



Program Delivered by:

Zero Ceiling Work 2 Live Research Project

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Annual Research Report

Research project
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Acronyms

FGs	Focus Groups	ZCBM	Zero Ceiling board members
MCFD	Ministry of Children and Family Development	ZCE	Zero Ceiling current employers
PAC	Project Advisory Committee	ZCED	Zero Ceiling Executive Directors
W2L	Work2Live	ZCG	Zero ceiling graduated participants
ZC	Zero Ceiling	ZCP	Zero Ceiling current participants
ZCAD	Zero Ceiling administrative staff	ZCS	Zero Ceiling staff

Introduction

It is important to recognise that this project opened amid the COVID-19 pandemic when there was optimism that on the cusp of mass-vaccination initiative, we would see a reduction of COVID-19 restrictions and limitations. However, the impacts of COVID-19 continue to be profound within the town of Whistler, which has seen an unprecedented toll on the tourism sector, the mental health of workers, and on employment in general. This has impacted the roll out of various aspects of the broader project, as well as the research activities. Despite the pandemic during Year 1 of this project, the research team completed the following tasks:

- Conducted an ongoing literature search with an emphasis on employment outcomes for youth experiencing multiple barriers to employment; supportive employment programs; and the supportive employment model in the COVID-19 recovery context. The literature search was submitted, as per the project milestones.
- Conducted a needs assessment which was submitted as per the project milestones.
- Completed the first round of a Theory of Change workshops and design of the Theory of Change for ZC. A draft of which was submitted, as per the project milestones.
- Conducted the research study as outlined and approved by the Tri-Council research ethics board (2021), involving the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from W2L program participants, graduates, ZC staff, employment partners, Project Advisory Committee and other stakeholders.
- Analysed the Year 1 research data and created the annual research report including findings and recommendations.

This interim report provides an overview of the first half of Year 1 case study qualitative research on the Zero Ceiling (ZC) Work2Live (W2L) program between May and December 2021. 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 tests the hypothesis that the expansion of the Zero Ceiling Work 2 Live model will provide

an in-depth understanding of the elements of support required by employers and youth, as well as partnership structures and relationships that are required to support the sustainability of the ZC W2L model.

The research findings will contribute to program changes that support W2L outcomes and meet the needs of current and future participants and especially the *Improving Outcomes for Youth Experiencing Multiple Barriers to Employment Through Supportive Employment Partnerships* project. In particular, ZC wanted to be able to use the findings to improve the communication regarding 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 and to support employers to better support their staff.

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, typically aged between 19 and 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 over 100 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.

The objectives of the *Improving Outcomes for Youth Experiencing Multiple Barriers to Employment Through Supportive Employment partnerships* project were to “build upon existing partnerships, knowledge, and practice to further our understanding of the best ways to support youth experiencing barriers to employment” in order “to implement supportive employment practices with 2-3 tourism industry employers to maximize the efficacy of the Work 2 Live program”.

Methodology

This action-oriented case study qualitative research (Kemmis, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; McIntyre, 2008) provided an opportunity to gather primary data at two data collection points: August and November 2021, in addition to ongoing monitoring data collection (i.e., the employer surveys).

Data Sources

Data sources included:

- Monthly Employer Surveys – these were changed to quarterly for the 2021 project year as mentioned in the regular ZC updates to the Ministry. Due to COVID-19 there was limited uptake by employers;
- Interview and focus groups with ZC participants and alumni, programming staff, administrative staff, Project Advisory Committee;
- Interviews and focus groups with employers.

Data Collection Methods

Using a participatory action research approach, a series of interviews and focus groups were conducted to iteratively answer the research questions. The perceptions of participants were obtained through open-ended questions, allowing participants to elaborate on their responses to the questions asked.

During the reporting timeframe, 6 interviews and 9 focus groups were held with representative stakeholder groups involving a total of 40 people. These included 4 focus groups (FGs) with current participants (ZCP) which included some graduates (ZCG); 2 interviews with new participants (ZCP new); 2 interviews with executive directors (ZCED), two focus groups with ZC programming staff

(ZCPS); one focus group with ZC administrative staff (ZCAS); 1 interview with a current employer (ZCE), 2 focus groups with current employers (ZCE) and one focus group with the Project Advisory Committee (PAC). To maintain a level of anonymity, some of these categories are collapsed where we identify quotations, including Zero Ceiling participants (ZCP) (including new and current participants), and staff (ZCS) (including executive directors and administrative and program staff).

