelessness

A staff member suggested that the “roots into and out of homelessness” had not changed from last year. Early experiences of homelessness emerged in the interviews.

These varied but included chaotic and unsafe situations that began early in life, difficulty finding stable housing, as well as self-descriptions of being nomadic (including not being attached to traditional concepts of housing). Others highlighted some of their previous experiences with shelters, noting unhygienic cramped spaces with bedbugs. They described the refreshing offer Whistler promised with a better physical location. One graduate described an experience searching for shelter prior to entering the program:

“

When autumn showed up it poured. We were living in the forest by the highway and that became marshy so we had to find higher ground so we decided that there was a forest... we were camping there and [we would] slip in when it was dark and wake up really early in the morning and stuff our stuff somewhere where no one would find it and that was still fine until my [roommate] got too impatient with setting up the tent and ripped it open so we had to find cover. We went downtown and slept in some crazy places and then while we were walking to work, we looked under the bridge and that looked like a nice place. It started to get cold so we wore two sleeping bags and one time I woke up to a bear and as this went on there was some stress and I didn't know where it came from and I would have a sequence of panic attacks (ZCG).

Experiences in Family

During interviews, participants shared information about their past, upbringing, and family connections. The stories were understandably diverse, but the overarching theme was that they had experienced troubled family relationships. This sat on a continuum from physically and emotionally abusive, through to pervasive familial conflict, through to reverberations from some sort of trauma or loss in the family. The ties to family came up in many of the interviews and these included both healthy and unhealthy family relationships. As one staff member noted family members continue to influence them in unexpected ways:

“

It is the context of where they are in their families and in the world. They go visit their mom and see their immediate family members not doing well and then they feel guilty that they are where they are. A big challenge for everyone is letting go of family members that are not a good influence on them (ZCS).

One participant identified how the W2L program offered some reprieve to the situation at home:

“

I felt it was a vicious negative cycle back home and having all of these triggers and so I am hoping to find my passion here (ZCP).

Participant Origin

Participants represented a notable diversity in backgrounds and origins. While many were from BC, or other parts of Canada, not all were. They also found themselves in Vancouver or the areas surrounding Whistler for a myriad of reasons. Some had some post secondary education, and some did not. Some were from visual minority groups, but many were not. All had experienced homelessness or precarious housing. Some had experienced the child protection system, but not all had.

While the program has historically focused on youth aged between 18-25, there was some discussion of broadening the definition of youth to 30, which would further increase the diversity.

While participants' origin were diverse, one cohesive point across participants was a desire to be in nature, as noted by one staff member:



The outdoor piece is the place that participants find, and it is those people who can connect with the outdoors that really thrive in the program (ZCS).

Experiences of Violence

Participants talked about experiencing and witnessing violence. For some this was in their own families, but for others it was in their communities. For instance, one participant said:



I saw a police homicide when I was 19 and that was the tipping point where I said I needed to get out of this area (ZCP).

Chaotic Experiences

Participants talked about multiple small challenges piling up on them, coupled with more significant experiences. For example, one program graduate described their story of becoming homeless after experiencing a serious accident, losing a series of jobs struggling to pay rent, beginning to drink too much and then beginning to use drugs.

In contrast, another participant noted a desire for stability stating:



I'm an open person and will see where the wind blows but I kind of see myself back here – probably in a little farm community (ZCP).

Preparing for, and Entering the Program

Participants discussed their point of entry into the W2L program, which varied. They had heard about the adventure program or ZC through their support workers or posters in shelters. Many had experienced the adventure sessions, but others were referred by partner service agencies. Participants talked a little bit about preparation and the anticipation for the program. Two participants had discussed their process for entering the program, whereby they were not accepted on the first attempt, but persevered until they eventually were. Two contrasting stories included one participant saying:

“

I didn't have any time to think of this before coming into ZC cause I didn't have anything to keep me in check so ZC has been keeping me in check and I have been able to plan (ZCP).

Another participant suggested:

“

I came up to Whistler a few times before applying to the program. I loved being outdoors and the atmosphere – seems really fun and I love snowboarding (ZCG).

Participants also discussed the decision-making necessary for entering the program. While many talked about it sounding fun and fitting with their ideas for their future or what they needed, others discussed more ominous decisions:

“

...the people that went to the ZC interview with me didn't choose to come up here and he passed away (ZCG).

Another ZCP noted that the alternative lacked safety:

“

there was some unsafe stuff for me to go back to (ZCP).

Similarly, a graduate noted:

“

... there was so much drama going on within my peer group and I was done with the city. I wanted to get out (ZCG).

