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Skills and Employment  
Office of Literacy and Essential Skills

## CASE STUDY INTEGRATING ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESS Tillsonburg & District MSC

### Key Facts and Information

**Issue:** Gaps in employment services meant that certain clients' needs had not typically been served

**Objective:** To provide literacy and essential skills training to those with low skills, while providing wraparound services to help participants overcome multiple barriers to employment and education/training

**Essential Skills Addressed:** Reading, writing, document use, numeracy, computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others and continuous learning

**HRSDC's Tools Used:** What are Essential Skills?, Postcard, Indicators, Self-assessments, Vocabulary Building Workbook, Oral communication videos and the Communication Essentials Workshop

**Other Tools Used:** Measure-up!, Prose, Document Use and Quantitative Series and the Barriers to Employment Success Inventory

### Summary

The Tillsonburg & District Multi-Service Centre (MSC) participated in a workforce literacy and essential skills pilot project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities that aimed to address gaps in services and meet the needs of individuals in the community that had typically not been served. The MSC provided wraparound services to help participants overcome multiple barriers to employment, including little work experience and low literacy and essential skills.

Participants were assigned a case manager to work with them to assess their skill levels, help them develop a training plan and establish career goals. With their support participants completed learning tasks offered by the program. Each week had a themed module such as self-exploration, life skills, and resumé building, with literacy and essential skills training interwoven throughout each. Case managers routinely discussed progress with each participant over the course of

#### WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL SKILLS?

The Government of Canada has identified key literacy and essential skills for the workplace. These skills are used in nearly every job and at different levels of complexity. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to keep pace with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.

their 8 or 12 week program, while providing wraparound services, beyond traditional employment services, targeted to what clients needed to become employable.

The program had a real impact for participants who generally experienced increased confidence, progress towards skills development, and a greater understanding of the need for further education and training.

## Assessing Needs

The Tillsonburg & District Multi-Service Centre (MSC) is a non-profit, charitable organization that provides a wide array of adult basic literacy, employment and home support services. Its services are delivered by over 100 qualified personnel, including personal support workers and committed volunteers. The MSC is supported by a variety of revenue sources, including a dedicated donor base.

The MSC is located in The Livingston Centre, which hosts a broad range of community-serving organizations including Service Canada, Community Living Tillsonburg, Fanshawe College, Ontario Works, and a variety of health, legal and counselling services. The availability of these services in close proximity facilitates referrals and enhances the case management approach.

Clients participate in the various adult basic literacy programs at the MSC to improve their reading, writing, numeracy and other essential skills in order to achieve individual goals related to employment, further education, training or independence. These programs are delivered through small group instruction, one-on-one tutoring and online learning.

The MSC provides various employment services that are funded by Employment Ontario and are free to the client. These services include employment counselling, job search support and workshops, and skills development opportunities for job seekers as well as services for employers to assist with recruitment.

The MSC's workforce literacy and essential skills special project was a pilot project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities that aimed to bridge its adult basic literacy programs and its employment services. The objectives of the project were to provide literacy and essential skills training and upgrading to those with low skill levels; to provide wraparound services to help participants overcome multiple barriers to employment; and to improve participants' employability, or their ability to seek further education or training.

The MSC hired a case manager/wraparound consultant to design and develop the special project. The project consisted of 21 hours per week of one-on-one and group learning. Over the one year duration of the project, the MSC was able to hold two 12-week sessions and one 8-week session. A total of 46

Participants meet with a case manager to discuss specific career goals and develop an individualized training plan.

clients participated in the project. Clients were referred to the MSC for the special project by a variety of sources including Ontario Works, a provincial program to help people in temporary financial need find sustainable employment and achieve self-reliance through the provision of employment services and financial assistance.

Many of the project's participants had been long term recipients of employment insurance and did not have much recent or cumulative work history. Many had low skill levels and multiple barriers to employment, including income and housing challenges.

At the beginning of each program session, the case manager conducted two assessments with each learner to determine their skill level. These assessments were the Prose, Document Use and Numeracy series (PDQ) and the Barriers to Employment Success Inventory (BESI), which evaluates learners in five different areas in order to identify barriers that may be present and that may be preventing the learner from moving forward.

In addition to the BESI and PDQ pre- and post-assessments, the program also incorporated "Measure-up!," a web-based tool that allows users to complete and print assessments of **reading**, **document use** and **numeracy** skills. The program also used several Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) literacy and essential skills assessment tools including the **document use**, **numeracy** and **reading** Indicators and the **working with others**, **oral communication** and **computer use** Self-assessments.

Many clients came into the program without a specific career goal in mind so the case manager and training facilitator explored career options with the client. The case manager interviewed each learner to discuss his or her specific career goals and develop an individualized training plan. They encouraged clients to set attainable goals, taking their work history and education into consideration, and worked with the client to determine next steps to achieve their goals.

## Supporting Skills Development

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Throughout the program, clients had one-on-one meetings with the case manager to review their progress and further develop their training plans. These new training goals were then broken down into more manageable sub goals that the learners could work on progressively over the 8 or 12 weeks of their program.

The case management of this pilot project is a key component of what made this service delivery model unique and noteworthy. Given their low skill levels and few resources, many clients were unaware of what services were available in the community, so the case management component involved providing the wraparound services a client needed to become employable, and referring the client to other organizations when the MSC could not address a particular issue.