Data Sources – Interviews & Focus Groups	August 2021	November 2021
W2L New Participants	0	2
W2L Current Participants	9	5
W2L Graduates	2	0
W2L Programming Staff	4	5
W2L Administrative Staff	2	2
W2L Executive Directors	0	2
Project Advisory Committee	0	2
ZC Board	0	0
Current Employers	0	5
TOTALS	17	23

Table 1: Total Number of Participants in 2021-2022 Year 1 Research Data

In addition, quarterly employer survey data has been included in this report and has been included in the discussion of findings below. Similarly, the participant case management system data and participant journals will be included as part of the data set in the next report.

Collection

Interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and video conference format depending on the preference and availability of the participant (ZCS). Three researchers rotated the roles of interviewer, transcriber and observer. Interviews with current program participants focused on their experiences in the program in relation to supportive employment. Interviews with staff focused on gaining an understanding of the various supports provided for participants in the supportive employment program. Interviews with employers focused on understanding the experience of employing a ZC participant. Interview and focus group protocols used are available upon request.

Data Analysis Approach

A thematic approach was used to analyze the interview and focus group data with the open-ended questions being coded using NVivo Pro 12 by each of the researchers and the research assistant. The researchers divided the transcripts for coding in keeping with the data collection assignment with the interviewer and the observer being the coder 1 and coder 2 on each transcript. The research assistant coded all transcripts as coder 3. The employer quarterly survey data was analyzed with any narrative comments included in the larger thematic analysis. The participant case management data will be included in the Year 2 report.

In coding, both anticipated and emergent codes were examined, i.e., the anticipated codes were established in advance and were determined by the questions posed, and the emergent codes were more granular sub-codes that developed in each question area.

The research team met to review the coded data sets and reached an agreement on the themes coming from the codes. These themes were then summarised in the Findings section of this report.

The research methodology adhered to the research principles of validity, reliability, and objectivity. The research subjects’ anonymity was assured, and they were made aware of their rights and responsibilities with a consent form.

Ethics

All research was conducted in accordance with the Tri-Council’s ethical standards for research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). 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.

Findings

The findings covered a range of topics and themes. To best represent the breadth and depth of findings, we have presented this under three foci, employers, participants and Zero Ceiling. Each section covers a variety of topics related to Benefits/Opportunities, Challenges/Barriers, and Insights/Gaps.

Section 1: Employers

Employer Benefits and Opportunities

Employers shared a range of perspectives on the role of Zero Ceiling and employment practices. All employer participants were happy to support Zero Ceiling and act as employment partners for the W2L participants. The employers spoke to the multiple benefits that they experienced from being an employment partner in addition to being able to tap into another labour pool. Several employers discussed the current challenging employment market in Whistler that has few applicants, high turnover and stretched workers. “It’s been tough to hire employees in Whistler. There’s a housing crisis. The rental market is really tough, the worst in BC ... COVID-19 amplified that” (ZCE). Many employer and staff participants discussed the increasing recognition that supportive employment could redress some of this shortfall. Some staff also noted that they had seen an increase of organisations reaching out wanting to partner with Zero Ceiling. “Societal pressures are real, and people are struggling. Programs like this are very important not only for participants but the future of youth and society. If people need support there are avenues to get it and be active parts of the workforce” (ZCE).

In addition to the benefit of meeting a labour need, employers also identified that their involvement in the supportive employment program was helping

them build a culture of empathy and understanding in their workplace. Having ZC participants as part of their team raised their staff awareness of others and increased the strengths and diversity of team members. The strong work ethic exhibited by the W2L participants was highlighted by the employers. Several managers spoke to their desire to rehire the W2L participant, but due to the seasonal nature of the business and/or lack of housing, this was not an option.

Employers and ZC staff discussed the importance of finding the right fit between the W2L program participant and the job. Providing jobs that were not front facing was noted by several participants. Employers suggested that they had been forewarned that Zero Ceiling participants may have more challenges with showing up to work on time and therefore they were able to plan for this. Finding the right fit was described as matching the role to support participants who may face issues that cause inconsistent attendance. It also required finding a role that could make room for progressive responsibility and at the same time, not jeopardize the business operations.

A contributing aspect to finding this fit that was identified by several employers, staff and current participants was the need for clear communication about expectations, support needs of both participants and employers and support processes available through ZC and other community groups. Employers and ZC staff commented on the value of the pre-meeting for sharing and the ongoing regular check-ins with ZC staff. Employers expressed that they wanted to know “what we need to do to adapt standard workplace practices to accommodate a person with challenges. We need to know if it’s realistic for us to do so. Clear communication, clear expectation, level of support we can expect” (ZCE).