When in the program, program participants noted a tension with sharing that they were part of the program, as one noted:

“

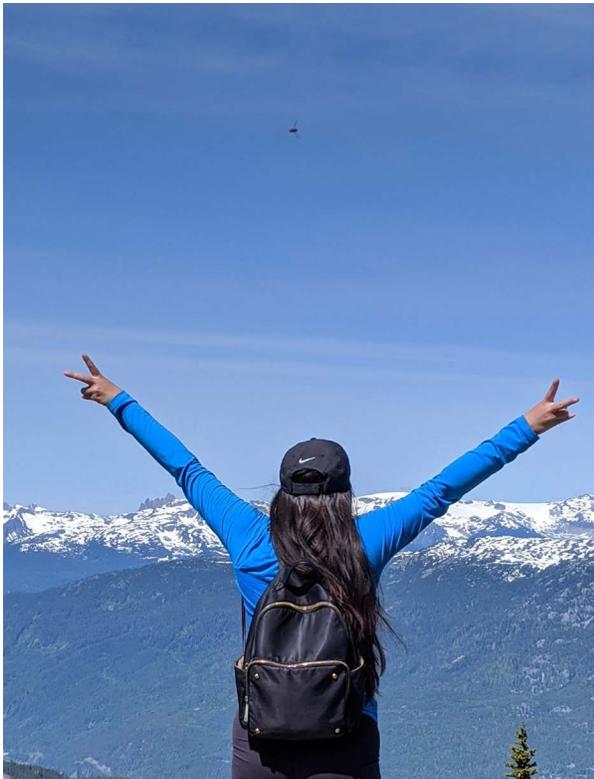
I don't describe that I am from ZC, [but] if they ask I will tell them (ZCG).

Transition into the Program

Some participants discussed their first impressions upon beginning the program. This often began with a conversation with the staff or a one day adventure experience.

“

I did an adventure session with them coming up for one day and snowboarding and that was really cool and I hadn't really experienced Whistler or anything like this before (ZCP).



Future for Participants

Some current participants discussed their strategies for their future plans, but these were largely tentative.

“

They helped me with budgeting and how I want to save money to go to school and I am working with [staff] right now (ZCP).

As another noted:

“

I feel like I need another extra year where I will focus more on what is going to come next. The first year was... to do work and enjoy what is out there (ZCG).

Participant Needs & Successes

In exploring their needs and successes, the participants and graduates discussed their current challenges, the support they have received beyond ZC, what success in the program looks like, as well as the support they need.

Participant Challenges - Substance Use

Participants discussed challenges they and their peers experienced, including both alcohol and drug substance use. Participants also commonly noted that they were not regular users. Discussion of substance use was most often discussed in relation to the circumstances in other youth shelters or within the 'party culture' of Whistler. It was discussed as a cautionary tale for those who could easily struggle with the proximity and readily available substances within Whistler. This could be problematic for participants, as one participant suggested because it was:

“

...hard to meet friends who are not drinking all the time and that is something I was trying to get away from (ZCP).

Another noted:

“

...every other day you see people drinking and that. I don't ever touch drugs as I know I have an addictive personality. I don't want to be stuck in that place where the last \$20 is given up for smoking and I don't want that to be me (ZCP).

Participant Challenges - Mental Health and Behaviour Issues

A range of mental health challenges emerged in the interviews, and the breadth of issues is summarised in these quotations. One ZCP suggested:

“

I was going through a really hard time over the summer and I was struggling with mental health, had suicidal ideation and went through some dark periods previous traumas coming back (ZCP).

Another noted:

“

I have natural anxiety and Whistler amplifies that (ZCG).

A few behaviour issues were also noted, but largely in the context of coping skills, for instance:

“

I used to have really bad anger issues and the sports helped me with that (ZCP).

Participant Challenges - Other

As a young adult, one ZCP discussed the tension with being both dependent and independent within the context of supportive housing. The ZCP was referring to the first experience in a shelter, but said:

“

I had already been living like an adult life for some time...so that was an adjustment (ZCP).

Other challenges noted were more typical everyday struggles for young adults, like challenges of getting out of bed in the morning or managing differing expectations of cleanliness between roommates.

“

They had me rooming with two guys but I am a very clean person and the way the boys were living were unacceptable. It was disgusting and no matter how many times it was addressed they didn't change which made it really hard (ZCG).

Another set of concerns arose that pertained to planning for their future and where they would go after the program.

“

I worry about it a lot re: what I am going to do in five years (ZCP).

Support beyond ZC

Participants highlighted a range of social services that they had drawn on, either prior to beginning the ZC program or once they were in the program. These ranged from shelters (youth, women, refugee shelters), group homes, employment support (e.g. Directions), legal support and social support (e.g. drop in centres, food banks), as well as statutory support (e.g. MCYD). Examples included, Covenant House, Broadway youth resource centre, Right of Passage, Together We Can, the Squamish Youth Centre, and school-based supports. As one graduate suggested:

“

I have done a couple of different programs (ZCG).

Alongside these structured supports, they also noted some unstructured supports, such as those provided by family and friends. Attesting to the range of support received, a participant noted:

“

I had a youth worker in the shelter and friend support. Life skills worker and social worker and case manager they were pretty supportive that way. Not a lot of family support (ZCG).

