

Program Delivered by:



Zero Ceiling Work 2 Live Research Project

January 2022 – December 2022:

Annual Research Report

Research project
conducted by:

Drs. Jo Axe;
Elizabeth Childs;
Kathleen Manion

with support from
Dr. Susan Euverman

Royal Roads University

Photo: Logan Swayze Photography



This program is funded by the Government of Canada
and the Province of British Columbia.

Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgement | 3 |
| Acronyms | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Context- The ZC Work 2 Live Program | 5 |
| Methodology | 6 |
| Findings | 9 |
| Section 1: Employers | 9 |
| Section 2: Work 2 Live Participants | 15 |
| Section 3: Zero Ceiling | 20 |
| Section 4: Lessons Learned | 25 |
| Discussion | 30 |
| Recommendations | 33 |
| References | 37 |
| Appendix 1 | 38 |

Photos: Logan Swayze Photography

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to express their gratitude to the Skwxwú7mesh and Lílwat 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 (ZC) for their support in connecting the researchers with the research participants, and the research participants who each gave their time for interviews. 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 given by ZC staff. We look forward to continuing our research of the ZC Work 2 Live program.

Acronyms

| | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|
| PAC | Program Advisory Council |
| ZC | Zero Ceiling |
| ZCB | Zero Ceiling Board |
| ZCG | Zero Ceiling graduated participants |
| ZCP | Zero Ceiling current participants |
| ZCS | Zero Ceiling staff |
| CE | Zero Ceiling current employers |

Introduction

Year 2 of this project (January to December 2022) operated through year two of the COVID-19 pandemic which saw the removal of mask mandates, a reduction of many pandemic restrictions, and an increase in travel, as well as an increase in COVID-19 cases. This would prove to have a profound effect on the labour market and supply chains. This combined with the outbreak of war in the Ukraine, economic uncertainty, housing issues, the great retirement, and climate disasters has heavily impacted the tourism sector nationally and in Whistler specifically. During Year 2 of this project, the research team completed the following deliverables as outlined in the Year 2 project plan:

- Conducted the research study as outlined and approved by the Tri-Council research ethics board in 2021, with updated approval received in 2022, involving the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from Work 2 Live program participants, graduates, ZC staff, employment partners, Project Advisory Council, ZC Advisory Board, and other stakeholders.
- Analysed the Year 2 research data and created the annual research report including findings and recommendations, as per the project milestones.
- Worked with ZC to revise their Theory of Change building off the work done in Year 1 deliverable.

In addition, the research team also:

- Completed a draft literature review focused on employment outcomes for youth experiencing multiple barriers to employment; supportive employment programs; and the supportive employment model in the COVID-19 recovery context. This builds from the literature search conducted as part of the Year 1 deliverables.
- Submitted an abstract to present at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conference November 2022
- Submitted an abstract to present at the Canadian Association of Social Workers conference October 2022
- Presented at the BC Housing – Housing Central Conference November 2022

This annual report provides an overview of the research activities conducted as part of the Research and Innovation funding provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR). Specifically, it reports on the Year 2 case study qualitative research on the ZC Work 2 Live program between January 2022 – December 2022. The objectives of the *Improving Outcomes for Youth Experiencing Multiple Barriers to Employment Through Supportive Employment Partnerships* project are 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”.

As was the case in past reports, the research findings directly inform program changes in the Work 2 Live program as it continues to iterate to meet the needs of current and future participants and employment partners. In keeping with a participatory action research design (Reason & Bradbury, 2006; McIntyre, 2008), the hypothesis being examined is that the expansion of the ZC Work 2 Live model will allow for a deep understanding of what is required to youth and supportive employment partners in a sustainable manner.

Context

The ZC Work 2 Live Program

This report focuses on the ZC Work 2 Live program. With twenty-five years of service, Zero Ceiling aspires to end 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 Work 2 Live program offered by ZC is a comprehensive program that provides supportive housing, supportive employment, life skills, case management, outdoor adventure, and a supportive family-like community in partnership with key employers and support services in Whistler. 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. Since inception, the Work 2 Live program has served 107 participants.

As part of the three-year project, ZC articulated its Theory of Change (2023). In this document, ZC highlights their core work as follows:

... everyone deserves a home and [we] are working to end youth homelessness by ensuring youth have access to the resources, supports, and accommodations necessary to achieve equitable outcomes. Zero Ceiling aims to create a community where every young person is valued as they come and made to feel they belong by:

- creating spaces and supporting youth so that they can find healing and stability;
- reducing barriers that youth face to help them achieve the success they define, by giving them space to:
 - self-reflect;
 - enhance life skills;
 - experience love, a safe space and family-like relationships to grow; and
 - access support, resources, housing, employment, healthcare, recreation, and community;
- advocating for broader social change to:
 - reduce stigma regarding homelessness and mental health issues;
 - address the systemic causes of youth homelessness

(e.g., colonization, trauma, inequality, poverty);

- end youth homelessness and poverty; and
- create an inclusive and equitable community. (ZC, 2023, pp.3-4)

[ZC believes] **Well-supported people do well.** When people are accepted and celebrated for who they are and provided access to resources and supports, they can heal and thrive. Zero Ceiling's practice is centered in relationships. Grounded in love and unconditional positive regard, Zero Ceiling provides a safety net for youth facing homelessness that includes:

- a safe, stable environment;
- housing that removes barriers and meets fundamental needs;
- supportive employment that leads to economic independence;
- reduced practical barriers to recreation (e.g., gear) and land-based programming;
- individual unconditional wraparound support, including:
 - promotion of self-sufficiency;
 - self-harm reduction;
 - support in employment;
 - outdoor programming;
 - structure;
 - 24/7/365 access to in-house support;
 - love;
 - fostering of life skills;
 - food security;
 - access to mental health and crisis supports;
- transitional support beyond the program with no aging out to ensure lasting relationships;
- a community of peers and staff, which provides what a family provides including support, boundary-setting, consistency, and a safe space to experience success and setbacks; and
- advocacy for individual and systemic change (ZC, 2023, p. 1).



Methodology

This action-oriented qualitative case study (Kemmis, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; McIntyre, 2008) provided an opportunity to gather primary data at two data collection points: April and November 2022, in addition to ongoing monitoring data collection (i.e., the employer surveys and anonymous participant case management data).

Data Sources

Data sources included:

- interview and focus groups with ZC participants and alumni, programming staff, administrative staff, Project Advisory Committee, and the ZC board;
- interviews and focus groups with employers;
- monthly Employer Surveys – these were changed to quarterly for the 2022 project year as mentioned in the regular ZC updates to the Ministry. Due to COVID-19 there was limited uptake by employers;
- anonymized sub-set of participant case management data.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews and Focus Groups

In keeping with the participatory action research design for this project, Year 2 interviews and focus groups were conducted in April and November in person and via Zoom where needed. The Year 1 interview and focus group protocols were revised slightly to reflect Year 2 of the project. Interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and video conference format depending on the preference and availability of the participant. 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, as well as lessons learned from program implementation that could be shared with other organizations. Interviews with employers focused on understanding the experience of employing a ZC participant, as well as lessons learned from program implementation that could be shared with other organizations. Interview and focus group protocols used are available upon request.

During the reporting timeframe, 11 interviews and 11 focus groups (FGs) were held with representative stakeholder groups involving a total of 59 people, with duplication of participants where appropriate. These included 2 focus groups with current participants (ZCP); 1 focus group with graduates (ZCG); 4 focus groups with ZC staff including programming and administrative staff (ZCPS); 1 interview with ZC Work 2 Live program manager; 4 interviews with executive directors (ZCS); 2 focus groups with the Project Advisory Council (PAC); 2 focus group with the ZC board (ZCBD); 1 focus group with a current employer (CE), 4 interviews with current employers (CE), and 2 interviews with ZC Auntie (ZCA).

To maintain a level of anonymity, some of these stakeholder groups are collapsed where we identify quotations, including ZC participants (ZCP) (including new and current participants), and staff (ZCS) (including executive directors, administrative and program staff, and contractors).

| Data Sources - Interviews & FGs | April 2022 | November 2022 |
|---------------------------------|------------|---------------|
| W2L New Participants | 0 | 2 |
| W2L Current Participants | 9 | 5 |
| W2L Graduates | 2 | 0 |
| W2L Staff | 4 | 5 |
| W2L Executive Directors | 2 | 2 |
| Project Advisory Council | 0 | 2 |
| ZC Board | 0 | 2 |
| Current Employers | 0 | 5 |
| TOTALS | 17 | 23 |

Table 1: Total Number of Participants in 2022-23 Year 2 Research Data

Employer Surveys

Quarterly employer surveys were sent to all Work 2 Live employment partners during Year 2 by the Work 2 Live program. In addition, Work 2 Live staff reminded employers of these surveys in their regular meetings. For Year 2, a total of 12 employer surveys were received.

Participant Case Management Data

A subset of anonymized participant case management data (CAMS) was planned to be sent quarterly to the research team for analysis. Due to the Work 2 Live staff turnover during the 2022 project year, this frequency was inconsistent. We have reports from 9 ZCP with between 1 and 11 case notes per participant from 2021 and 2022. The analysis of CAMS data includes both Year 1 and Year 2 of this project but focuses more heavily on Year 2. The analysis is included in this report.

Data Analysis Approach

Interviews and Focus Groups

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.

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.

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.

Employer Surveys

The employer quarterly survey data was manually analyzed with any narrative comments included as part of the larger thematic analysis.

Participant Case Management Data

The anonymized data received from the case management software (CAMS) used by Work 2 Live was manually summarised and added to an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed. These were manually analyzed, and themes were included as part of the larger thematic analysis.

Ethics

As in Year 1 of this research, 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 in 2021 and received subsequent approval in 2022.

Findings

The findings covered a range of topics and themes. To best represent the breadth and depth of findings, we have presented this under employers, participants, and ZC, each with four foci, Benefits and Opportunities, Challenges and Barriers, Insights and Gaps, and Lessons Learned.

Section 1: Employers

Employer Benefits and Opportunities

Year 2 of the Work 2 Live Research and Innovation funding saw the number of employment partners engaged with ZC in the Work 2 Live program expand from 3 in Year 1 to 15 by November 2022. All Year 1 existing employment partners continued to be involved with the Work 2 Live program and a few previous employers reengaged with the Work 2 Live program based on the fit between their staffing needs and the Work 2 Live participants' goals. In addition, several new employers from a variety of service industries (e.g., grocery stores, tourism, adventure experiences, food production) became Work 2 Live employment partners during the timeframe covered by this report. Some of these partners approached ZC directly to address their staffing shortages, while others were identified by program participants as they worked to find employment that was a fit with their skill set. Part of the growth in employment partners was in part due to a shift at ZC from long term work placements to "more shorter placements, and which is, in many ways a good thing because it means that we can actually, like, support people to get into jobs that they're more likely to enjoy and succeed in" (ZCS).

Supportive Employment Practices

One of the key benefits of being a Work 2 Live employment partner that was raised by all employers was an increase in understanding and implementation of supportive employment practices. Many employers, ZC staff and Work 2 Live participants commented on how much the labour market had changed in Whistler since the pandemic.