Many employers spoke about the range of supports that they provide to all employees including support with finding housing, connecting with support services offered by the Whistler community for mental health and wellness, and resources for independent living. For many employers, the additional supports that ZC provides the W2L participants such as family dinners, additional training (e.g., Rent Smart), empathy/perspective taking were seen as a benefit to having a W2L participant and were causing them to consider what additional supports they could provide their other employees.

Another benefit mentioned by employers included the mental health first aid training offered by ZC. It was seen as a valuable support for engaging in this work, and for use with their other employees. In addition, the work that ZC did with the participants re: goal setting, tracking, reminders of start time and detailed additional instructions for the job were all aspects that were valued by employers and in some instances, provided by them as well to the W2L participants. “Just being aware and mindful of what may have happened to them in their lives and being a bit more lenient on some of the rules ... just check in and see if they are okay” (ZCE).

Employers were also able to talk about the benefits of the program, in particular from their own personal perspective. They spoke about developing more empathy and understanding of people, realizing that many people need help and understanding. “It has helped me with all my staff be more empathetic and understanding that there is a lot going on in everyone’s lives behind the scenes” (ZCE). In addition, the ability for managers to see the impact of their actions as they worked with the W2L participants contributed to the sense of manager satisfaction that many

employers identified experiencing. “It is very rewarding knowing that you have helped someone in their journey that needs some help. It makes me feel good that we are able to help people and also really proud when you see them grow and you maybe had a little part in that and that is rewarding” (ZCE).

Employer Challenges and Barriers

A variety of challenges and barriers were raised by employers based on their experience working with W2L participants. Ensuring consistency in terms of programming, expectations and goal setting were common themes in the discussion. The main issues faced by employers were also issues they identified having with other employees; including irregular attendance, lateness, and in one instance, inappropriate behaviour for the workplace. As one employer states, the “main issue was attendance. A few late days at times but we get that with our staff too” (ZCE). Ensuring that there were clear communication channels established early in the employer/participant relationship was identified as critical in order for employers to support the W2L employee, and to be able to balance those support needs with the operational needs of their business.

In addition to the workplace expectation challenges, employers also identified the challenge of the Whistler environment, and specifically in the context of COVID-19 as having an impact. Employer and ZC staff commented on the difficult tension between the previous experiences of the W2L participants and the setting. Mental health was identified as an issue for all employees at this time and many employers have brought in more flexible working arrangements, sick day policies and additional wellness benefits for all employees.

Having to balance the additional health regulations, employer requirements and customer expectations was an ongoing challenge for employers. As one employer commented “COVID-19 has taken away the fun... We have to find value in other ways” (PAC).

Confidentiality and fairness were challenges that were expressed by employers and additional guidance was asked for, specifically as they were preparing to onboard the W2L participant employee. While many employers recognized that there was additional energy spent in taking on a W2L participant as an employee, the main challenge they faced was navigating the non-ZC employee's frustration as some saw the “special” treatment of the ZC employees as unfair. Some employers adopted the position that they “assume there will always be challenges with employees from ZC. It is important to give people a chance however, staffing wise, it is hard. It is a confidential program so we don't tell our other staff what is going on, but they see this person is getting extra chances and it is hard cause you cannot tell them why. It is a hard line to play, you are giving them a few extra chances. One we have worked through, but it is there” (ZCE).

Employer Insights or Gaps Identified

Employers identified the need for an improved communication pre-hire package that included detailed guidelines and expectations for employers as part of this program. The creation of an iterative FAQ document that they could also use as a point of reference and also contribute to, if relevant, was also suggested. “Early support – as much information as relevant as possible - back and forth with ZC without going into too much detail – but information that would help us to prevent issues. As long as you are aware of every issue that may come up then you can make a plan and if boundaries are broken then you can make changes and discuss with the person” (ZCE). In addition, employers expressed the need for a clear and consistent point of contact, ideally the case worker, during the employment term.

Being able to tap into the training offered by ZC to employers and expanding those offerings was identified as an area of opportunity by employers. Several expressed how valuable the mental health first aid course was and how they would like to offer that to their entire staff. They encouraged ZC to consider the mountain schedules more closely when offering training opportunities for employers to maximise participation. Employers also commented on the deep expertise in ZC staff and identified that as something that ZC staff could build on and develop “made in Whistler” workshops to offer to employers around ZC areas of strength.