Demonstrating self efficacy, one graduate said:

“

The only support structure I would have liked would have been myself. I just wasn't there. Even now I am slowly taking over but before I was in survival mode and instinctually case by case solving whatever problem was directly in my eyes (ZCG).

Succeeding in the Program

In defining what success in life after the program looked like, participants stated:

“

... I'm First Nations and my family is very cultural and so being somewhere so rich with nature and everything (ZCG).

Another stated:

“

I was really trying to get away from a weed/substance abuse – lots of people struggle with that and so asking people what they want to get out of the program and make a little plan for you and set things up for you for when you arrive – it is about the changes you want to make in your life (ZCP).

In defining success in the program one participant suggested:

“

Skills learned during the program – improved my skills – my nutrition; my budgeting; my social skills and boundaries and people; recreational stuff (biking, etc.). It is more like once I am up here I had more time to think about what I am eating. When I was a student I didn't have time for that. It was all about coming up here getting stable. I was in the student rush for three years and I felt like I needed a break (ZCG).

Supports Needed

The research demonstrated that a tailored approach is needed. Each individual is different and has a different set of needs. The supports articulated were both ones that are provided by ZC and those that they wish could be provided. Some supports identified were social in nature, for instance one participant who was struggling in the program noted this was due to shyness and finding ways to connect to the other participants, staff, and the community.

Another suggested support provided included:

“

...someone to talk to me. They have a supportive and adaptive way of seeing it and I found it very useful with the program (ZCP).

A participant suggested exercise was helpful. Another focused on needing structure, suggesting:

“

I needed someone to set the structure and then I can follow it... Having something constructive to do in the break would be helpful to keep that routine going (ZCP).

One graduate thought that including goal orientation was important, suggesting:

“

I would like to see interpersonal support. 1:1, each person having their own gains to get to where they want to be. There is no other person in the program that is where I am at this now and it has been so hard, and it is not easy and so I can understand why no one has really come up to this point (ZCG).

In exploring the limits of support, one staff member suggested:

“

When we see people fail in the program, we work really hard to make sure it is not just a crisis moment, wait till people hit rock bottom and then it explodes. We work to help them come to the conclusion that it is not the right program for them. Can't maintain a job (often because of substances); a safety concern (ZCS).

Some suggestions for needed supports were more pragmatic, like support arranging a drivers license or rides, or life skills, for instance:

“

...budgeting and finances; sexual health consent; healthy relationships (ZCS).

Some supports were focused on employment, for instance:

“

...education of how to function in the workplace (ZCBM).



Focus 2 - Zero Ceiling Context

In this section, the focus is on the context within which ZC operates, as discussed by program participants, graduates, staff, and board members. Themes emerged from the interviews and are organised under the following areas: the Whistler context, the W2L program context, advice for participants, new opportunities, partners, governance, and program successes and vulnerabilities.

Whistler Context

Party Town

Many program participants and graduates commented on the social environment in Whistler, noting the party atmosphere and temptations that surrounded those working in the community. This included both positive and negative aspects of the social context.

“

The party scene here is really nice, no one is super aggressive, or they are black out wasted. You have to be smart about it and how you spend your money (ZCP).

“

There are a lot of unhealthy mindsets around and I am trying to enrich that while being here and apart from that it is perfect. It keeps me healthy. It is the outdoor capital of BC (ZCG).

Benefits and Challenges of Living in Whistler

Graduates discussed benefits and challenges associated with living in Whistler. There were comments about the negative aspects, such as getting caught up in the excitement, the costs associated with accommodation and food, and coping with constant change of people. Some graduates noted the positive aspects of living in Whistler, such as feeling safe in the relaxed atmosphere, the benefits associated with having more job opportunities than those available in the city, and the strong sense of community.

“

It is a seasonal resort so there is no actual feeling that evolves, and you are never in control of that. Housing is never secure. There are things always change and that constant change makes it really hard to adapt (ZCG).

“

The community here is very strong, and people are willing to do anything for you (not formalized supports) a friend or an acquaintance (you need my truck for the day; house sit) more trusting people for the most part (ZCG).

Nature

The beautiful environment was a focus of attention, graduates emphasized the benefits of living close to nature and the freedom that resulted from being on the mountains.

“

What this place has to offer is the mountains, the nature when you get out of the city and see all the trees you feel alive and you're not caged in and you don't have all these different cameras and cars and the ability to go up on the mountain and. I was going up red chair with [staff member] and I couldn't even express how happy I was. It was surreal (ZCG).

“

Benefits of Whistler – being in nature... is so rewarding and calming and it felt amazing to breathe the beautiful mountain air and be surrounded by the mountains made me feel safe (ZCG).



W2L Program Context

Housing

Many participants commented on the benefits and challenges of the housing component of the W2L program. While there was a recognition that it was a central feature of the program and enabled the program to achieve some of its aims, the tenuous nature of the housing/employment relationship was identified as stressful for many stakeholders. As one participant stated:

“

...having the housing and the supports set up when I arrived was amazing. I didn't realize how bad it was here to find housing, so having that all set up was very helpful (ZCP).