For example, if a client had a criminal record that was preventing him or her from getting a job, the case manager would help the individual determine whether he or she was eligible for a pardon; if the client had unaddressed health issues, such as mental health issues, the case manager helped the individual find a doctor or referred the individual to other support services where applicable. Wraparound services also included helping clients to replace identification, resolve housing issues, or access counselling, training, transportation, daycare, etc. Removing these other barriers meant that individuals could participate in the literacy and essential skills training and upgrading provided by the program, and work toward achieving their career goals.

As part of the program participants completed incremental learning tasks. Each week had a themed learning module, such as self-exploration, life skills, or resumé building,

*“The Essential Skills program helped me update on reading, document use, numeracy, and we worked on the computer. They worked one on one if you need it. They helped me get a job placement.”*

Program participant

with literacy and essential skills training interwoven throughout the program. For example, if participants were working on resumé building, the instructor would explain which essential skills participants were working on, such as **writing**, and integrate writing tasks into the module. Although literacy and essential skills were an integral part of each learning module, particular attention was paid to **working with others, oral communication, writing** and **document use** since these were identified as the essential skills requiring the most development to meet employer needs.

The program’s curriculum development was supported by various HRSDC literacy and essential skills tools that were used throughout the program including What are Essential Skills?, the Vocabulary Building Workbook, Communications Essentials – A Modular Workshop and Oral Communication in the Canadian Workplace videos.

To further enhance the learner’s experience, the training facilitator and a manager/project partner from the Salvation Army delivered workshops that dealt with the five BESI areas within the context of life skills, addressing some of the client group’s particular needs.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

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This program was designed to assist individuals who face barriers to employment and/or further education and training. However, a challenge in running the program was recognizing when a client had too many barriers to

participate, for example, the client was unable to function in a classroom setting. The MSC had to make sure that the learning environment was a safe and healthy place for all participants.

The wraparound service component, which was so important for removing barriers to success, is not part of the MSC's regular programming. The program was built from the ground up, designed by the MSC for the one year pilot. While there is desire and interest to continue the program, certain challenges would first need to be addressed. For example, the MSC does not have a regular case manager, and the existing staff does not have the

time or capacity to provide that level of individualized case management. However, since the curriculum for this project overlapped with the adult basic literacy programs and employment services, some aspects of this pilot project could be implemented fairly easily into the MSC's regular programming. For example, the literacy program outcomes could be linked with employability.

## Outcomes and Impacts

The program was beneficial in a number of ways. Upon completion of the program, clients had improved their literacy and essential skills, and had also made progress toward removing the barriers that were preventing them from using the MSC's regular employment services or toward pursuing further education and training. For example, participants who had tried before to get their GED (General Educational Development) but failed now had the confidence and skills to pass. With increased self-esteem, they felt that they could function and succeed. The program had a real impact for participants who generally experienced increased confidence, the removal of employment barriers, progress towards skills development, and a greater understanding of the need for further education and training.

Of those who completed the program, 61% improved in at least one of the three skill areas (**reading, document use and numeracy**) as determined using the PDQ pre- and

### Benefits for Participants

- Improved access to education and employment services
- Increased confidence
- New outlook on continuous learning
- Recognized importance of career planning

post-assessments, and 33% of participants improved all three skills.

The results of the BESI pre- and post-inventory of barriers showed that 90% of participants who completed the program had a decrease in barriers in one of the five areas (personal and financial; emotional and physical; career decision-making and planning; job-seeking knowledge; and training and education), and 60% had a decrease in four or five areas. The MSC found that once clients had improved their personal, financial, emotional and physical barriers, they were better able to work on the others and identify a career path and/or move on to education and training to attain the goals that they had set for themselves.

The workforce literacy and essential skills special project also had an impact on the organization. By bridging the adult basic literacy programs and employment services, the MSC was able to provide a complete wraparound service that greatly contributed to the success of the project. By looking at client needs in a holistic way, the project helped Ontarians who would not be successful with regular stand alone programs, but needed that wraparound component to address their multiple barriers.

*“My experience in the Essential Skills program was excellent. I received all the help I needed. It was very helpful in providing all the skills that you needed for finding a job. It provided me with a job and assistance with going back to school.”*

Program participant

## Use as a Model

The MSC has demonstrated that this is a successful model for reaching individuals who face barriers to employment and/or further education and training, and whose particular needs are not being met by existing programs.

Employment programs that offer literacy and essential skills training should be tailored around the needs of the community if they are to be successful at meeting the individual goals of participants. For example, the issues affecting a rural community will be different from those affecting a high density urban area.

Service providers could also look into implementing a wraparound component in their current programs. Having a case manager/wraparound consultant to provide individual

### KEY INGREDIENTS TO SUCCESS:

1. Case manager available to support participants
2. Wraparound services are provided
3. Programming is targeted to meet specific client needs

support to each participant and coordinate services is a key component to helping those with barriers to success. For the MSC, being co-located with other social services also added value to the program. However, the important thing is that case managers are familiar with local offerings and able to refer clients to related services that meet their needs.

## Practical Tips to Help You Get Started

1. **Establish a network of partners that can help you to succeed.** Check out **Developing Partnerships to support Literacy and Essential Skills** for more information.
2. **Learn about resources available to assess essential skills needs and support skills development.** You can find free profiles, quizzes, checklists, workbooks and more on the **HRSDC website**.
3. **Create an action plan. Taking Action: A Guide** introduces a seven step process for developing and integrating essential skills training in the workplace. From performing a needs assessment, to selecting training techniques, and carrying out an evaluation, this guide can help prepare you to embed essential skills in your organization.

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