Section 2: W2L Participants

Participant Benefits and Opportunities Identified

W2L participants spoke openly about how they benefited from the program by developing skills that supported independence, feelings of self-worth and being treated like a human being by both their employers and the ZC staff. They talked about the connections they were making with other W2L participants and the wider community. Some felt this improved their chance of finding full time and ongoing employment in the program and once they graduated. Attesting to the impact, one participant stated, “realistically how many days would you have lasted [without ZC] ...6 days? I would get so stressed about rent, social situation etc.” (ZCP).

W2L participants likened ZC to ‘a community’ or ‘a family.’ Within this context, several noted there was a broader diversity of W2L participants with a more complex range of support needs, with some staying in the program longer than a year. To support them, participants noted that the transition in and out of the program were important to successfully support independence, as one said, “they will help you process and plan for the future” (ZCP).

W2L participants shared ideas for how they believed the program could be best monitored and evaluated, focusing on the importance of youth voice and stories of success. W2L participants were asked to articulate what success meant despite being challenging to measure and quantify. One stated, “stop measuring time, I used to focus on it too much, it held me back” (ZCP). Some participants stated that success was a feeling, others associated this with meeting goals. Current participants’ short-term goals included practical and tangible actions; for instance, creating a good resume, saving money, securing housing, completing training, getting a counsellor,

learning to live independently, learning to cook and eat healthy food. The long-term goals varied by participant but were in keeping with the kinds of long-term aspirations of people this age; for instance, saving money, going to school, buying a property, working towards a career, finding a partner. One participant suggested, “on my own it would feel difficult – I feel motivated with help from ZC” (ZCP).

W2L Participants highlighted their appreciation for employment opportunities and support to help build their confidence, employment experience and networks. “I want to see where I fit. I am trying to explore where things are cause I do know I need to build experience, and I also just want a consistent job, and I also want to know and to be in love with my job” (ZCP). Some noted their pleasure of working as part of a team and some also highlighted employer support they received that helped them succeed in their roles. For instance, these two suggested, “every time I've met them [employers], they've had an understanding of genuineness” (ZCP) and “bosses compared to city have been phenomenal. The more faith they put in me, the better I do my job. What you put in you get out” (ZCP).

Various W2L participants emphasised the importance of housing to build additional opportunities, particularly housing within walking distance of work. Several rejoiced that the program had de-coupled housing and employment and had introduced overnight support staff at the house.

The most discussed valued element of the program was the support they received. As one stated, “just being a good reference, having our back, special treatment – really good trusting people that believe in people, express their skills attributes and what they do best. It's been really helpful, I second guess myself, but they give me confidence. It's nice having a support system” (ZCP).

Support ran along a continuum from small and pragmatic, to more relational and intangible. One example of tangible support included getting a driver's license. One example of less tangible support included having accessible staff who offered an open-door policy. A few W2L participants noted support and relationship-building helped build a sense of stability and security, success at work and explore new opportunities. As one suggested, "taking the step I've been afraid to take" (ZCP). Trust was critical. Having a trusting person to work with, but also trust in the process and in self was important, as one said, "I know hiccups will be there, but I trust. Being around the right people, focusing on the right people, not dwelling on what I can't fix" (ZCP). Individualised support was valued. "I feel like they've had the support I've needed. I'm a bit more complicated and they've been there, I'd also second guess myself, they give me confidence" (ZCP).

An emergent theme was the importance of being treated like human beings, "it is the individuality and the warmth and the connection. It's nice to not be another statistic on the board. ZC makes you feel like a regular person. It's the humanness of it" (ZCG). "I'm human too. I'm my own person like to be respected as an adult" (ZCP). The weekly family dinners and recreation helped create this atmosphere and some noted these were critical to their well-being and self-care.

W2L participants stated they were finding their way to independence and learning ways to take care of themselves and "be a respected adult" (ZCP), as noted here,

"I feel like I have more direction, finding my pathway" (ZCP) and "[I am working towards] independence in terms of understanding my responsibilities for myself as an individual and being independent enough to sustain myself in society" (ZCP).

W2L Participant Challenges and Barriers

Challenges did not feature prominently. The main themes that arose, related to mental health and COVID-19. One participant said, "I wanted to be supported when COVID hit I was too burned out to even function. Everyone is feeling the stress of the pandemic" (ZCP). Overall, the program structure was seen as suitable, but some participants suggested that they needed to expand the program to include more participants.