While they recognized that there is a current labour shortage, they spoke positively about some of the **supportive employment practices** that were occurring such as "people

not accepting of crappy working conditions, demanding better wages, and not tolerating housing situations that would have been considered tolerable before" (ZCS). In an environment where employers are **desperate for staff**, and asking more of them, employers also recognized that they need to provide better working environments to attract and retain staff; "I think they are starting to ask, how can we help our staff stay?" (ZCS). This provides opportunities to **train, coach and mentor employers** to turn to "an untapped market, untapped talent," so they can "work with a more diverse workforce" (ZCS) and "helping them be a more supportive and inclusive employer" (ZCS). Given the current labour shortage, being an employment partner in the Work 2 Live program was identified as a benefit by several employers who commented that, "having ZC as another resource to help us get staff is great" (CE). In addition, the Work 2 Live program was seen as "providing an opportunity to bring folks that might not have been able to sustain employment into the work force here [to Whistler] in a place that is precious" (ZCB), and as a way to "help Indigenous people get into the workforce, and it is something that at-risk youth have trouble with as well" (CE).

Flexibility was identified as being central to supportive employment approaches and a key learning and benefit that several employers identified as a necessary component of their approach to being a Work 2 Live employment partner. Examples of employer flexibility included: scheduling requirements to support the Work 2 Live participants' goals and programming commitments provided by ZC; allowing for unplanned time off from the work depending on the participants' needs; discretionary enactment of the company's progressive discipline policy; type of supports provided to the participant, and the level of communication undertaken between participant and employer.

As one employer outlined, “when I say flexible, it’s understanding perhaps what some of the issues are that participants have and why they might not turn up for a shift, or understanding that it’s a little bit different to the expectations you have when you employ, perhaps someone else, where if someone didn’t show up for a shift a couple of times that would probably incur a different response. There is more flexibility in terms of needing time off or support. We make sure we have an open-door policy” (CE).

As a result of this flexibility, several employers spoke to the **dedication, hard work and commitment** shown by the Work 2 Live participants. A survey response stated that “candidates are usually quite engaged/enthused” (CE).

In the context of the new labour shortage reality, several employers felt that “the idea that you need 100% from everybody in your business 100% of the time is an archaic way of thinking

... a happy and supported employee is going to work harder for you than someone that you’re beating with a stick every 15 minutes - maybe not the most efficient employee but they will stay longer, they will do more for you and they will put more heart into the output of whatever they’re doing” (CE). Many of the employment partners in Year 2 stated they would be happy to continue working with their Work 2 Live participant in an ongoing basis and, “what I notice of people from ZC [is] they are very enthusiastic about wanting to learn and really engaged. A lot of them are from neighboring Nations and the openness and willingness to learn about the territory that we are on here is very exciting to me” (CE). Having a Work 2 Live participant was seen as **increasing the empathy and compassion** in some workplaces, **contributing to inclusivity** in the workplace, (CE) and **fostering diversity** in the work environment. This was articulated in the focus groups and surveys. A survey response stated that the program helps “learn new ways of helping those with different needs” (CE). As identified by the PAC,

“there needs to be a push on employers and the opportunity to learn to create inclusive environments. In my opinion that is the new retention tool, what works today might not work for the next individual or the next employee”.

Communication was identified as critical to the success of the Work 2 Live employment partnerships with several of the employers speaking to the value of the “regular meetings with participants and someone from ZC, case worker, usually once a month” (CE). This was reiterated in the employer monthly surveys, with some recommending more check-ins on ZCP by ZCS. These meetings provide “a foundation for the employers to stand on... whether it’s booklets, monthly meetings, or check-ins” (ZCS) and allow the employer to have a point of contact and communication with the Work 2 Live participant beyond the day-to-day interactions which can be somewhat irregular and interrupted by the demands of the day. The approach has been **relationship-based**, for instance, meeting with employers, ZC staff and participants over coffee to offer smooth supportive transitions, “we would like to see the managers treat all employees the way the participants are treated, and so we’re really providing some coaching, as well as the ability to debrief the situation and think about ways of managing it with the staff” (ZCS). Work 2 Live participants also spoke positively about the communication process in place with their employers, with several noting the value of “having the social workers come have meetings with our manager with us because it keeps them in check with their employees’ mental well-being” (ZCP).

Several employers expressed interest in being able to further deepen the connection with the Work

2 Live participant and their support worker in order to ensure that the work goals and experiences were meeting the overall need and not exacerbating an issue.

Due to the turnover of support workers at ZC in Year 2, employers raised the need for more regular, consistent communication and connection. A few employers had benefited from the hiring of an **employment coordinator**, which involved “just checking in with [employers] to give them more of a **trauma-informed** lens ... it’s that balance of not providing confidential information but also giving that trauma-informed lens and, and just really supporting an aligned approach” (ZCS).

Training and Support was identified as a significant benefit of being an employment partner.

Employers spoke of their regard for, and the usefulness of the mental health first aid training provided to all employers by ZC, “which was fantastic ... because that helped with my ZC participant and all my employees in general I highly recommend it and I am trying to let my managers at work know about it and incorporate it into what we do” (CE).

Requests for additional offerings of this course were mentioned by several employers and ZC is in the process of piloting the training for employment partners that will be rolled out formally in Year 3. It is the intention that the training for employment partners will “mirror our education for our managers with that of our participants...the lesson plans and as well as the kind of work booklets for session, attendees ... it’ll be a way better kind of service” (ZCS). Many employment partners acknowledged that they have internal training budgets and they “see what [my department is] interested in learning and trying to find things that benefit the organization as well, and like, that will also be of interest to them and their personal development” (CE). Training on **trauma-informed practice, mental health first aid, mental well-being** and **diversity and inclusion**, particularly with respect to **reconciliation**, were identified by employers as areas where ZC could support them in their work. “It is critical that a big organization do something along these lines. It is their duty to make sure that it is an open environment available to everyone. It can’t just be a one percent catering to a one percent scenario, especially if you want the sport [skiing] to continue and grow in the future.

We need to expand and welcome people from everywhere and challenging backgrounds to say yes that this sport is for you too, and you can be involved and please come work with us and join us” (CE).

Time to form connections and build relationships was also identified by employment partners as one of the benefits of being part of the Work 2 Live program. “When we started with the person, I had some time to really spend with them, to onboard them to give them the **support** and training to be successful” (CE). Some employment partners commented on the knowledge they had gained in working with the Work 2 Live support workers, as they learned how to connect with diverse individuals with many commenting that they were using this knowledge and skill in how they approached all their employees, “just creating the foundation of being open and even willing instead of... in hospitality they just brush you off. Oh, you showed up? Cool, great. Taking that one minute of a day [to ask] how’s it going? how was your weekend? are you okay? can make all the difference” (ZCS).

Helping people and giving back, both on a personal and professional level, was a recurring benefit and opportunity expressed by employment partners. “Giving back to the community, helping people. I think it is a great program, it makes me happy that even though it is a big corporation that we can hopefully still make a difference in someone’s life. Makes me feel proud of the organization I am working for” (CE). Being a part of the **change and growth in participants**, “seeing the **confidence** change from timid/shy/yet almost overextending themselves because they are afraid to say no, to that point where the confidence is there, and they come in and have a bit more understanding of the job and maybe to say ‘no’ or ‘maybe not’ when it is the correct answer” (CE) was very rewarding for many employers. The ability to contribute, regardless of the person’s initial circumstances and background, to them gaining transferable skills and a rewarding relationship with work was labelled as “the win” by employers. Employment partners also commented on the value of having participants in this **program in Whistler** including the natural environment, the small supportive community, the active lifestyle, and the ability to engage with people from a wide range of circumstances, cultures, and settings. “Whistler is a different community and being able to work in the front line allows them to involve themselves in the community more and grow more and work as individuals” (CE). In discussing the various community supports and services one employer commented, “I think ZC is a really well-organized program and I think it works well. I just hope that they can grow a little bit more and get more people into that restart” (CE).

Employer Challenge and Barriers

Given the labour market shortage and the continuing impact of the global pandemic, there were several challenges identified in Year 1 that persisted in Year 2 of the Research and Innovation project.

Good fit between the Work 2 Live participant and the employer was raised as a critical factor in ensuring the partnership was valuable for both parties. As some of the Work 2 Live participants arranged their own work situations this year, it reinforced the need for employer orientation to the Work 2 Live program, its expectations of the employment partnership, the participants and the supports that would be provided. As expressed by one employer, “They’re not just a regular employee, because we have an understanding, if someone comes to me and tells me they’re on medication, it’s my job as an equal opportunity employer to make sure that I take that into consideration when making decisions and having discussions with them” (CE). However, others commented that it was very difficult to “be as supportive as you can be and also try to keep them accountable as much as you can so that, in the long term, it is helping them future-wise their work. Not everyone will be ‘okay, it is okay to turn up whenever’, that is a hard balance, but we are trying to help them to [get to] their future state” (CE). **Misalignment of expectations** between the employer’s business requirements and the Work 2 Live participants’ supportive employment needs was a key concern. Without a good fit discussion with the employer prior to them entering the Work 2 Live employer partnership, issues of **expectation management, accountability, communication, and responsibility** surfaced, “managers having expectations that aren’t realistic can cause our participants to fail an expectation that the employers shouldn’t have had in the beginning” (ZCS).

Due to the current **labour shortage**, the employers are “relying a bit more on our participants to be employees that have the same capabilities, when they first start, as other people that they’d hire, when we need that more supportive approach... it’s a gradual thing, that they’ll get there, but you almost can’t rely on us to be your workforce” (ZCS). In previous years, the **employment partnership development process** involved staff reaching out to an employer about supportive employment; however, in Year 2, some Work 2 Live employment partners were initiating contact with ZC. However, with the staff turnover, current labour shortages and high demand, “there is a part where [the employer will] be either trying to schedule the Work 2 Live participants] way more than what they can handle.

Everyone has the best intentions. [the Work 2 Live participants] say yes, I’ll make more money, I’ll do it. And that’s not how we’ve seen it being successful” (ZCS). With the staff turnover, both within employment partner organizations as well as the Work 2 Live program, the necessary communication between the Work 2 Live program and the employment partner was not as consistent as in past years and made it difficult for the channels of communication to be open. There is still the **challenge of educating employment partners on what it means to be a supportive employer** and the specific needs of the Work 2 Live participants. For example, “I had a great conversation with an [employment partner] who said we are all about diversity and inclusion, but when I said that our kids show up late, they said ‘oh, we can’t do that’. We [ZC] no longer sugar coat what we do, and what the kids are able to do, and what supportive employment is” (ZCS). Many employers identified that **additional training** would be very valuable in this regard.

Another key challenge identified by employers was the **emotional investment** that was required in order to feel that they were providing a safe and supportive employment setting for the Work 2 Live participants.

The complexity of the needs of the participants required a deeper level of emotional investment on behalf of the employment partner than they would have provided to their other staff.