The challenge of housing in Whistler was raised by many participants.

“

There are a lot more jobs than people in Whistler and it is getting worse year on year because the housing crunch has become better known outside of Whistler, so less people are coming and staying (ZCS).



Kent Danielson

W2L Program Purpose and Approach

In addition to housing, another major focus in the interviews was on the ZC W2L program purpose and approach. As noted by a respondent, respect, love, and care were identified as core to the W2L program approach by all participants interviewed. Individualized approaches provided by the W2L staff and the trust that develops between staff and participants was also identified as a key component to the overall W2L program approach.

“

This program is unique as it is structured to care for people on an individual level, but that impact extends into their close circle and into the wider community and then more broadly into committees and hopefully into systemic change (ZCS).

“

They do care and they let you know that they do care about you. I needed people around in my life that really cared about that what I was doing was important (ZCG).

Value and Impact

The value and impact of the W2L program on participants was highlighted by all and included safety, housing, purpose as well as opportunities and friendship.

“

I've molded into this new person that is fearless and confident – it is awesome (ZCG).

If I hadn't gotten in the program, I would be homeless, dead, or maybe working a better job or back home living at home with my parents and not really doing anything and sitting there in defeat (ZCG).

Program Vision & Values

Many participants commented on the core vision and values of the program and how they were being taken up in the work as well as the need to revise them to be in keeping with the larger context of the field. As one participant framed it:

“

...we [ZC W2L] have aligned ourselves as a supportive housing and supportive employment program (ZCS).

This is supported by others who commented that:

“

...the vision is not changed but how we speak about the program is. Supportive housing and supportive employment program – which is kind of lingo for the sector as well (ZCS).

In addition, other participants commented on the need to revisit the overall vision to ensure alignment with the changing needs of the sector and find a way to track and report out on meeting strategic goals. As one board member noted, they had:

“

...been forced to articulate the longer term vision... This is where we have work to do. We have dealt with the strategic plan 1, 3, 5 years but some of the stuff we are talking about is that far out. We have a vision for the organization and who we service and why we do that. We have that, but in terms of a vision re: where we would like to take the organization, we need to talk more about that (ZCBM).

“

We have started to talk about our values and how we are writing [about] ourselves is quite different... more and more, our goal at ZC is to end homelessness and we will not end it, but we will align ourselves to a sector that will end homeless with solutions. We are a prevention tool, and we get in touch with youth and will pull them out of that (bad housing situation) and house them immediately and give them the tools to exit homelessness permanently (ZCS).

Skills Development

Many participants discussed the need for, and types of skills development required by participants in the W2L program. In describing the current skill training provided, a staff member suggested it included:

“

...weekly check ins from our support staff and scheduled monthly power check ins ...and we have a guide book that is a super structured support to workplace support (ZCS).

Research participants identified other needs including cultural training, public speaking, and governance/board training.

“

Life skills is an area that participants have identified (budgeting and finances; sexual health consent; healthy relationships). The plan is that we deliver, once a month, an evening session and then follow up during the rest of the year individually on those topics and working toward their goal (ZCS).

Areas where participants identified a need for improvement in the skills and training provided including counselling, a more formal process devoted to learning specific skills, and time.

“

I take it for granted that people are learning in organic ways from the conversation we have, but we are moving to a more structured case management system to organized goals and transition from start to the end and the life skills more structured so that they have what people need to live more independently and here is where they get it in the program (ZCS).



Advice for Participants

Communication

Research participants discussed their need to communicate effectively, both in the workplace, and with other program participants:



Communicate with your boss always. If you have gone on an acid trip, text your boss as soon as you can (ZCP).



Try to communicate with each other, try not to ignore each other and try not to get angry with one another talk about it and get through it. If you are not going to talk about it and you ignore each other it is not going to work out it will get worse. I used to ignore it and then when I started talking about it, it made the situation better (ZCP).

Focus on Self

A major focus in the discussions with research participants was the need to focus on self. This focus took a variety of forms, including the need to prioritize themselves first, identify their goals, and avoid losing themselves in the Whistler party culture.



Make sure you stay quite aware of what you have going on in your life, so you don't lose yourself. I kind of lost myself in Whistler as much as I had fun there (ZCG).



In my past, I got addicted to wanting to help people and the money is good too but at the end of the day I put myself on the back burner – and then injured myself. Be realistic about what you can do and stay within your limits (ZCP).

Organize, Take Responsibility

While discussing how supportive the ZC staff were, it was noted that program participants should not over-rely on the guidance provided. Time spent in the program was well spent taking responsibility for actions and learning how to organize their time:



Work – be on time. And make sure you are leaving on the right time and check the bus schedule, so you are not late. Show up and not taking days off. Showing your employer that you are a hard worker and that you are meant to be there (ZCP).



Not to crutch on the program too much. They are there to support you but not be there as your crutch completely (ZCG).