The employment milieu in Whistler had also become more complex and this had meant more W2L participants worked part time or were intermittently out of work. Many participants shared that there was a dearth of job or career options within Whistler. Other employment challenges as noted by many participants related to absenteeism and punctuality. Conversely, some current participants noted the stress of being pressured to work overtime to fill in for the lack of employees. One participant also noted that motivation to work was depleted. As mental health issues were commonly mentioned both within and outside of work, one participant shared, "most managers don't know – they have never dealt with mental health – they have no idea. If you share too much, they will be breathing down your neck asking if you are okay but if you share too little, they won't give you a break. Managers need training on this more so now because of the pandemic... I was told to leave my shit at the door when you go to work" (ZCP).

The main concerns that emerged regarding housing related to predictable roommate dynamics, but also issues pertaining to household maintenance and delays in repairs. A few W2L participants noted the importance of instilling "expectations, goals, boundaries, guidelines" (ZCP). One participant was concerned with not being allowed overnight guests. However, the most pressing issue was the precarity of securing housing in the program.

W2L Participant Insights or Gaps Identified

Various participants espoused the value of the program and its supportive structure. Like the employers, the W2L participants suggested the need for clearer guidelines and expectations. As moving to a new community can be overwhelming, participants noted a comprehensive orientation package, as well as an exit package can help ZC participants.

W2L participants highlighted the basic supports needed to help them build the tools needed to support themselves, including basic skills such as car maintenance, communication skills with roommates, staff and employers, ability to obtain a driver's license, how to pay rent and talk to landlords, but also ensuring a link to a social worker or counsellor. In anticipating support needs, one new participant suggested that it would help if employers, "texted what I might need to bring with me to work, knowing what kinds of challenges would be there...Need someone to help ask the right questions" (ZCP). Another suggested, "support in managing money, savings and investment and budgeting. That would be really nice to have a mentor/instructor who is available all the time and has the knowledge of finances" (ZCP).

The increasing level, duration and complexity of support needed was emphasized. A suggested gap was transitioning. "We need more supports for when people leave the program. Things in the city didn't work out and Whistler felt like it was the last option I had in my life. The program should not drop people so easily" (ZCP). ZC has initiated a stop gap approach by allowing W2L participants to stay longer in the program to support a better, more sustainable transition out.

Section 3: Zero Ceiling

Under the category of Zero Ceiling, many comments were made by program participants, staff, employers, and the Project Advisory Committee about both Zero Ceiling in general, and the W2L program specifically.

Benefits and Opportunities for Zero Ceiling

Comments that related to the program benefits targeted the specific activities associated with the program, the structure of the program, and the impact of supportive employment practices. In addition, it was noticed that community reciprocity was evident, as noted in this quote by a member of the Advisory Committee who observed that there was a “knock on impact for community as a whole” (PAC). With a focus on program opportunities, research participants added that there was a need for financial stability, enhanced reputation, and expansion of the program to include more Indigenous participants and participants from the Sea to Sky corridor.

When discussing the future of the program, research participants provided comments on staffing, the strategic plan, governance, training, and report writing needs. One participant noted that the priorities include “getting the curriculum person starting, making sure staff are doing good. AGM is in April, so bringing one or two Indigenous people onto the Board is needed” (ZCS). While the governance of this project is through the Advisory Committee, the governance of the program is through the Board. When focussing on Board needs, a participant noted that Board membership needs to embody diversity and that “all the Board [members] need to do mandatory cultural safely training” (ZCS). In addition, the Board needs to have a community focus, more Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion training, as well as youth voice. Discussions also focused on program expansion, which could include reaching out to health organizations and increasing the number of participants which could counter homelessness and housing challenges for more individuals. Related to this was the identified need for increased mental health supports, which if implemented would result in a lower barrier program, ultimately expanding opportunities for program participation. “Our newer focus on mental health provides lots of opportunities for healing and growing for participants, and that was a piece missing in previous years because it was all time limited. By focusing on mental health and healing from trauma and extending our support, people’s opportunities to move forward have increased” (ZCS).

When asked what new initiatives should be considered, research participants stated that it would be valuable to consider budgeting, case management, feedback, partnerships, and employer training. In addition, one staff member noted that expanding participant support should continue to be a focus, stating that there was a need for “different levels of staff, we were able to take on

people with higher needs, whereas in the past we wouldn’t not have accepted participants like that” (ZCS). The benefits of training were mentioned by several people, with one employer stating that, “just having the knowledge of the mental health first aid and being able to pause and think about what could be making this happen, and what could be triggering this for them, and having an idea of warning signs ... do I need to get them help” (ZCE).