Employers spoke of the tensions they faced as they were “learning how to work with their [Work 2 Live participant’s] challenges, how to get them to work, and how this is a challenge for them, and at the same time not getting so involved...because it does take away from what you are doing with the front-line staff, and it does eat away at you, and you are trying to over-compensate for that person” (CE).

Finding the balance between knowing when to create space for the participant, having time to find/provide the resources they need, and knowing when to defer them to their case worker was raised as a key challenge faced by employment partners.

Several employers raised the **concern of not knowing enough** about the participants to be able to ensure that they were provided a safe and supportive work environment.

Many noted that in order to be able to provide an individualized response and personalized approach to supporting the Work 2 Live participant, it would be helpful to know more about the participants situation so that they could ensure that they were not inadvertently setting up triggers in the workplace. While employers recognized the need for **individual privacy**, several expressed that knowing more would help them identify “where the boundaries are, because I don’t know ... how do you do it when you have those tricky situations? I think that might be an area to consider going forward” (CE).

Consistent with the previous year, **issues of the extra effort** required to support the Work 2 Live participant and the **differentiated treatment** they receive in the workplace and the potential for a detrimental effect on other staff were raised by some employers. While one employer felt that “the pros very much outweigh the cons, but there are challenges. There is physical time, extra intangibles on the day ... more interaction with that staff member in general, and knowing that if the person can’t come in, we have to scramble, but especially in a short staff situation – who am I going to get to cover?” (CE) another employer commented that “for me to reach out all the time to try and chase the employee is an inconvenience, but at the same time, do I want that?” (CE). The **time investment required** by employment partners both with the participants, and in their interactions with ZC, highlighted a challenge such as,

“part of the problem of being so short staffed is finding the time to dedicate to the ZC person when needed. Those regular monthly meetings – can we actually do that?”

... I found those challenges came up this year more than they probably would in a normal year. The short staff definitely was an issue” (CE). This was echoed in the feedback ZC received from employers that, “they’re just too strapped to be contacting us all the time or, [the employer will] be managing turnover, and you won’t have the same relationship”. At the same time, employers recognized that ZC are “dealing with people with unresolved problems from all over the world every year, so having more people locally, trying to get a leg up in a local community and get themselves back together, I have no issue with that” (CE).

Lack of connection with ZC staff and the **high staff turnover** was identified this year as a key challenge by the employment partners. Employers did not always know who to speak with about participant issues that arose during employment. Some employers understood that there were case workers for participants while others were unclear as to what supports and resources were provided to participants, who provided those supports and access to resources, and how the various groups (case workers, support workers, life skills workers, psychologists etc.) interacted and were coordinated. Several expressed that they “did not know some of the support workers. If I could just understand who the case workers are for the individual participant, that would help me with connecting with the right person. I know ZC is in a period of growing” (CE). The **location of Whistler** was identified by some employers as a challenge both for the Work 2 Live participants as well as the other employees that are attracted to the setting. The high percentage of service sector jobs and coupled with the transitory nature of the work makes it a difficult town to remain in despite its beauty. Consistent with previous reports employers identified that, “it is a hard-core town...very isolating...it also lends itself to a whole bunch of parties, so I think the success in Whistler is just more exposure to more companies and more people working with ZC participants” (CE).

Employer Insights and Gaps

Program growth was a predominant theme from the employment partners this year. Many expressed the value of the Work 2 Live program to themselves and the community and their desire to have it succeed and continue.

*Finding a way to create and foster a **Work 2 Live employment partner Community of Practice** was raised by employers as a way “to meet other employers and talk about resources or approaches to strengthen our toolbelts” (CE).*

Many employers did not know other ZC Work 2 Live employment partners and suggestions such as luncheons, meet ups and shared training opportunities as possible avenues to begin to create this community and build relationships between employment partners. Part of this might include the formation of an **employer ambassador network**, “for the managers at the workplace who work with the participants directly... an ambassador network that can create new layer of support within the program, talking with other employers and sharing that knowledge” (PAC). In addition to becoming aware and connected to other employment partners across Whistler, employers also identified the need to connect with other staff in their own organizations who were part of the Work 2 Live program. Having this internal community within an employment partner organization would help managers to “lean on each other, and if I’m on my days off and my other supervisor is not up to speed, maybe I could say, here’s another contact for you [to the participant]” (CE).

Several of the employment partners commented on the length of time they had been working with ZC and how that over time, they now felt much more **comfortable and prepared to support a Work 2 Live participant** and to take up supportive employment practices in their organizations. As one employer expressed, “now that I have a third intake, I feel a lot more comfortable with the process and a lot more comfortable sort of reaching out knowing what it is” (CE). Part of this comfort was coming to **know what supports ZC provides** to the Work 2 Live participants and how they dovetail with the employer-provided training and supports. This was identified as an area of opportunity by several employers who suggested a list outlining these supports would go a long way in providing them a “good understanding of what those [supports] are and how they have received them, because a lot of [the supports] overlap with what we do in our training program” (CE).

In addition, being aware of upcoming **training opportunities** for employment partners was identified as an area of interest, specifically the mental health first aid and trauma-informed practice.

One employer noted that, “I did a mental health first aid course through ZC, which was fantastic, so little things like that because that helped with my ZC participant and all my employees in general. Any courses like that would be awesome to do. I highly recommend it and I am trying to let my managers at work know about it and incorporate it into what we do” (CE).

Other employers felt that “maybe that could be the kind of things that should be “mandatory” if you are working with the ZC team” (CE).

Other employers discussed having a **subsidy to support employment partners** to provide an incentive and recognize the time it takes to work with Work 2 Live participants. “I think that would be a lot more incentive for some small employers that only have five or seven people in their team ... I think that might potentially allow or entice other employers to work with ZC to create a larger section of people that could approach it” (CE).

As in previous years,

*employers recognized and valued **forming relationships with participants** as being key to their transition into the work environment. Employers commented that doing so allowed them to “tailor the needs and the learning and the employee expectation person to person” (CE).*

Being able to have a 1:1 meeting with the case worker prior to the more in-depth meeting/interview with the participant that is currently done would be useful; “a pre-interview would be good, some people can’t really read the room all that well and I think that if I were to have a one-on-one with their case worker to find out what I might be expecting” (CE).



Section 2: Work 2 Live Participants

Participant Benefits and Opportunities

As in previous reports, participants highlighted a range of benefits and opportunities arising from participation in the program. Some benefits were obvious and tangible like housing, employment and access to gear, “snowboard, snowboard pass, bike pass” (ZCP), art, music, referrals to dentists, **ride days** and **family dinners**, as well as support with securing ID, setting up bank accounts, filing taxes, and creating budgets to pay off debts. According to one participant, access to unrestricted funding allowed staff to be more flexible in providing opportunities to work with ZC participants, for instance by taking them out for coffee. This allowed them to build **trust** and relationships by taking participants for coffee or a meal, she noted “work really happens in a natural fluid way when we have that relationship established” (ZCS). She further suggested, it is “all built on a foundation of trust... throughout the relationship that’s based on trust and love” (ZCS).

“Our approach works, because it is very relationship centered and it’s around meeting people’s basic needs and connecting and being cognizant of, like, the social determinants of health” (ZCS).

The model provides “a way of framing providing services... That is not that language. It’s family. It’s unconditional love. It’s this trust... It’s a safety net” (ZCB).

Participants noted that the flexibility of the program allows “opportunities to develop interests and passions” (ZCS). In valuing each youth as a unique and respected individual with **unconditional positive regard**, “it’s just amazing how each of the youth bring such a wonderful element to the table” (ZCS) and in showing up and offering non-judgement, acceptance/support, “they will never forget that they were loved and that they were cared for” (ZCS). In a related comment, a staff member noted that, “we’re teaching kids confidence and life skills and supporting them with like a family unit. There’s so much, like, softer exposure to being like a competent adult that we provide” (ZCS). Other benefits were more subtle, but no less important, like support, spiritual support, and empowerment. In short, one participant summed ZC as **changing lives**, “it helped me, and it shaped the man I am today, and I feel more confident that I am able to take the leave from the city and be back to the basics of what I want and what I don’t need in my life. It made me more of a better version of myself” (ZCP).

Support was critical for participants, as one articulated,

“they are my family and they constantly provide that to me, for all the kind things that people do and, when I am in need of support other participants are always willing to be there for me and ... everyone is looking out for each other ...

that is really important for me” (ZCP). In working towards providing individualised support, as a staff member suggested, “we recognize that a lot of the life skills we are doing are so tied in with trauma that it is a lot of one-to-one conversations, that is a better approach ... and a lot of individuals have ADHD and they don’t want to sit there and listen to you talk, and I have found that the organic way of learning just works better” (ZCS). Additionally, the support is increasingly recognised as **community-based**, “everything happens within a group setting... even though we treat people individually, they live in communal settings and in a communal program, so their actions impact everyone else” (ZCS).

Participants and Staff noted the benefits their new role of Auntie as being a flexible and individualized approach to supporting participants, inclusive of “a huge field of mental, emotional, spiritual, cultural, physical practice” (ZCS).

A staff member described her role as “one-on-one, it could be as simple lunch or a drive or speaking of a ceremony or spiritual practice, and I am really grateful for how we are growing into it to surround them almost like a blanket. It’s so beautiful”. This research participant further noted that Auntie’s support has been “received lovingly, that because it’s gentle, it’s non-judgmental” (ZCS). Given the reported success of this role, participants noted they wished to see the introduction of an Uncle.

With the increase in staff, ZC had recognised the untapped expertise on their team which they noted had allowed them to better support participants with higher needs, while still connecting with appropriate external counselling. As the support is now 24/7, one participant stated,

“social support is very good – it is nice having ZC staff around... they really decrease that stress of mental health issues because we have that connection with them” (ZCP).

In addition to focusing on building communication skills, building **relationships** was also noted as core to the effectiveness of support. This was notable in both relationships between staff and participants, participants and employers, and between participants. Participants also shared that they supported one another and provided an opportunity to, “see things in a new light or take a different look at something – something that you have been thinking about all day and he will explain it to me in a different way – we are a sounding board for each other, horse around a lot, have fun, destress” (ZCP).

Unsurprisingly **supportive employment** emerged as a benefit. A staff member suggested, “work is fundamental to the successes we see”. As new participants have more complex needs, ZC has had to become more flexible with notions of work, and to encourage supportive employment practices in their employer partners to circumvent participant burnout and absenteeism.

As a precursor to being able to focus on other areas of growth, participants expressed gratitude for **housing** and for having their own room, particularly given the expense of housing in **Whistler**. As one participant noted, “ZC is good for housing, not having to worry about being kicked out if I don’t pay my rent this week” (ZCP). The environment in Whistler was another benefit. “Living here in this environment with these people and I feel like everyone should experience this at least once. The community and the solitude draws me here” (ZCP).