Avoid Partying

The Whistler party culture was noted by several research participants as being a challenge for those who were part of the W2L program. Rather than letting it be a distraction, research participants recommended being aware of the potential issues and avoiding situations that could expose them to the party scene:



There is going to be so much party and drug use around so just be aware and watch out for it and don't fall into that trap (ZCP).



Try to find your own community – I would avoid the drugs and alcohol – some people have that normalized in their life here (ZCP).

Participate

When acknowledging the healthy aspects of living in Whistler, program participants and graduates encouraged W2L participants to engage fully in the ZC organized activities:



Do the things ZC offers, mountain biking; family dinners; don't be afraid to ask questions (ZCP).



Get into being active with ZC a lot because they are the ones that care about you (ZCG).

Realistic Expectations

Some graduates noted that program participants needed to clearly understand the employers' expectations, as well as having a clear comprehension of what living in Whistler entails:



Need to let them know and tell them what is actually, what is going on up here. Be fair with them. Don't sugar coat it. I guarantee you that every kid that has entered it has been a different experience than what they thought (ZCG).



Think about what's going to happen – the outcome, the end game because if you don't think about long term you probably shouldn't be up here. It is not a vacation (ZCG).

New opportunities

Life Skills

Many research participants noted the importance of W2L creating an experience in the W2L program that not only provides the participants with a job and secure housing, but that also allows them to learn skills that would serve them well post-program.

“

...the life skills pieces. Do they have the skills to go shop for themselves, to budget for themselves and all those things you would learn through being part of a family? Whether they teach budgeting or bring someone in to do that making sure participants have the skills they need (ZCBM).

Evolving W2L

The discussion about how ZC and the W2L program could and should evolve was multifaceted. Board members discussed the role of the Board, noting how it needed more of an emphasis on governance, thereby allowing the staff to place an emphasis on running the organization. Board members also commented on the need for growth, noting some of the current issues facing the organization, such as the housing, staffing, and funding models. Staff had similar observations, but also added the need for developing a clear strategy, allowing for flexibility, and strengthening communication. The program participants and graduates suggested adapting their processes for admitting people into the program and growing the numbers of W2L participants.

“

We have talked a bit of the housing potential and trying to get it to be a self funding model, but we haven't quite gotten there yet. Having revenue generation as well – get a few units, get participants in some, and rent the other (ZCBM).

“

But organizationally that flexibility is a strength, and it is a challenge to think about as we grow because you have two key people balancing all for that (ZCS).



Laurence Crossman-Emms

Improvements Needed

Several program participants commented on improvements that were needed in the W2L program, including synchronizing the program start time with the assignment of housing, formalizing participant-to-participant communication, and using forms to facilitate information sharing prior to housing allocation.



Communication between the roommates and if ZC could help have a group once a month to get together and see how everything is going (with living together) (ZCP).



It would be helpful to have a form you fill out about yourself and then ZC could put people together who fit together (re: early bird/stay up late; I think it should just always be tidy but some people don't mind if it is a bit dirty) (ZCP).

New Directions

Research participants offered many ideas for new directions that ZC could consider. Housing was at the forefront in the discussions with both board members and staff, with comments about the limiting nature of the current housing situation in Whistler. In addition, one staff member noted the disconnect between the current program offering and the needs of the local First Nations, and another commented on the opportunities for funding.

There were several comments about partnerships and establishing new connections through discussions with community members and organizations.

Reducing barriers, increasing the ceiling age for participation in the program, succession planning, and clear expectation setting were explored by staff as some of the potential changes to the existing program.



The W2L program is not working for local First Nation people and we need to redesign the program and I don't know what it will look like to meet local First Nation needs (ZCS).



If ZC is able to tie in more to youth in the Sea-to-Sky corridor that would be a good thing. The Sea-to-Sky corridor is Squamish to Mount Currie. I don't think our corridor has sleeping on the streets but we definitely have a lot of youth at risk, using the food banks, high alcohol and drug abuse and if ZC were able to tie into that and maybe that is a totally different program, maybe that is not W2L (ZCBM).

Opportunities

Board members and staff talked about the potential for program growth, including expansion into other communities, increasing government funding opportunities, incorporating counselling services, and incorporating cultural training. However, as one board member noted, sharing the participants' stories was critical to gain greater support for the program.

“

There is an opportunity to grow the program in other communities. In the world of business if we were going to franchise then you need to get your model figured out (ZCBM).

“

Building the relationship with the MCFD, that has never really existed and taking us into some bigger agencies for referrals (ZCS).

Potential Partnerships

Several different partnerships were proposed: expanding the employer base, which has traditionally been focussed only on one employer in Whistler. First Nations groups, both local and outside the Whistler area, and Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) were some of the suggestions.

“

Partners – [main employer in Whistler] is it right now. The Board uses their connections to help identify partners or potential partners. Whistler is a small place. Lots of the board members know people (ZCBM).

“

Partnership with First Nations or Indigenous groups primarily but even outside of Whistler (ZCS).