A robust discussion captured a variety of elements of the partner arrangement including benefits, relevance, and risks of the partnership, communication strategies, selection of program participants, and the value of partnering with ZC. One staff member commented that alignment of values was paramount to success, “employers that don’t align on values, it doesn’t matter the amount of support we throw at them, we just won’t find success there” (ZCS).

Research participants were asked to comment on program success drivers. One staff member saw the multi-faceted nature of relationships that grew amongst participants, staff, and the broader Whistler community, and connected this to the continued engagement of the W2L graduates with ZC, “[the] relational aspect of our support – strong relationships, housing and sense of security that brings, is integral, and the sense of community. Our cohort model – there is lots of value in that and we see that through the continued engagement of our alumni” (ZCS). In addition, other research participants talked about how accountability, communication, confidence, housing, new employer partners, organizational structure, stability, and strategic planning contributed to the success of the W2L program.

A positive change for employees has been the variety of employers, and the types of employment positions, that are available to the W2L participants. This increases the likelihood that program participants can find a job that fits their needs.

Being part of a community and building relationships were two benefits that featured in many discussions, with a reference to both the program participants and the wider community of Whistler, “one of things I see is the depth of the relationship you all build with the participants. It is so unique and so genuine, and [ZC has] said a lot of times, understandably, it takes time. It takes a long time for participants to trust us, but you build these long-term, supportive, unconditional, trusting relationships that keep going” (ZCE). A similar perspective was noted by a program participant who explored the relationship between ZC and the Whistler community “something else that impacts in a positive way is the relationship ZC has in the community. Everyone is hardcore advocating for us by partners in the community” (ZCS).

Challenges or Barriers for Zero Ceiling

While there have been many successes and positive changes for ZC over the past few years, there is room for improvement. It is apparent from the focus group discussions that the composition of Advisory Board needs attention, accompanied by the need for board training with a goal to supporting youth Board participants by providing an environment where younger members have greater opportunities to express their opinions, and where their voices are honoured. Due to increased ZC workload demands, job sustainability was another concern expressed by staff, who also noted that “everyone is so busy ... one ED is burned out” (ZCS). Related to this comment, some solutions were identified: focus on the organizational culture, increase pay, add more mentoring opportunities, enhance conflict resolution practices, and offer additional mental health training.

Recently, the needs of W2L participants have changed, and there are specific challenges related to COVID-19, which has meant the program needed to adapt. Some program-specific areas for growth were identified, including the need for more effective communication, clearer expectation-setting, securing funding for housing, having a greater focus on equity, decolonization and cultural programming, more effective boundary and norm setting, and planning for program participant transitions into and out of the program. Focus group participants also noted that there is a need for the program to continue its work expanding employment options for program participants. Furthermore, as ZC has striven to lower the barriers for entrance to the W2L program, the risks to organizational sustainability have changed from having sufficient funds to continue the day-to-day operation, to challenges associated with growing demands on staff members by program participants, “the organization takes on more risk and challenge because of this, and we are seeing staff burn out” (ZCS). One focus group participant noted that there was an increased demand for the program, which resulted in longer wait times for participants who wished to enter the program, “one young lady overdosed and died, that was on our waiting list which was tough” (ZCS). There has been burnout at multiple levels, including program participants, staff, and employers, with insufficient time to meet all program demands. As a staff member commented, “the atmosphere is calling for employers to be more supportive, I don’t think employers have the capacity to do that they are so burnt out and overstretched that they can’t” (ZCS).

Insights or Gaps for Zero Ceiling Identified

When discussing priorities for the future, funding priorities were highlighted, this included funding for necessary core organizational structures such as staffing new positions and pay increases, boundaries between themselves and program participants. When speaking of program improvements, a staff member talked about going beyond the physical needs of participants, “I hear a lot that we are a holistic program and I hear that we take care of mind, body, and emotion but I am wondering if there is more opportunity for us to take care of the spirit of the people to help them identify and develop what that means to them” (ZCS). increasing funds allocated for training to support mental health and managing difficult behaviours, expanding housing and transportation options, as well as supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives. To create meaningful change, it is important to acknowledge the colonial nature of barriers as well as to support organizational sustainability for W2L and similar programs. In response to the barriers youth face, one comment related to the need for progressive funding programs,

“A program like [W2L] is responding to human needs that are a result of historical and current government policies and we need an avenue for secure, ongoing, unrestricted funding in order to run the program. This would be a game-changer for programs like ours” (ZCS).