As participants progress through the program the level of support changes. A staff member stated that, “we provide that safety net, and lots of opportunities and resources. And then when people aren’t feeling well enough, they’re able to take advantage of those opportunities and resources. And then once they start taking advantage of those, like the ball, like it’s like a snowball, and we just see people want supports long enough and they start to feel safe, they just start going and they make moves” (ZCS). One participant noted that they had moved towards greater independence, “I am coming to the end of my program, so I feel that ZC is a little hands-off and there hasn’t been a need to do any intervening with my workplace” (ZCP). This was facilitated by ZC’s focus on building program participant’s **communication** and self-advocacy skills to encourage sustainable **employment**. As noted by one program participant,

“ZC taught me how to communicate with my employer, not be so shy, and take things into my own hands – kicking us out of the nest” (ZCP).

Despite challenges caused as a result of the pandemic, participants articulated how they were **achieving individual goals**. **Stability** and **flexibility** of support were seen as precursors to success by program participants. Within the context of the pandemic, several suggested they had modified their goals and focused on more modest outcomes. As participant suggested, “I am struggling with issues. I would like to be in a place where I have roof over my head and food in my belly. I am not working for perfection anymore; I am able to humble myself, if I have food in my stomach and healthy relationships to support me and I can be a lot more at peace” (ZCP). Another young person indicated a need to focus more on mental health and aim for manageable daily goals to help them cope. In terms of tangible goals, one participant suggested, “I did my snowboarding instructors course and without ZC, I wouldn’t be able to do that ... ZC is really good for that, connecting you with things that you want to pursue” (ZCP). Affirming the importance of tracking goal attainment, a graduate retrospectively noted,

“the empowering was nice, the boost was nice ... because of how self-deprecating I was, I didn’t realize I was doing anything or getting anywhere, and when she showed me that list [of accomplishments] it really boosted me up. One lesson that stuck with me was that I wasn’t as bad of a person as I thought I was, and I was doing better than I thought I was” (ZCG).

A review of the case management records demonstrates the kinds of areas participants were working through and the ways they were focusing on achieving their goals and addressing barriers with their case workers. The areas covered included self reflections, strengths, barriers, what they want to do differently, and any changes to their goals they wished to make. Additionally, they discussed employment, mental health and financial goals. This provided insight into the kinds of things ZCP were focused on in an ongoing way, like establishing routines, working through the process of gaining employment, progressing through the onboarding processes, working through issues at work, like communication, or transport issues, as well as longer term transition planning. Self reflections on the state of their mental and physical wellbeing included actions like identifying triggers, reflecting on when they need to reach out for help, role playing approaches to navigating conflict with roommates, discussing issues with friends, being open about their level of drinking, working through past issues, exploring local services, or implementing journalling. Financial goals were consistent with many focused on saving and paying off debts. While there were case notes for nine participants, there were an inconsistent number of notes for each participant. In reviewing those with more than two case notes, there was an indication of a move to meeting their goals, with ups and downs along the way. This included working towards understanding their own beneficial and detrimental patterns. As an example, a ZCP recognised their level of drinking and its impact on their timeliness at work and their ability to save money. Similarly, another ZCP articulated the issues that emerged when they were not able to communicate with their employers or ZCS.

Participants articulated the importance of **expectation setting** in the program and, the role ZC had in making space for participants to flourish, while also noting that the work had to be done by the participants themselves. “The more effort you put in the more effort they will put into you, and the more tools and resources they will give you to get you out of the house” (ZCP). ZC’s role in **reducing barriers**, including access to basic needs, supported them in their own flourishing, as one participant shared, “ZC are a big part of why I am succeeding so much. Some of the things ZC has offered this year because there has been the bus strike, they give us rides to appointments” (ZCP). This was summed up well by a PAC member, “success is reducing barriers, sometimes it is not always possible to reduce all of them, but sometimes there are quite a few that are possible and when I think about success, I think about the various [opportunities] that are coming down for the youth to take steps forward, even if it is small steps” (PAC).

Over the years, ZC has increased its focus on youth-led actions, including having program **graduates** on the board, but this year program participants were involved in the hiring panel for the staff, and graduates continue to be hired into staffing roles, as one staff member suggested, “I am loving hiring our grads, which we’ve done it for a few years now... challenge the normal approach to supportive programs. ... it’s just like another level of mentorship” (ZCS). One of the ways youth voice feeds into the program is through ongoing research, where the voice of participants and graduates is privileged, and their recommendations are acted on. As one staff member noted that a participant carefully reads the reports and “he gets a sense of engagement or enjoyment that his words are valued, and that they contribute, to the improvement in the program” (ZCS).

Work 2 Live Participant Challenges and Barriers

Participants noted that there were some challenges that were beyond the control of ZC, for instance, cuts to external services, the pandemic, and the escalating cost of living and housing in Whistler. Staff had a range of suggestions for improvement to overcome minor challenges, for instance in diversifying the **activities offered**, “getting the overnight staff to create a sense of home and making sure it is clean and orderly” (ZCS) and working through the conflicting schedules to find a time when all program participants could take part in structured groups. In addition, a participant suggested, “we need more variety of things. Today it is go-on-the-mountain, ride or go hiking and there are two people who have decided that they don’t want to do any of those but going hiking every week for the next 8 weeks will be pretty boring” (ZCP).

A common theme in many discussions was the broader challenge of finding affordable **housing** and a **living wage** not only for staff, but also for graduates of the program. A program participant noted that,

“ZC is good, but the transitional part is nerve wracking because you are just shooting for the moon ... B.C. has a whole housing crisis right now and Vancouver is named again as the least affordable city” (ZCP).

At a personal level, one staff member noted, “there’s **grief**, unfinished grief, or there’s a need to move on. I’m talking with a youth about doing a grieving ceremony in the forest with a tree and then wrapping the ribbon around the tree leaving the grief there so that healing steps forward can start” (ZCS). Making friends and building peer support in Whistler was noted as challenging, while some participants highlighted the benefits of peer support, **interpersonal issues** and **relationships** also came up for some as problematic. One program participant complained that there was no peer support within the house; and participants shared their concern over the level of conflict in the house leading to disrupted sleep, “they come to Whistler, get into the program and abuse it. We have had multiple issues at the house re: boundaries and spaces, alcohol, drugs” (ZCP). Other participants perceived inconsistent treatment, with some feeling there were lax control for some and overinvolvement for others. “I feel like I get more ‘parented’ than anyone else, which eats my brain up, why is this happening?” (ZCP) and “too much catering at our house – it is toxic at this point” (ZCP).

In contrast, a staff member believed that the interpersonal conflict in the houses had decreased, saying, “the houses are really stable because everyone’s been there so long. There’s still conflict happening, but everyone knows what to expect. I think it’s different to when we were having kind of cycling in and out more frequently” (ZCS). However, given relationships were critical for the success of the program, one participant noted concern regarding the level of staff turnover, “the staff turn-over is horrible, I would like to see more staff staying and helping – we connected with them, and I thought it was my fault [they left]” (ZCP).

Staff also grappled with the changing nature of work and housing and noted that the program participant’s work is no longer tied to housing, “work is voluntary, and payment is voluntary, and our perspective has evolved too. Going to work every day is not a priority, which is a move to a lower barrier program” (ZCS). These issues may be more acute, given what one staff member suggested, “a lot of the participants have never had really functional homes, so they will not be able to build off that foundation, and understood what it means to run a home” (ZCS).

An intrapersonal issue was also raised regarding the different approaches to how program participants disclosed that they were tied to the Work 2 Live program. Some participants were open about these ties, and some were more discerning about who they shared the information with. A participant suggested, “that is a weird feeling because ZC is such a huge part of my life but can’t talk about it” (ZCP).

As ZC has now dropped the 12-month time limit for participants to stay in the program, as well as the upper **age** limit of 24, several staff noted the need to gently nudge participants to identify and work towards their exit plans, so that they did not become, “too comfortable in the program” (ZCS). The other issue raised was the **wait list**. Given participants have been in the program longer, and there are more likely unmet needs among youth,

the waitlist is both long and tenacious, one staff member stated that, “we will need to provide expectations on what needs to happen while they are on the waitlist, like engaging in services and supports for whatever needs we identified” (ZCS).

Work 2 Live Participant Insights and Gaps

Participants also outlined a range of additional insights and gaps. One participant suggested that ZC needed to maintain its unique offering with **individualised support**, “ZC needs to be less cookie cutter re: employment ... I don’t need the same support as he does. I don’t need rides to work, don’t talk to my boss, I need more mental health support and life skills. The problem area is not the work, it is mental health and practical skills building that I missed out when I was a kid. ZC needs to offer programming that needs to be tailored to each individual” (ZCP).

A few ideas for specific supports surfaced, including ideas for how to improve life skills support, for instance effective budgeting and **money management** training for participants, “if you have a good proper budget, get sponsors involved ... and get the participants out in the community... and learn budgeting in context” (ZCP). **Trade training** was also suggested as another support that would benefit program participants. In housing, participants stated that they would like to see **additional housing**. An idea that was raised was to offer “a co-ed house in Squamish and if people don’t have the desire to work for Whistler Blackcomb or in Whistler, it would be a really cool option” (ZCP). In addition, for employment, a participant noted that, “a mentor would be useful” (ZCP).

Although ZC has worked to diversify their pool of employers, participants and staff discussed the need to further draw on a **variety of employers**. One research participant suggested that ZC “talk to sponsors about doing tours and rentals ... if ZC staff don’t have the time to do this, you have 15 other people in the program that are willing to do it – tell/teach me how. Help me help you help me – get us more involved in contacting sponsors ... because they see the impacts firsthand and we can see if there is a good fit or not – it shouldn’t be up to the staff because the staff will never be affected by the choices, but we will be” (ZCP).

Another suggestion made was to focus on support for transitioning out of the program. “The housing issues, the transition out, needs more work (ZCP). Another perspective on transitions was highlighted by a staff member who had seen a shift in the approach to transitioning out of the program, “I just feel like that end goal has kind of been erased, people are forgetting about it. They’re not paying rent, they don’t have to work ... that’s why we have that flexibility, but at the same time, they’ll just sit there forever. And they say, I don’t have to do anything. I don’t have to go to work because you’re not gonna kick me out the program’ ... I feel like has to end; we need to have a bit firmer timeline. You’ve been here three years, right. Let’s give it eight more months. You have employment. Let’s get this ball rolling” (ZCS).



Section 3: Zero Ceiling

The research participants discussed benefits and opportunities, challenges and barriers, and identified gaps in the context of ZC and the Work 2 Live program. Comments included general observations about ZC, as well as remarks that were specific to the Work 2 Live program.

Zero Ceiling Benefits and Opportunities

When discussing the benefits of taking part in the program, research participants spoke of **cultural supports** as a “burgeoning element of our support” (ZCS) available to participants, which included, “building culture into the organization, training, and into plans that are more than just on paper” (ZCS). One research participant commented on the success of the long-awaited cultural activities, for example

“ZC Auntie, which has been something that has been years in the making, I think some of the first recommendations were to incorporate more Indigenous [support], and it is working so well” (ZCS).

Aligned with this shift, ZC had reoriented the **Adventure Sessions** to hire a “land-based programming coordinator, which is another step towards trying to indigenize our programming a little bit and how we recognize and relate to the land” (ZCS).