Partners

Communications

Various participants discussed the role and involvement of partners in the W2L experience. The need for clear messaging and multiple ways to share the W2L successes was identified as being necessary in ZC's work with its current and new partners. Several research participants identified the shift in the terms used to discuss social issues from "at risk youth" to 'vulnerable and marginalized youth' (ZCS) coupled with the challenge of framing the message and developing partner supports in a way that various audiences can relate to and begin to understand the complexities of homelessness.

“

... they do not understand the root causes of homelessness. They think it is because of choices that that individual made or problems in their behavior that led them to that rather than being a result of external forces (ZCBM).

“

Even when I was invited to sit on the Board, I went into the meeting thinking I have no time for this but then when they told their stories and the impact, I thought I needed to get involved. They need to tie it to the end result and tell the story (of how it changes lives) as much as they can (ZCBM).

Building Strategic Partnerships

As noted earlier, the focus and types of partnerships aspired to or currently cultivated were discussed by several participants. In order to build more strategic partnerships to maximise the benefits to the W2L program, research participants identified key areas for expansion of partnerships including housing, Indigenous communities, and employment.

“

Employment and housing – we have a board member on the Board from WB but the other partnerships that are involved, I don't feel that we have a role with them at all really (ZCBM).

“

We need to work with more employers (ZCS).

Governance

As a hybrid board, who work closely with staff, research participants suggested the Board had the following functions as a:

“

...a combination board but less operational than it has been and moving towards governance and advisory (ZCBM).

It has increased and strengthened its processes, including a succession plan.



It is stronger now. We have a committee structure (5 committees). Communications goes across all of the committees – we have talked about whether or not we should have a separate committee... Housing we are evolving to a task force rather than a committee – they want to do what they need to do. We have just on-boarded a new member – a rock star and is a governance expert and she is making governance happen (ZCS).

The Board includes two ZC graduate members. From the perspective of board members, the Board is valuable to members, as one suggested:



I wanted to do something that made a difference in my community. It feels to me like I could make more difference doing something with ZC (ZCBM).

Another suggested:



I think when you are a leader of an organization you are there making a stand for it working no matter what and I see that as my role. This is what I am giving. The value to me as a board member (ZCBM).

Some unique challenges and strengths raised about the board structure or functioning included:



What I noticed right away was that [staff] have handpicked the board members which was a red flag for me but what I have learned is that both [staff] are both so strategic and they are so good at what they do that collectively we have identified the board members we want (referral from an outgoing board member). We always have our ears open. The process is that we look at what we need and then go out and look for it and ask people we trust (ZCBM).

Recognising the progress that had been made in the Board, research participants noted:

“

We have new bylaws last year. They were outdated and prevented us from funding opportunities. They didn't help us and now we have new bylaws that align with the Act and it has helped us with Director terms, built in succession planning, and that has been positive and we are starting to see some of the fruit of that right now...We have done some governance training and now we have someone who has worked in governance who has their own consulting firm on governance and we have a lawyer with a strong background and that has been valuable (ZCBM).

Participants noted how the Board is supported to be effective, through training and getting the rights mix of members:

“

[Staff] had a large number of us go through a governance course and a few more of us have just gone through it just the other week and that is what ZC is looking forward is more of a governance board and letting them run the business (ZCBM).

On the focus of the Board, one noted:

“

We did go through that period where fundraising was our biggest issue, and it is only in this past year that we have been putting some energy behind the growth. I think our Board is heading in the right direction and we are looking at putting in terms, succession planning and moving through the positions of a chair, vice chair and a past chair but at the same time I don't think it is working horribly now (ZCBM).





Program Successes and Vulnerabilities

Community Benefits

There were a variety of suggestions regarding how the community could and did benefit from having W2L participants in Whistler. Graduates observed that bilingual language skills, diverse backgrounds, work ethics, and the capacity to entertain others were all ways they had of contributing back to the community.

“

I already had some knowledge in terms of interacting with guests in terms of working with the company. I am bilingual and co-workers too. I am from a different background I bring in my context (ZCG).

“

I always kill it at work. I always go above and beyond at work (ZCG).

Obstacles to Success

This area encompassed a variety of themes where research participants provided insights on employment, housing, funding, succession planning and staff capacity, Indigenous Peoples, the program referral process, the Whistler community, and program participants. These quotations identify some of the concerns that research participants raised.

Employment and Housing

For program participants, some of the obstacles to success in the program included issues at work and issues with housing. At work, one current participant suggested:

“

I left [my job] because it wasn't a really good work environment for me cause I felt like they didn't want to talk to me and smile and didn't seem happy that I was there. I would try to talk with my old boss, but he wouldn't talk with me, but he would go talk with another group and then treat me like I wasn't there (ZCP).

“

The big change that has to occur is a change in our housing. We have a lynch pin in our program re: the housing that we are tied too. Until we have more control over our housing and the ability to have a couple more safe fitting suitable beds for our youth in Whistler, we won't be able to grow (ZCBM).