Funding like the Research and Innovation project demonstrates a commitment from government to enact meaningful change in the lives of marginalized youth and young adults. There is hope yet that the private sector can follow in the Ministry’s footsteps and commit to funding programs that put people first, engage in lasting and meaningful reconciliation, and are centred in equity and anti-racism. In this way, the Ministry and Zero Ceiling are well-suited to undertake this project together.

Other priorities for the program and the organization included establishing, “a Board that has shared alignment ... we need to do some work there to ensure there is shared values throughout the organization ... there is work with the Board to get them up to speed on what we do” (ZCS). In addition, organizational-level Human Resource changes were highlighted; these changes included meeting structure, case management, hierarchy, directors’ roles, and shared group norms.

As one staff member noted, “wages for staff needs to increase in order for a lower turnover in staffing ... creating a program where everyone is in alignment and understands the goals of the program” (ZCS). When discussing the most effective ZC employee qualities, staff noted that the most successful employees were action oriented, collaborative, flexible, had lived experiences that allowed them to empathize with program participants, and could build trusting relationships with program participants, other staff members, and employers. Staff also noted that having autonomy was important, as was having access to appropriate training and the ability to develop effective boundaries between themselves and program participants. When speaking of program improvements, a staff member talked about going beyond the physical needs of participants, “I hear a lot that we are a holistic program and I hear that we take care of mind, body, and emotion but I am wondering if there is more opportunity for us to take care of the spirit of the people to help them identify and develop what that means to them” (ZCS).

Discussion

The research sought to answer whether the expansion of the Zero Ceiling Work 2 Live model could provide an in-depth understanding of the elements of support required by employers and youth, as well as partnership structures and relationships that are required to support the sustainability of the Zero Ceiling Work 2 Live model. The core question asked, “how can supportive employment partnerships between not-for-profit agencies, employers in the tourism industry, and government benefit youth experiencing multiple barriers to employment?” The following discussion outlines core elements drawn from the analysis of the data that began to answer the research sub-questions.

a. What staffing challenges are employers facing in the COVID-19 economic recovery?

The lack of frontline workers was identified as a staffing challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was due in part to a reduction in international workers, mental health challenges and employee fatigue, as well as unpredictable restrictions on tourism activities.

b. What interest do employers currently have in adding supportive employment practices to their workplace?

It is important to note that supportive employment did not appear to have a shared meaning and it varied depending on the employer context and interpretation. Irrespective, there is a demand for mental health training, and employers are aware of the growing complexity of the employee landscape.

c. How can supportive employment practices address challenges in staffing for employers in the tourism industry in the initial stages of COVID-19 economic recovery?

It would appear that expanding participation in programs such as W2L could be valuable to employers in tourism; this follows the increased need for EDI and mental health training for employers. In addition, setting expectations at multiple levels for both program participants

and employers is one of the keys to successful inclusion of W2L participants. ZC participants also noted that when they are well supported in work, they are better able to do their best for their employers.

d. What basic needs such as housing, transportation and wrap around supports do young people who are facing multiple barriers need?

Housing and transportation were both identified by program participants as being critical to their success in employment. Location of housing was identified as a contributor to success, with some of the available housing being in close vicinity to employer organizations. Having housing tied to employment, however, was not a guarantee of success; rather, there were identified obstacles to having housing dependant on employment. Preference would be given to having independent housing available that is not dependent on a specific employer.

Wrap around support featured significantly in the research. A variety of accessible supports helped participants succeed in their employment and build the skills to work towards confidence and independence. In addition, being treated with dignity, respect, and “like a human being” undergirded self-efficacy.

e. What are the impacts and associated benefits and risks of hiring vulnerable youth in supportive employment programs?

Expanded leadership opportunities in multiple levels of the employer organization, greater awareness of diversity, training in areas of mental health and addictions, partnership opportunities, expanded workforce, reduced dependence on international workers (visa approvals etc.) were all identified as impacts by research study participants.

The largest tangible barrier noted was finding ways to support ZC participants, while recognising punctuality and absenteeism may be an issue for some employers.

f. What does a successful supportive employment program for vulnerable youth look like?

Participants described successful employment programs as ones that treated people like human beings and recognised the limitations that may come with mental health issues of any employee, as one staff stated, “working with the individual on what needs they have and how you can accommodate them” (ZCS) was critical to successful employment. Supportive employment also includes clarity on expectations for employees, employers, and ZC staff. In addition, external support networks for participants, mental health support, training for employers, supportive housing, support to enter workplace, and including alternative ways to curb youth homelessness, were all used to describe supportive employment programs.

g. What tools can be created to enable ongoing monitoring and evaluation with a focus on demonstrating impact to stakeholders?