A PAC member also spoke of the connection between **reconciliation** and land-based activities, “reconciliation is not just about us. It’s about everyone. And when you take people out into the land, all three parts of their brain are being activated. And when that happens ... a person’s highest healing happens without them even really knowing it. So, when all three parts of the brain are engaged, land-based activities enable that to happen” (PAC).

Furthermore, research participants noted that there was strength in the **holistic approach** taken in the Work 2 Live program, because participants benefitted significantly more by having wraparound supports than if they had only housing or employment. This support structure was expanded in the Research and Innovation project, and as suggested by a research participant, “this project... spoke to the holistic approach that we have...to research and invest in the model... add capacity to ZC and research the model...lots of success around that capacity building, which has resulted in better services for the participants” (ZCS). A focus group participant explained these benefits by noting that, “helping the participants through this kind of approach is a really valuable tool – it is not trying to fix one thing, it is trying to create a more sustainable holistic approach to their lives, so it’s really beneficial” (ZCB).

The Work 2 Live support structure led to **participant growth** in a multitude of ways, as captured by a staff member,

“I’m just encouraged by their courage alone, and saying ‘I need help’, or ‘is there another way?’, or ‘how can I do this?’... I’m really encouraged by the willingness that I see with the youth that I’ve been working with at ZC ...

I see some of them taking flight, some of them moving on and ... confidence, they’re taking with them skills, and they’re taking acceptance” (ZCS). Another participant stated that, “there’s just so much flexibility... I think that benefits the participants and I think that feeling safe and having the space to grow so that they’re getting away from the rush of survival mode and needing to move on but actually having that that breathing space to think more broadly, I suppose about long term goals, and to set up for success” (ZCS).

In addition to benefits of participating in the Work 2 Live program, there was a robust discussion about the opportunities that were available to ZC as an organization. Some research participants noted the **value of the WorkBC project**, which brought in additional **resources and funding** to ZC. One board member explained the link between the funding and the perceived value of the program, noting that the merit of the unique Work 2 Live approach extended beyond the participants and employers, “this funding is a major piece of affirm[ation], that the work we do is phenomenal, and we bring massive value to provide a program that our government, community, and society doesn’t offer. The importance of what we do, and that the Ministry is committed to give us funding, makes us feel good and affirms what we know to be true, which is that we do good work” (ZCB). Also, as a member of the Program Advisory Council explained, ZC has a growth and improvement culture, “intuitively we know it is a good program and intuitively we know ZC is willing to take it all in and grow and improve” (PAC).

In addition, when referring to the advantages associated with the ZC growth and improvement culture, one staff member explained how growth was not a constant, rather there were pauses in progression to allow for organizational stability before embarking on the next phase, “[there was a] growth phase then, and we stabilized then, and the management team were part of that; and now we are growing again” (ZCS). However, the same staff member went on to note that

even though there were benefits linked to an organizational growth strategy, there were also significant challenges associated with rapid growth, “in the last 18 months, we went through the accelerated growth phase, and the staff team and their supports and hours that we work with participants, and that is what is leading to burn out, and the pandemic – too much change, constant change, and we are now moving from the fast lane to the off ramp” (ZCS). However, later in the year, a participant suggested that “we’re looking at doing probably the biggest growth we’ve ever done at the same time as all of our contracts coming up” (ZCS). Not only has there been organizational growth, but also a positive growth in the approach of the PAC members, “what I have found interesting is the iteration from committee from meeting to meeting and hearing the responses. I get the sense that it’s elevated and shifted the conversation and the way I think about the program and the way that can be applied, but that’s through the iterative nature of the questions and answers within the committee” (PAC).

Over the fiscal year, several new changes had been implemented, including some that were not growth-related. As noted earlier, one of these included extending the program beyond 12 months, which was originally brought in as a response to the impact of the **COVID-19 pandemic** but was found by some research participants to be beneficial. Along with extending the program, came a shift towards taking a “more **needs-based approach** ... transition planning happens quite organically when there’s not an arbitrary end date” (ZCS). Staff had also been articulating all of their processes and creating “a **branding** guide process” (ZCS) to augment a “concrete structured approach to how we communicate... defining the theories and the approaches that we believe in, and ground[ing] our work and communicate that on” (ZCS).

Despite the potential challenges associated with the opportunity of organizational growth, there were discussions about how investment in **staff, self-care**, and the **ZC team building** resulted in a vibrant workplace culture; as one staff member commented,

“so much of what we do is to invest in our staff to create a really strong workplace culture” (ZCS).

This pays dividends, as “the passion and experience that that each of the workers brings” contributes to the success (ZCS). Another staff member noted that “it’s not just the participants, but it’s how a staff are treated as well. So, I think that’s it’s about walking the talk...the work culture is really great” (ZCS). A noted element of success of the organisation was the **leadership**, with a staff member noting that the organization had “really good EDs...the leadership they give is really strong. And they’re also not afraid to take risks, or to move things forward. They’re not satisfied with the status quo, which I think you need to be here. You need to be flexible and moving” (ZCS). In addition, the existing co-director model was thought to add strength to the organization, “having a co-director structure has its pros and cons but certainly as it relates to succession it puts us in a nice position” (ZCB). Another positive identified by a board member also related to the staff organization and culture, as well as the benefits of ZC being able to expand staff numbers, roles, and responsibilities, “the actual staff are chairing committees so that we are actually absorbing it into the organization instead of at the board level. Again, it is the staffing level that has enabled this. We just didn’t have the bodies before” (ZCB). This fiscal year saw ZC investing in the development of a more robust **onboarding** process for new staff that participants suggested increased accountability, better prepared for succession planning; standardised processes, but also included personalised, casual, comfortable, flexible approaches to onboarding.

As noted in previous research conducted with ZC, participants highlighted the importance of **community support** to the success of the program, most tangibly seen with the donation of ski and bike passes and the food bank. This also links to the benefits of fostering **partnerships**, “Partnerships are essential to how we deliver our programs. And honestly, one of the key partners is the Ministry [Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction] to have the funding for this and for many other parts of operating and then the data attached to the effectiveness of programs” (ZCS).

Zero Ceiling Challenges and Barriers

In the interviews and focus groups, research participants provided examples of some of the challenges and barriers faced by ZC. These included an acknowledgement that the **board** has played a key role in the operations ZC in the past, but that due to the **growth of the Work 2 Live program**, and the associated increase in ZC staff, a research participant noted that there was a need for the board to evolve, “we don’t need a working board anymore but that is what they are and so what it is now is really inefficient” (ZCS).

Related to the expansion in the number of ZC staff, was the sense that even though there were more employees, there were also related challenges caused by **staff turnover**, “[there is] so much turnover ... people come in that aren’t familiar with the ZC program, so you will find it will fall on a small number of people to manage it ... if this [the staffing level] stays like it is, it could be a real challenge to offer the support needed for ZC participants” (CE).

Another issue that related to the staff turnover was the challenge of implementing the new **curriculum**, “I feel like we haven’t actually got fully into this project yet. I feel like the curriculum is such a massive piece that we haven’t been able to deliver on yet because we had an employment coordinator that didn’t really work out” (ZCS).

The challenge of **stress and burnout** facing ZC staff was identified during this phase of data collection, consistent with previous years. This board member noted that burnout was a significant issue,

“the staffing is our biggest risk, burn out ... it is hard to get staff in Whistler. It is also really taxing work for the case workers ... are they sustainable roles?”

We have expanded the housing support now to mitigate some of that – is that going to be enough?” (ZCB). The impact of organizational growth reached participants in other ways, as one staff member noted, “because the team is bigger, we can take more risks, so we are taking the most complex case we have ever taken ... but we don’t want to burn ourselves out and we don’t want to rock the boat so much that it destabilizes the other participants. Whenever we bring someone into the program it does destabilize the other participants” (ZCS).

While organizational growth came with both positive and negative implications, the loss of connection to grassroots approaches was lamented, “part of the risk is that we get away from the **grassroots** tenacity and hustle and the expertise that went into creating the program. A part of the success is that people like [Executive Directors] have taken people by the hand and helped them move forward, a system or model may not do that. We need to not lose the hustle and tenacity of the [the Executive Directors]” (PAC).

Even though there was an appreciation for the origins of ZC, as well as for the progress ZC had made over the years, the precarious nature of funding-based income was of concern, particularly as the imperative to seek funding post this project became more imminent later in 2022. One staff member noted the potential for the **funding being at risk** if compromises were not made, “I think there is a general risk there regarding how reliant we are on government funding for a lot of the basic needs of our programming ... tensions come up, we have to be mindful of how we live up to the values we have. Things like this [government funding] come with an expectation ... I think that expectations are really high, and they are hard to fulfill sometimes” (ZCS).

Another perspective on funding was provided by a PAC member, who pointed out that there was a balance between opportunities associated with funding and the responsibilities that come into play, “I do understand that there are accountabilities and reporting and so on and there’s this need for data and information ... It’s frustrating, certainly from someone who is immersed into that on a day-to-day basis, because it can hinder progress sometimes when you’re constantly trying to feed the machine with data and information” (PAC).

Another result of ZC’s growth was the increase in number and types of employers offering the Work 2 Live program participants work experience. This growth created the need for consistent employer and employee **orientation**, “we need to figure out the cycle of recruiting, training, onboarding employers and having a good system and documentation” (ZCS), and “we need to make sure we have the same onboarding package for participants, recruit, onboard, support, transition, offboard, repeat” (ZCS). Orientation was also emphasized as a human resources challenge for ZC as an organization, “I feel like the position wasn’t around for people to, kind of, fully understand it. And like that was also explained to me as well. It was kind of like, well, this is a new position, make it what you want” (ZCS). Another staff member highlighted one of the reasons why providing appropriate orientation for incoming staff was critical to their success, “I think that’s even harder because we require the staff to have a closer relationship with the youth, which can be challenging. Like it’s harder to switch off. You’re more personally involved” (ZCS).

A challenge for both program participants and ZC staff was that of finding suitable **housing**. As in previous years, Whistler was in the midst of a **housing crisis**; as noted by one of the program participants, “we have staff who left because there is no housing here, and she was doing programming with us, and it got cancelled.

For participants and staff, housing is a big issue in the Sea to Sky Corridor” (ZCP).

A board member highlighted the irony between the mission of ZC and the location of the program, “the mission to end youth homelessness” is contrasted by “a community where homes are one of the hardest to find in B.C.” (ZCB). Another problem that faced ZC was also identified in earlier years – how to define success, and what metrics should be used to **measure success**, but also to share stories of success. A board member captured this as follows, “when you are serving vulnerable populations, what is success? What are you measuring? Is it 20 youth or 8? ... we know we have gone way deeper and wider in a difficult time [the pandemic] for youth but what is the number?” (ZCB).

It is evident that **COVID** had both positive and negative implications for ZC and the program. As noted by a staff member, one of the results of the pandemic was that there was greater flexibility; however, this did not always have a positive result, “we talk a lot about ‘there’s no end date to the program anymore.’ Yeah. It used to be 12 months; now, it’s like ‘you do you’ ... I feel like we’ve now gone way too far ... at what point do we acknowledge that and if someone’s been here two, three plus years, do we support them? ... And how do we support you to move on with your life and move on to something” (ZCS).