Funding

Like many non-profit organisations, funding was raised as an issue by several research participants.

“

...threat to funding as there are many organizations competing for limited donations. We need to have conversations with the other not for profits so that we don't step on each other's toes (ZCBM).

“

Stable funding. It is a huge time suck (three people) and it puts a limit on growth and on how ambitious we can be and how far we can plan into the future and the program is so well established and has structure to it but our funding doesn't reflect that (ZCS).

Succession Planning and Staff Capacity

As a small organisation with a broad remit, staff take on multiple tasks and can sometimes tax their capacity. In this research year several research participants noted the detrimental impact of having one staff member on sick leave for an extended period of time. Research participants raised some concern regarding the reliance on particular staff, in particular the co-directors and they discussed the need for succession planning.



Risks to the program – [ZC Managers] – succession; they are very strong at what they do and they are doing it in a very expensive place to live but you have people who are star performers raising their families in this expensive place and you never know and because of their specialized knowledge I don't know who could step in and fill that (ZCBM).

Sufficient Support for Indigenous Participants

Staff and a current participant discussed the obstacles within the program for Indigenous program participants and the appropriate supports needed for them to navigate the program.



The things we see people struggle with the most particularly with the Indigenous young people - it is the context of where they are in their families and in the world (ZCS).

Referral Process

As the W2L program is situated in a context with limited support structures for youth, the program does not accept program participants with active substance abuse issues or untreated mental health issues requiring treatment unavailable in Whistler. Staff noted that this requires ongoing communication with referral agencies to ensure they understand the strengths and limitations for the program for particular participants.



I have had more reach out from potential referral agencies (always looking for housing and employment opportunities). It is a really easy sell to them. The hard part is aligning to the slightly higher barrier to the program opposed to other programs they work with. We do recommend it is not the program for those who are working with addiction issues and/or need mental health support. That is a bit of the gap the referral agencies need to have a good understanding of that so that they are referring the right people in the program (ZCS).



Community

As noted elsewhere, Whistler proffers strengths for the W2L but it also throws up some obstacles, as noted by one staff member:

“

A barrier we face is that we don't have a physical presence in Whistler in the village we have this little office in the community services centre, and we don't have brand recognition so we can easily drop off of people's radar (ZCS).

“

They are challenging staff to take on – at least double the work of any other staff member. When you are a supervisor, and this one person takes extra attention at the same time they have 29 other kids that are newly employed (ZCBM).

Success Contributors

The contributors to success discussed by the research participants were wide reaching and varied. They included: financial supports, emotional supports, physical supports, life skills, housing and employment, environment, and community, breaking past cycles, financial benefits, and program design. The following quotations outline the kinds of support that research participants highlighted as contributing to success.

Financial Support



All clothing and gear was free and I get rentals for free and a ski pass. It is expensive, man. I don't know how these people are coming over here to work \$13/hour and make it. WB is understanding on this because they know how expensive it is so if someone is late on their rent or needs a pair of boots, they will find a way (ZCP).

Emotional Support



Fun work, being in the mountains, family dinner every week, coaching on money matters and nutrition and [ZC Managers] team up and create that family feel. The emotional support, skills building and confidence (ZCBM).

Physical Support



I like how active it is. I need some form of physical activity. I will start to notice I am more short tempered, on edge and I don't like being like that. I get really sassy and I don't feel like myself and so I feel like this program will give me an outlet to do this – being outside is a big thing for me really therapeutic (ZCP).

Life Skills



I think that I am learning a lot of things here –putting myself out there; doing things on my own (living by myself) is a big step for me and I'm learning a lot of things and doing things on my own. Shopping – money is tight and finding deals that are there; cooking; cleaning and doing all those things. Taking out the trash to keep the place clean (ZCP).

Housing and Employment

“

It is great that ZC asks you right from the start if you want to be in front of the line, warehouse, rentals, lifts (ZCP).

Environment and Community

“

I like the environment, being out in the forest and around the rivers and that is not something that you don't have access to in Vancouver very easily. Just stuck in the Downtown East Side unless you push yourself to take a bus but don't always have bus fare to do that. The immediate access to nature has been so valuable for me (ZCP).

“

I run into them working in the community and isn't that ultimately what it is all about to get them in a position where they can manage their own destinies, get jobs, homes and contribute to the community (ZCBM).

Breaking Past Cycles

“

We have one of our graduates who had a child in foster care and her child is now with her and she is now driving, schools, jobs – multi-generational impact. You are breaking the past cycle and dealing with the trauma that has occurred and changing the direction of a life. I know that when we have time with our participants – over the course of the year – that it changes lives (ZCBM).

“

Youth homelessness and changing someone's life – people don't care if they come from the Yukon as it is a chance to change someone's life and help them turn their life around. Whistler has a big Vancouver based population, so it is a familiarity (ZCBM).