Suggestions included ensuring that monitoring and evaluation efforts should recognise that demonstrating impact is intangible. The tools should incorporate ways to listen to stories, and the ability to initiate journal check-ins.

h. What role should the government play in the creation of supportive employment programs for youth experiencing multiple barriers?

Government was identified as a critical component of supportive employment programs. Multiple roles were identified for government, which includes providing more flexible and accessible opportunities for organizations to create new programs and funding, as well as limiting the barriers for participants to enable smoother access to employment programs. One suggestion was to create a fund that pays people experiencing barriers to employment; this would ensure that the cost is not carried by the employer and would reduce the impact to a participant facing difficulties attending the workplace.

i. What is the impact of the adventure-based learning on participants success with the program?

Participants highlighted the adventure-based or recreational aspects of the program, noting that this supported their mental well-being. Participating in activities that enabled a stronger connection with nature, resulted in participants who felt more grounded and experienced less stress.

j. What is the impact of the family-like setting/supports on the participants success with the program?

Participants noted that the family-like supports were a core element of the program. These supports provide an environment for long-term, supportive, unconditional, trusting relationships. Participants noted they felt safer and more supported, and that a family-like setting contributed to their ability to feel more responsible to others and to themselves; in addition, this environment allowed them to develop basic skills for self-care and life skills.

Recommendations

Based on the data collected and analyzed as part of Year 1 of this project, the following recommendations emerged.

Short term (6 to 24 months) - for next offering of the W2L program

- Offer training for employers that includes:
 - mental health first aid;
 - orientation training to the skills sets of the ZC staff; and,
 - connecting with employers for their input on the ZC W2L curriculum under development.
- Offer training for participants that includes:
 - employer and employee communication strategies and supporting processes;
 - professionalism in the workplace – expectations and supports to develop this; and,
 - expectations, norms setting and boundaries in the program and in the shared housing units.
- Provide orientation that:
 - provides an orientation package to the W2L program and Whistler (e.g., outline expectations) for W2L program participants;
 - incorporates an employer orientation package to support W2L participants to be successful in their jobs;
 - offers consistent and detailed onboarding training for employers regarding the specifics of support provided by ZC; point of contact information; communication approach;
 - includes FAQ's for employers; and, identifies an approach to minimize participant behavioural issues such as punctuality and attendance.
- Offer training for the Board on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).
- Offer training for the Project Advisory Committee, specifically on governance.
- Increase the number of staff who are qualified in mental health support, to cover supports currently being accessed externally by ZC.
- Incorporate more youth voice on Board (this relates to EDI training and is also related to valuing youth).
- Enhance case management tools.
- Hire staff who have lived experiences.
- Move to align pay to scale representative of the nature and context of the work to support job sustainability.
- Obtain ZC vehicle.
- Include decolonizing processes and cultural programming for employers, participants, and staff.
- Plan for W2L participant program transitions.
- Examine ZC organizational structure.
- Create a more holistic program that encompasses aspects of mind, body and spirit.

Longer term (3 to 5 years) – more general recommendations for W2L program and to address the project research question(s) more broadly.

- Include a more diverse membership on the ZC Board, with a shared alignment (values and mission statement).
- Expand access of W2L to more participants (lower-barriers, Indigenous and Sea to Sky).
- Secure ongoing, unrestricted funding for W2L program.
- Expand employer partnerships and employment options.
- Increase housing opportunities.
- Recognise the increasing complexity of support needs and have funding to support them.
- Create more flexibility in access and use of funding.
- Increase partnership options – values alignment is important.
- Shorten the wait time for participants coming into the program.
- Change organizational structures, such as meeting format, communication, case management, hierarchy, clarify director's roles (including delegation pathways), and discuss shared group norms.

Year 2 Research Team – Next Steps

The following tasks are scheduled to be completed during Year 2 of this project:

- Collect Year 2 data with W2L program participants, staff, employers, PAC and ZC Advisory Board (Spring and Fall 2022);
- Revise the ZC Theory of Change (Fall 2022);
- Present Year 1 findings to the Whistler Community (Summer 2022);
- Present Year 1 findings at relevant conference in the field; and,
- Support ZC to put the Year 1 report and findings on ZC website and social media channels.

References

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