It is likely that some of the answers to questions raised by the board and ZC staff could be found in discussions with the program participants; however, there was a need for **participants to take a more active role in the research**, which as one staff member noted couldn’t be guaranteed, “if any of them ever, in the future, comment I’m not your guinea pig, I would totally understand that” (ZCS). Receiving information that could aid in the effective implementation of the program offerings extended to potential challenges of working with **referral agencies**. One staff member was concerned with the potential gap in information before the program applicants were accepted into the program, “instead of putting them in the program and then having something bad happen, and then having to remove them from the program ... [we need to] have more knowledge of the participant from when referral was created and what has happened since” (ZCS).

Zero Ceiling Insights and Gaps

With a focus on future priorities, research participants identified several initiatives that ZC could incorporate into their practice. When highlighting the need for greater **advocacy** by ZC on behalf of program participants, one staff member noted that while there was an appetite for change, it was not always sustainable, “the team seems really enthusiastic and helpful and wants the bigger pictures piece (advocacy) but how do we do that and sustain it” (ZCS).

Within a broader perspective, a participant shared,

“we have a responsibility to support those in our care that have been harmed... But we also have a responsibility to change the systems that have resulted in that harm if we stand at the end of the pipeline, there’s always going to be kids coming down the pipeline.

So, we have a duty to support those kids. And we can be at the end of the pipeline, but we need to turn off the tap... I have a better understanding how we can end youth homelessness ... I think it’s through coordinated efforts of like, groups like us and working together in an organized fashion to lobby and pressuring government in systems change” (ZCS). In addition to advocacy, options for program participant **counselling** was discussed by staff, who noted the positive effect for ZC and the program participants as relationships with community partners became stronger, “we have greater access to counselling, more varied choices... we have an amazing relationship with VCH [Vancouver Coastal Health] and that is stronger ... and we are better with connecting to Whistler Community Services Society(WCSS) to say these options aren’t working, and we have worked with WCSS to find the right fit” (ZCS). By November, counselling options had expanded to include a link to low barrier access to culturally appropriate individualized counseling through a partner agency (ZCS). Existing supports for program participants are varied, but one that was recently incorporated was the inclusion of **Indigenous supports** which provides program participants with resources and the opportunity to take part in a variety of new activities. As a research participant noted, “I find that I’m thinking of new opportunities or new events that ... are meaningful, that sets aside from what they’re doing now” (ZCS).

Three other opportunities for continuation and expansion noted in focus groups and interviews are ZC **participant recognition, resilience, and transportation**. One of the employers suggested that it would be beneficial for ZC to recognize program participants when they had achieved a milestone in their employment. For example, if a program participant “moved up to a new level at work and then carried on [working for that employer] after program” (CE). An observation was made by a ZC staff member that identifying and acknowledging resilience was valuable to program participants by reinforcing their ability to cope with adversity, “I think like what we see with the participants, maintaining and building the resilience ... so that when things do become rocky it is not scary again ...” (ZCS). Finally, the benefit of having transportation easily available to ZC was highlighted, “the minibus will be the biggest game changer – we have one now – we have the car we just can’t drive it yet. This will change the whole program because it will allow us to reduce barriers around ride day, group activities and connection” (ZCS).



Section 4: Lessons Learned

Many lessons emerged from the discussions with participants, including programmatic and personal lessons learned through the process of being involved in the program. The following discussion outlines the key lessons learned.

Leadership, Direction and Measuring Success

Strong leadership, shared values, and a sense of where the organisation is going, as well as how to get there, all support the ongoing health of the organisation. These aspects of the lessons learned will be important as the Work 2 Live program grows. The organisation has undergone a significant period of **growth**, which has demanded adaptation on the part of ZC and its staff. However, constant change is not without challenges. Leadership, according to some research participants, includes making some changes, and then allowing for others to catch up, or to understand, those changes. Not all innovation is beneficial, and there needs to be efficiency tests applied, as noted by a staff member, “now what we are hearing is that we need to stop changing. I think it is probably quite typical with cycles of an organization” (ZCS). ZC’s focus on **being realistic** and **starting small**, but also accommodating periods of growth and periods of pause, was exemplified by a staff member.

Other changes have included bringing in new staff and board members. These additions have illustrated ZCs focus on **strategic hiring** and aligning values. As one staff member observed, “I think we have people who are really aligned with [the ZC] approach and values on the board. Really what that means is we have less people telling us like why don’t you do something that just doesn’t make sense ... I think everyone on the board is pretty open to what the evolution could look like for the board” (ZCS).

Through interviews with the PAC, **defining success** emerged. Programs such as ZC are often required to prove the success of the program but identifying a definition of success that everyone agrees to, as well as a metric of standardization that everyone can use, can be challenging. For ZC, above all, any measurement must benefit the program participants, as one PAC member noted, “...confirmation that each party has the same definition of success and an openness to answer the question “what does it look like today” and “has it changed”, and the constant need to evolve. If you don’t have a common definition of success, then when you get to the end, no one thinks it is successful” (PAC).

Defining success for the entire program is one thing, but also understanding what success is for the participants in the program is a lesson that was well articulated by some of the research participants. There will be ebbs and flows for participants and the expectation that learning will be an upward linear path is not realistic, neither is the expectation that every person who enters the program will leave the program a changed individual. “I think coming from an employment perspective, sometimes when we do work with individuals who have barriers to employment, there is an expectation that they will go through this [change], and after that, everything will be fine and they will maintain it, that perspective needs to shift. Meeting the individual where they are at, there will be ups and downs and you have to be okay with that, with a person failing and having some hiccups, ... or it will potentially cause that individual to phase out or be detrimental to the program. There may be times it may not be successful, or it may not be successful the first time around” (PAC).

The Context

A key lesson learned in previous ZC reports is that it is critical and mutually beneficial to **know your community** well. This understanding includes leveraging the community’s strengths and challenges; in Whistler, the beautiful natural environment and the tight-knit community are strengths. Illustrating ZC’s continued approach to leverage those strengths, a staff member suggested that “it’s important for me to basically expand our partner base. And that’s what I’m really focused on right now, getting as many new partnerships ... as possible” (ZCS). The relative **lack of community services** and high cost of living, particularly housing, represent some of the challenges in the community context. Attesting to the impact of housing issue, one stated, “we’ve got two staff right now who are almost homeless” (ZCS). In looking at this risk for staff hiring and retention, ZC is looking for creative opportunities to mitigate the challenge, and it appears there are “housing options on the horizon that would allow us to grow to a point that might actually meet some of the more local needs” (ZCS). In looking at the high unaffordability of housing for staff, ZC “might [acquire housing options] for staff and then [for] graduates as a bit of a transition piece” (ZCS). Similarly, ZC is exploring building connections to the home community for Indigenous youth and “targeting the Sea-to-Sky specifically” (ZCS). In addition, ZC is considering alternative and innovative approaches to generating sustainable revenue through producing professional development opportunities, which could also allow ZC to “hire participants, and then empower them in positions of authority that will help to reduce the barriers that they face previously, which I just love – the full circle” (ZCS).

Employers

The Research and Innovation project is developing processes and training to **set employers up for success** when working with ZCP, with the idea that it will be more broadly beneficial. As one staff member stated, “management training that anyone gets, and everyone should get, in terms of being able to work with people dealing with mental health issues, because that’s part of the struggle – the newer generation are more conscious of mental health things and less likely to sacrifice their mental health for workplace productivity ... I think the training is a really good way to bridge those gaps in workplace evolution” (ZCS).

It was evident that employer partners care about the wellbeing of the ZCP, and that they want to understand how they can provide what the participants need to feel valued and successful. One employer talked about the concern of being **short staffed** and not able to devote enough time to the ZCP, “I hope the ZC participant felt supported and feels **supported** but the threat to that is this staffing situation. If it continues, the follow through on the ZC meetings, the workbooks, the support I provide etc. is getting done to a satisfactory level – that is one of the challenges with this year” (CE). The **time and energy needed** to provide enough feedback and attention to ZC participants was emphasized, “you are investing more time and effort into those people – nothing wrong with that, but something you need to be aware of moving in this direction is that your person will miss work more than a regular staff member would” (CE).

Another lesson that was shared by an employer was about **social gatherings** with staff which include ZC participants. Many of these gatherings include alcohol which was a concern for this employer and would like a more inclusive activity that does not centre around alcohol, but centres more around the activity and creating social connections. “As we get rolling towards normalizing, whatever we will be doing, more of those gatherings and get together but around here that involves going for drinks and that is not always the best thing for ZC candidates. I know so it is one of those things we need to be cognizant of as we start getting back together it can’t be at the bar. It is not always the most inclusive and I would hate to put something in the environment like that, but they don’t want to miss out because they want to be part of the team. We have started to think about non-drinking activities – pizza party, karaoke” (CE).

Decolonisation and Indigenous Support

ZC is working towards **decolonising** the organization and increasing **Indigenous supports** for both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous program participants. Consequently, many research participants discussed the work that was being done in 2022, “I think we’re doing more work on the decolonization ... I’m really interested in how ... we can change things. So, it’s just not the way it’s always been done ... developing close relationships with First Nations and opportunities... that’s really important to us” (ZCS). Not only was there interest in continuing with the supports that were already implemented, such as Auntie, but there was also an interest in expanding staff to support this growth area, “I think that that’s like an area for growth for us to like we’re talking about maybe having an uncle as will who provide ... different supports” (ZCS). There were many benefits to having Auntie as a member of the Work 2 Live program, she provided a familial figure that the ZCP could reach out to, rather than a counsellor or staff member. Auntie was able bring a cultural lens and an **Indigenous connection** for participants. In reflecting on the new role, a ZC staff said Auntie was able **to connect** with participants in a way that is more unique, while also taking the privacy of all participants seriously, while also gently nudging them to any additional supports they may need. A staff member noted how much value [Auntie] brought to the program participants, “I know some graduates afterwards went up to her and said I wish she’d been here when I was in the program. And she just brings so much love and caring, she calls them all her nieces and nephews, and they really pick up on that; she comes to family dinner” (ZCS).

ZC Program Staff

Caring for staff was an important lesson that ZC shares with employers, but also has focused on internally. This year ZC concentrated on ensuring staff are treated well, respected, receive fair pay, have clarity on their role and are well trained. ZC has hired graduates into their program over the years and has learned that this requires ensuring that these staff are placed in the right roles and are trained and well supported, as one staff recounted, “we had two grads as an overnight support worker which we did not provide enough training to we thought that job was going to be easier than it was. It’s a hard job.... we need to provide more robust training to support ... suicide prevention, crisis management, conflict de-escalation” (ZCS).