Program Benefits

Multiple benefits to the program were interspersed within the interviews, but a few participants highlighted the cost-benefit ratios, as noted by one board member:

“

Low person benefit for high dollar – this is its success because it is taking an individual person and putting them through a small program so you have a way better chance at helping that individual because you are focusing on eight or twelve people at one time as opposed to solving it for masses (ZCBM).

Other research participants highlighted the overarching benefits that emerged based on the program design that bolstered program participant success.

“

The fundamental design: we supply housing; social support and jobs. If you are homeless, having a home is great but there are more layers to it than that, and having a job for the first time and inside of all of that, the support, [staff]’s end of things, is key (ZCBM).

“

We are setting it up like a family so on an ongoing basis they will come to the Tuesday night dinner, Christmas dinner, come to the board meetings we have participants on our Board and I think that is probably the most lasting effect for the participants (ZCBM).

Threats

Staff talked about a variety of threats to the ZC in general, and the W2L program specifically. One of the most prevalent of these threats was the challenge for ZC of having a significant dependency on the main employer in Whistler or jobs and housing. In addition, the restrictions to the organization’s operation due to the lack of staff capacity and skill set, as well as transportation of employees located in the Whistler area.

“

Housing, funding, and staff capacity is restricting the capacity of the program (ZCS).

“

The main threat is our relationship with [main employer in Whistler]. It is out of WB hands. [Main employer in Whistler] is calling the shots (ZCS).

Recommendations

Based on the data collected in this round of research, the following recommendations are made. It is clear that the recommendations made in previous reports are being implemented in the W2L program. For example, participants identified activities such as ride days, family dinners, readily available support from staff as successful components of the program that need to be continued. Based on the responses from participants, we encourage the ZC Co-Directors, with input from the ZC Board, to continue to prioritize the recommendations below, as well as those from previous years as they continue to implement them and improve the program.

For the Board:

1. Develop clear selection criteria for board members.
2. Continue to develop formal processes for onboarding and exiting board members and succession planning.
3. Continue to support W2L graduate and participant voice on board.
4. Continue to support diversity on the Board and training on the need for diverse voices.
5. Continue training for the Board on the purpose of W2L and the root causes of homelessness and a clear accepted definition of youth at risk of homelessness, as well as mental health issues for youth.

For the W2L program to support participants:

6. Expand support for participants prior to the program, as they transition into the program, and after they leave the program.
7. Continue to explore ways to leverage support for the myriad of needs participants enter the program with, including counselling, mental health support, and substance use support.
8. Continue to support gender-specific housing.
9. Expand and formalise life skills training and support for participants, including household management, budgeting, shopping, cooking, and baking, job search, housing search; lease agreements; safe relationships, and providing someone to talk to. This needs to include dedicated time for these activities.
10. Continue to develop processes for outlining and tracking success; work on and track longer term goals including a structured transition out of the W2L program.

General recommendations for the W2L program to continue to:

11. Expand the reach of the program, find ways to bring in more diverse participants such as Indigenous Peoples, refugees, international, and an older demographic.
12. Create a succession plan for ZC Co-Directors and staff.
13. Update the communication strategies used with employers, housing, and the Whistler community to convey the needs and experience of participants and the program overall.
14. Reach out to other employers to provide a greater variety of options for participants and make the program more sustainable by providing additional support to the employer.
15. Pursue alternative housing options.
16. Seek additional funding suppliers to support expansion and provide more permanent basis for existing operation.



Conclusion

This third round of data collection and analysis illustrates that the program continues to expand and implement recommendations from the research. This demonstrated the commitment to strengthen and expand the program. The participants come to the program from a range of backgrounds and experiences and they are linked by a desire to work towards housing and employment stability. ZC continues to develop support mechanisms that will address the needs of the varied participants. This dedication to growth was evidenced by the many positive comments from participants, employers, and ZC staff who noted the forward movement trajectory. Overall, research participants highlighted the importance of offering a tailored approach to meet diverse participant needs, but also building on the respect, love and care provided within the W2L program. In the same vein, participants provided ideas on what needs to be done to continue on this path of program improvement.

The recommendations provided in this report are intended to identify areas for further development and new ideas for exploration. The comments and experiences captured in this document are indicative of the visible progress ZC has made building on successes and strengths and implementing many of the research recommendations identified in previous years. In this round of data collection, it is encouraging to see the progress that has been made. It was evident that ZC is committed not only to understanding the needs of the W2L participants, but also to providing the support structures required by the program participants, thereby allowing them to achieve success both in the program and beyond.

References

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.)*. SAGE. doi: 10.4135/9781452230153

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine.

Kemmis, S. (2008). Critical Theory and Participatory Action Research. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (eds). *Handbook of Action Research*. Sage.

McIntyre, A. (2008). *Qualitative Research Methods: Participatory action research*. SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781483385679

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2006). *Handbook of Action Research*. Sage.

Zero Ceiling Society of Canada
PO Box 61 Whistler, BC, V0N 1B0
604-962-5000
info@zeroceiling.org
zeroceiling.org