The ZC program staff were able to share many lessons that had been learned over their time in the program, one of which related to **community and building relationships**. This component of their job related to their work with employers in the community, focussing on ZC building relationships not only with the Work 2 Live participants, but also with the employer partners. However, not every employer will have values that are aligned with program, and as one staff member said, “know your community and who your allies are and you will have to choose what battles to fight, and it is a lot easier to fight the battles with people who are on your side. We have learned along the way that it is not worth working with certain individuals or organization because having the right relationship with the right person is key.” Employment is a major component of the Work 2 Live program, but the recreational activities are also key to healthy relationships and the success of the program. As a staff member stated, “employment does not exist in a vacuum. It wouldn’t succeed without all the other stuff we do, the family dinners the ride days the location the 24/7/365 support” (ZCS). As with previous years, the variety of activities and support given to the participants to provide a well-rounded experience was a noteworthy contributor to the program’s success.

The program staff showed care and consideration when talking about the participants of the program. Although staff and employer partners may have wanted to see positive change occur quickly, they appreciate the value for participants to develop at their own pace, and setting realistic expectations so that the youth can feel incremental successes.

A lesson shared by a staff member noted the importance of, “know[ing] you are not trying to change the individual” (ZCS). Focusing on **helping and supporting** the individual can be a useful approach for the ZC staff members, “we often hear that ‘it is so complicated, I am lost, it is overwhelming’. It is really simple; you just support the individual – it is everything else around them that is complicating it. We have taken that view and we just have to do the next right thing. Sometimes you do have to fight the battle and what we are asking people to do is not as complicated as they think it is, and to start the journey down decolonization, justice, and equity as soon as you can” (ZCS).

A component of the research and funding is to determine if the Work 2 Live program can be used effectively in other communities. One staff member had some concerns about implementation of similar programs in other organizations, sharing the lessons learned from a program such as ZC that has been running for 25 years, “a lot of [people] aim for the stars right away and fail to see and deal with the small problems. Start small and then when it is working, then go to the next step instead of trying to build [a program] out of nowhere, it has taken us 25 years to get here, and it has been organic evolution at every point. You can’t just pick it up and plunk it somewhere else – it is so **interlinked with community** and the individuals who have been part of it over the years. It is not as linear as it looks.”

Current Participants/Grads

The most important component of the Work 2 Live program is the participants and their move towards independence during their time in the program. As one staff member shared, “the reason why I joined ZC is because I think that impact is like exponential and especially at a young age” (ZCS), with graduates not only having achieved an ability to live independently and gain stability in their employment, but also wanting to keep the relationships they built during their time in Whistler and stay connected to ZC after program completion. The **ongoing support**, that often continues after participants graduate featured in the interviews, “I thought that it speaks volumes, when you have youth who have left the program through graduation ... who would have taken flight, and they still will come in for **family dinner nights** on Tuesday. They will come from the city, or they’ll come from wherever, whenever they can participate, and they’re still coming together as a family with ZC and that is so beautiful for me to witness” (ZCS).

Not only were the emotionally supportive relationships that formed during family dinners appreciated, but supports that focussed on physical health, such as gym passes, were found to be of benefit, “[it’s] nice to see more flexibility in funding to you so that we can look at you know, whether it’s a gym pass here where it’s, you know, more like an individual specific thing” (ZCS).

One of the reflective lessons that emerged in 2022 was the recruitment of new participants. One participant suggested, “I think we could do a better job in vetting youth that we know are going to succeed, because they have some of those traits, rather than being like, well, this person needs the program the most right and then all of us allocating two or three years of like very valuable resources to someone that’s not ready for the program when we could have someone in there that is ready” (ZCS).

Lessons learned from the participants focused significantly on interpersonal **relationships** whether it was with staff or fellow participants. At times, there seemed to be some dissatisfaction with how issues were handled by ZC staff, “I have found harsh criticism of ZC is the only thing that will make them change things. Negative reinforcement works to make ZC do something” (ZCP). A participant commented on a housing conflict how ZC handled the situation, “there is an immense amount of conflict in the house that I cannot sleep well. ZC won’t do anything about it. They usually take the mediator role, but they will try to help out both people to go and shake hands and they want us to hug it out like 6-year-olds” (ZCP). When a crisis happens, if it is not related to a specific program participant, it was suggested that ZC needs to handle it, and should not be the responsibility of the participant to solve the problem, “for example, my other roommate has been missing for a month and they keep asking me where she is, but that is not my responsibility, I obviously care but it is your guys’ jobs to keep track of the ducklings” (ZCP). Staff had a different perspective and took the intra-participant conflicts as an expected part of living with roommates, and navigating issues came down to the need for “clear expectations and communication... it’s an unconditional positive regard, that we’re giving them the space in the housing first and the supportive employment, but it’s not just about getting a job” (ZCS). Staff worked with each individual asking them, “what would you want your life experience to look like, how does it [impact] your current situation, [or] feed into your ultimate vision of the future and goals ... if participants are stuck for example, there may be not enough pressure, then there may be too much pressure, you’re trying to find that balance... so, the clear expectations and accountability but it’s a balance” (ZCS).

Another program participant theme that emerged was **feeling judged** for what they looked like and/or who they were. This theme mirrors 2021 interview responses, when participants noted feeling **less than human** before entering the program and discussed how many of the ZC staff and employers made them feel more human and made them feel as though they mattered. A graduate of the program also discussed the desire to be **treated the same by their employer** as other employees were treated. Although this can be challenging as the ZCP may need different things than other employees, it was still important to feel like they are all being treated equally and just like all the other employees. As noted by this graduate, “I would hope that the employer would treat us the same as everyone else that worked there, and they did, and having the opportunity to have more resources if you need. Being treated the same is pretty important” (ZCG).

On the other hand, a current participant talked about the need to be treated as an individual and not the same as everyone else. Each person had a unique set of skills and knowledge, and needs something different from another program participant. The lessons learned can be complex, as the Work 2 Live program is supporting many program participants, and working with many stakeholders, all with their own experiences and expectations.

On the Horizon

As has been noted, ZC has traversed a significant degree of growth and change and is settling into a period of holding a steady course. As a staff member reflected, “you can’t jump over a chasm step by step. Sometimes you’ve just got to jump, I see that we’ve jumped” (ZCS). Despite this pause in growth, several new initiatives appeared to be on the horizon that respond to some of the lessons learned. ZC continues to find ways to incorporate youth voice into program development and build from previous experiences. This was summarised well by one staff member, “we’ve had two graduates on the Board, which didn’t go very well. We’re on the cusp of doing a Youth Advisory Committee, which is probably a better, safer way to have youth input into decision making; more formal” (ZCS).

The main areas of focus in the coming period are on seeking funding, obtaining sustainable housing, and continuing to strengthen connections with local First Nations and potential new partners, including the Ministry of Child and Family Development. In seeking funding, the main lessons are that they should be, “seeking out funding that aligns with our program” (ZCS) and “nurture relationships so that we’re on the radar and meeting the criteria” (ZCS). This is pertinent because, “the biggest risk in the next couple of years is replacing this Research and Innovation funding which currently funds half our staffing. ... I still question if government funding is the way we want to go ... I mean, there’s other partners ... new employment partners like tourism” (ZCS).

Discussion

Building on the findings from the previous year, this Year 2 report demonstrates further exploration of the supports, partnerships, challenges and opportunities for the ZC Work 2 Live model. The core question was, “how can supportive employment partnerships between not-for-profit agencies, employers in the tourism industry, and government benefit youth experiencing multiple barriers to employment?” This report deepens previous knowledge, but also introduces a range of new areas. This discussion is organised via the research sub-questions.

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

The impacts of COVID-19 have been broad and deep, causing a multitude of disruptions to businesses in many sectors, to individuals, and to services. Despite this, COVID-19 did not feature heavily in the interviews in 2022. However, the impacts of COVID-19, such as the changing economic conditions, the exit of a pool of international employees, lack in affordable housing, and the increased cost of living more generally, did receive attention. According to research participants, these challenges have been acutely felt in staff turnover, staff shortages, ongoing mental health challenges, and employee fatigue. Staff shortages, and the associated challenges, logically meant that placing greater emphasis on retention was critical. Alongside this shift, staff demands for more accommodating employment conditions, support with transportation, and access to housing, have increased. These conditions put pressure on employers and employees, reiterating a negative feedback cycle on staff recruitment and retention. The resulting challenges were felt by both ZC and the employers.

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

Given the context highlighted in the previous section, the employers interviewed in 2022 recognised the need to include more supportive employment for their staff to support recruitment and retention. While this was particularly needed for ZCP, it was identified as valuable for all staff in the employers’ organizations. As identified in the 2021 Report, supportive employment did not appear to have a shared meaning, and yet, whatever the interpretation, it was recognised as beneficial. Given the many demands on employers, the time needed to train and implement supportive employment practices was taxing. Balancing the in-the-moment priorities with the needed investment in systems and supports for employees was identified as challenging. As with Year 1, the most frequently requested area for support and training continued to be mental health training.

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?

Participating employers noted that, despite the challenge of attending to multiple demands, participation in programs like Work 2 Live provided tangible benefits and pushed them to implement supportive approaches more generally in their organizations. The benefits of taking a supportive employment approach in the workplace benefitted staff at many levels of the organization, with benefits to those in leadership being cited as significant, allowing organizations to provide a more balanced approach in the workplace. Using the supportive employment approach also aligned with the employers’ efforts at improving their JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion) initiatives. From the perspective of ZCS, setting up effective working relationships, clear expectations from all parties, and ensuring there was values alignment at the outset of the partnership helped ensure that there were synergistic approaches in place to support ZCP and other employees. ZCP continued to feel supported in the workplace by their employers and by the ZCS.

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

Research participants in 2022 reiterated the need for a variety of wraparound supports for young people facing multiple barriers to housing and employment. These included major supports such as affordable housing, access to employment, and access to transportation, as well as a range of additional and diversified supports. The 24/7 wraparound support structure that ZC has adopted was valued by many research participants. Beneficial areas of support included nature-based and recreational programming and gear, tangible life skills support (e.g., setting up bank accounts, working with landlords, and filing taxes), and easily accessible emergency incident supports around the clock. The quality of the support also mattered, and ZC was praised for providing non-judgemental, organic, flexible, family-like support and accountability, in a home-like setting with unconditional positive regard. The support provided by ZC was also noted as individualised and goal-oriented which helped program participants to build trust, confidence and independence. Many of these qualities were identified as being exemplified with the new Indigenous support that ZC implemented in Year 2.

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

A benefit of hiring vulnerable youth included having access to an untapped employee pool. More importantly, being part of the Work 2 Live program provided employers opportunities to better understand and implement supportive employment practices, like offering flexibility, adaptability, empathy and inclusivity to their increasingly diverse employees through direct experience, training, and mentorship. Employers also noted that it provided them with pride in being able to help people and give back to the community while watching ZCP grow in confidence. In addition, some of the employer partners noted that they were continuing to work with, or expected to work with, the ZCPs after the participants had graduated from the program. The program was also meeting the demand for supportive employment practices emerging from the labour market in Whistler. In addition to the organizational benefits, and to the youth themselves, employees in leadership positions within the organization were able to expand their understanding and learn empathetic approaches to working with their teams. Hiring a vulnerable youth was not without risks. The most cited risk was in mismatching a young person to a job where the expectations on both the ZCP and employer were unrealistic, and where the employer had insufficient time to support the participant because of competing demands. Another challenge was dealing with perceptions of fairness balanced with confidentiality when a ZCP is given differential treatment, yet their participation in the program cannot be shared.

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

Supportive employment was not consistently or universally defined, yet it included being flexible, personable, patient, empathetic, and open about needs and supports that allow employees to do their best at work. For example, this could mean being adaptable when employees are absent or late, but it could also mean offering jobs for shorter periods of time that allowed the employees to build confidence, trust, and foundational skills. Supportive employment also required clarity of employee and employer expectations and using excellent communication skills between the employer, the employee, and ZCS. As there is increasing openness about mental health struggles in the workplace which required more supportive approaches, the mental health first aid training was highlighted as helpful for employers.

Research participants were careful to note that investing in supportive employment practices required spending time with participants and caring about their wellbeing; this could be achieved by engaging in a five-minute check in at the beginning of a shift, setting achievable and tangible goals at work, or offering a variety of team building activities that respected the individual's unique challenges thereby allowing their employees to build effective relationships.

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

As in the previous 2021 Report, research participants noted that the most impactful changes were the most difficult to measure and track. The importance of sharing stories of success was emphasised. Tracking youth-defined, but achievable goals was also suggested.

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

In outlining the role of government bodies, research participants highlighted the importance of investing in supportive employment programs. They noted the value of the Research and Innovation Project and the funding provided by WorkBC and the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. One specific recommendation was to provide a subsidy program for employers hiring participants in a supportive employment program to offset the costs of providing support and/or the extra time it required to provide those supports by the manager. Several research participants also underlined the benefits of imbedding research into programs to build cycles of continuous improvement. Additional comments pointed to providing accessible mentorship for organizations new to supportive employment from organizations who had experience in appropriate techniques and structures, and to include additional financial supports that allow the organizations time to build their staff expertise prior to starting new initiatives. At a broader level, entrenched issues of housing affordability, rising cost of living, pernicious cycles of children in care leading to youth and adult experiences of homelessness were raised. These systemic issues require multi-levelled, multi-tiered and multi-pronged interventions and advocacy which require resourcing and inevitably include government.

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

While the adventure-based programming was not central to the discussions in 2022, when they were raised, research participants unanimously suggested that both the recreational aspects of the programming and the connection to nature were central to supporting ZCP's wellbeing and sense of connection to other program graduates and participants. In addition, ZC is expanding the scope of the one-day Adventure Session¹ to increase the range of land-based and decolonised programming offered.

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

The non-judgemental, flexible, home-like, family-like supports based on connection, trust, support, ongoing relationship continued to be a core element of the program, as expressed by research participants, staff, board, and PAC members. In one focus group with ZCP, a few participants suggested that these relationships helped them process unresolved issues within their own families, but also provided them context to gain skills they were not able to gain during their upbringing. Ultimately, ZCP and ZCS suggested that this setting was key to fostering their skills development, confidence and success in working towards independence.

¹ This is a distinct no-cost outdoor adventure day-camp for young people at risk of homelessness aged between 13-24 who are excluded from the outdoors. Historically, participants coming into the program would attend one of these sessions.



Recommendations

Recommendations for organizations setting up similar programs

The following provides insights research participants shared for other organisations seeking to start similar programs in different location.

Program set up

- seek funding early for operational costs, and ensure funding sources align with the program and its values;
- obtain funding that starts prior to the program participant's arrival, this will allow for building an expertise base that is solidly in place upon program start-up;
- include funding for administrative functions if reporting is a key expectation of the funder;
- build a contingency budget;
- talk to, and ask for mentorship from, someone who has done this kind of work before;
- build a growth and improvement culture that challenges the status quo;
- a co-director model can support succession planning and play to different strengths;
- start small to build the program, the partnerships, and the processes to support your work;
- implement strategies for staff retention;
- add cross training as an organizational approach, thereby reducing the potential impact of staff turnover; and,
- include research cycles for continuous program improvement.

Program staff

- provide personalised, casual, comfortable, flexible approaches to staff onboarding;
- invest in staff care and team building to achieve a vibrant workplace culture and avoid or address stress and burnout early;
- include ongoing staff training to keep employees up to date with latest techniques in participant support;
- focus on clear communication with staff to support their ability to work effectively;
- budget for upfront staff time to build program systems and processes; and
- plan for and communicate contingency planning when staff leave to ensure continuity in service.

Youth support

- provide holistic, non-judgemental unconditional positive regard;
- include training that supports successful transition to work/life after graduating from the program;
- work with the participant's individual achievable goals;
- be respectful of privacy issues; and,
- prepare for interpersonal issues and relationship break downs among youth.

Employment partners

- ensure values alignment;
- provide consistent employer and employee orientation;
- make sure training is available and taken up by employers on program and supportive approaches;
- safeguard appropriate match for youth and job/ employer so that expectations are achievable; and,
- support the implementation of clear communication and mentoring processes between youth, employer and Work 2 Live program staff.

Program context

- spend time building community supports and partnerships;
- build structures to communicate the value of the Work 2 Live program to the community; and,
- leverage the strengths of your community.

Recommendations for Zero Ceiling

Based on the data collected and analyzed as part of Year 2 of this project, the following recommendations emerged. Note, progress towards recommendations made in the Year 1 Report 2021 are provided in Appendix 1.

Transitions in and out

- refresh the application waitlist and follow up with individuals on the list;
- build processes to gain more knowledge of participants when they are referred;
- spend time identifying individual needs of participants exiting the program;
- provide stepped training to support participants preparing to transition out of the program;
- implement new structures and timelines to nudge participants to move towards graduation; and
- build a safe, achievable transition plan for participants nearing graduation.

Youth support

- introduce a participant recognition process to acknowledge their resilience;
- continue to work on individualised support that meet each participant's needs;
- build in flexible time to form connections and build relationships;
- continue to support graduates of the program, helping them to successfully move on to life after Work 2 Live;
- continue to develop a Youth Advisory Committee;
- find a variety of ways for youth to guide the continuous development of the Work 2 Live program;
- support connection to home communities, especially for Indigenous youth;
- expand cultural supports to include an "Uncle";
- continue to consider ways to hire participants/ graduates in the program, and then empower them in positions of authority that will help to reduce the barriers that they face; and
- consider growing the supports offered for youth in the Sea-to-Sky region.

Staff

- continue to address/minimise staff burn out and stress;
- slow down rapid pace of change to support staff wellbeing;
- build processes to ensure that when staff leave there are clear transitions and communication plans and that participants do not take their leaving personally;
- find ways to support staff looking for affordable housing; and,
- train a driver for the bus.

Curriculum and training

- continue to develop, build, and trial new curriculum for staff, participants and employers;
- consider providing participants with budget training; and
- consider offering employers (and staff) more training on trauma-informed practice, mental health first aid, mental well-being, diversity and inclusion, particularly with respect to reconciliation, how to cope with employee absenteeism and tardiness, and how to cope with the needed emotional investment of working with a ZC participant.

Employment

- consider introducing employer mentors for participants;
- continue to increase the variety of participating employers;
- provide support structures that allow seasoned employers to mentor new employers;
- improve regular, consistent communication and connection with employers (given turnover);
- provide employers with a list of supports and training opportunities;
- include strategies for clear communication between staff and employer partners;
- advocate for a subsidy to support employment partners; and,
- build a Work 2 Live employment partner Community of Practice, and/or an employer ambassador program. Support programs with luncheons, meet ups and shared training opportunities.

Structural considerations requiring resources

- provide additional housing options, for instance purchasing a property, securing longer tenure, opening a house in Squamish;
- strengthen connections between ZC and local First Nations, as well as with the Ministry of Children and Family Development;
- grow the program and include more participants;
- seek replacement funding for Research and Innovation funding; and,
- secure flexible unrestricted funding to allow for more flexible youth support.

Year 3 Research Team – Next Steps

The following tasks are scheduled to be completed during Year 3 of this project:

- collect Year 3 data with Work 2 Live program participants, staff, employers, PAC and ZC Advisory Board (Spring and Fall 2023);
- revise the ZC Theory of Change and support Evaluation;
- present Year 1-2 findings to the Whistler Community and at relevant conference in the field;
- support ZC to put the Year 2 report and findings on ZC website and social media channels; and,
- submit final project report.

References

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2018). *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*.

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 (2023). Zero Ceiling's Theory of Change [unpublished]. Zero Ceiling.



Appendix 1

Review of Progress from Year 1 Report 2021

| Recommendations from 2021 Report | Progress |
|---|----------------|
| Short term (6 to 24 months) | |
| Offer training for employers that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health first aid • trauma informed practices • orientation training to the skills sets of the ZC staff • connecting with employers for their input on the ZC Work 2 Live curriculum under development | In progress |
| Offer training for participants that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employer and employee communication strategies and supporting processes • professionalism in the workplace – expectations and supports to develop this • expectations, norms setting and boundaries in the program and in the shared housing units | In progress |
| Provide orientation that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides an orientation package to the Work 2 Live program and Whistler (e.g., outline expectations) for Work 2 Live program participants • incorporates an employer orientation package to support Work 2 Live 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 FAQs for employers • identifies an approach to minimize participant behavioural issues such as punctuality and attendance | In progress |
| Offer training for the Board on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) | In progress |
| Offer training for the Project Advisory Council, specifically on governance | In development |
| Increase the number of staff who are qualified in mental health support, to cover supports currently being accessed externally by ZC | In progress |
| Incorporate more youth voice on Board (this relates to EDI training and is also related to valuing youth) | In development |
| Enhance case management tools | In progress |
| Hire staff who have lived experiences | In progress |
| Move to align pay to scale representative of the nature and context of the work to support job sustainability | Complete |

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Obtain ZC vehicle | Complete |
| Include decolonizing processes and cultural programming for employers, participants, and staff | In progress |
| Plan for Work 2 Live participant program transitions | In progress |
| Examine ZC organizational structure | In progress |
| Create a more holistic program that encompasses aspects of mind, body and spirit | In progress |
| Longer term (3 to 5 years) | |
| Include a more diverse membership on the ZC Board, with a shared alignment (values and mission statement) | In development |
| Expand access of Work 2 Live to more participants (lower-barriers, Indigenous and Sea to Sky) | In development |
| Secure ongoing, unrestricted funding for Work 2 Live program | In development |
| Expand employer partnerships and employment options | In progress |
| Secure stable, ongoing funding | In progress |
| Increase housing opportunities | In development |
| Recognise the increasing complexity of support needs and have funding to support them | In development |
| Create more flexibility in access and use of funding | In development |
| Increase partnership options – values alignment is important | In development |
| Shorten the wait time for participants coming into the program | In development |
| Change organizational structures, such as meeting format, communication, case management, hierarchy, clarify director's roles (including delegation pathways), and discuss shared group norms | In progress |

Zero Ceiling Society of Canada
PO Box 61 Whistler, BC, V0N 1B0

604-962-5000

info@zeroceiling.org

zeroceiling.org

