Service Providers’ Perceptions of the Challenges of Delivering Services to Vulnerable Adults in Ontario: 

Results of the 2015 Survey
Introduction

The Ontario employment and training sector in Ontario delivers services and supports to help a wide range of clients reach their full potential. However, not all clients are created equal. Some experience few or no barriers, while others face multiple barriers which impede their ability to achieve their employment and training goals. Numerous studies show that more vulnerable individuals\(^1\) often require intensive and complex wrap around supports. Simply providing employment and training services may not produce meaningful outcomes for such clients.\(^2\)

Recent reports have suggested that Ontario’s employment and training systems is struggling to meet the needs of vulnerable clients.\(^3\) The authors highlight the high rate at which clients return to Ontario Works and attribute this in part to the nature of the labour market and the prevalence of temporary low wage jobs. However, this high rate may also occur because the current employment and training structures fail to provide adequate integrated supports to address complex barriers to employment.\(^4\)

The Employment Ontario system has recently been transformed to place greater emphasis on referrals, service coordination and vulnerable clients. It is important to understand how service providers are achieving service referral and how they perceive the challenges they encounter when providing services to vulnerable individuals. To accomplish these ends, the survey *Understanding Vulnerable Individuals in Programming* collected information about the categories of vulnerable clients who frequently use employment and training services and about the challenges that such service providers face when providing services to these clients. This report of the survey results contributes to ongoing efforts to enhance employment and training supports for those Ontarians who need them most.
Survey Background

The following findings are based on data from the *Understanding Vulnerable Individuals in Programming* survey, which was administered online between January 23 and February 13, 2015. The intention behind the survey was to develop a better understanding of the obstacles faced by vulnerable and multiple barrier clients of employment and training services and the specific challenges that service providers face when addressing the service needs of such clients. The questions were designed to be answered from the perspective of the organization which the respondent works for. For this reason, respondents were not asked to report their position within the organization. It is unclear whether the questions were answered by groups of respondents within the organization or by a single respondent. In order to ensure an adequate responses rate, respondents were not asked to consult program data when answering, so the results are based on estimates provided by the respondents.

In total, 113 people representing organizations across the entire Employment Ontario network completed the survey. The majority of respondents work for Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) service organizations.

The answers to each question are analyzed in the following sections:

- Respondents and Their Organizations
- Categories of Vulnerable and Multiple Barrier Clients Served and Challenges They Face
- Challenges in service delivery
- Service Referral Challenges
The service providers who responded to the survey represent employment and training agencies that provide services in communities across Ontario (see Figure 1). Many respondents (37%) work for organizations based in Central Ontario. A quarter of respondents (26%) are located in Western Ontario, and 21% in Northern Ontario. A smaller percentage (16%) work in Eastern Ontario.

![Figure 1 - Location of Respondents’ Organizations](image)

The size of organizations varies (see Figure 2). The majority of respondents (68%) work for small organizations (35 staff or fewer), while a quarter (26%) work for large organizations (over 75 staff and offering services in multiple locations). A much smaller percentage (6.5%) work for medium-size organizations with 35-75 staff.
The number of clients that organizations serve is consistent with these findings (see Figure 3). Nearly half of the respondents (46%) work in organizations that served a small number of clients (fewer than 400) in the previous fiscal year, while a minority (19%) state that their organizations served over 2000 clients in the same time period.
According to respondents, the organizations that they represent offer diverse services (see Figure 4). The most common program is literacy and basic skills (79%). Of these organizations, 14% (or 11% of the total sample) provide Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) only. A quarter of the organizations (22%) do not provide LBS services, and roughly half of these (29% of the sample) provide employment support services. Other services offered include computer literacy (61%), education (45%), open learning (21%) and labour market information (20%).

**Figure 4 - Types of Services Provided by Respondents’ Organization**
Figure 5 - Proportion of Single-Service and Multiple-Service Organizations

- 87% Multiple Services
- 12% Single Service

Figure 6 - Proportion of Organizations that Provide LBS and Non-LBS Services

- 66% No LBS
- 22% LBS Only
- 11% LBS and Additional Services
Categories of Vulnerable and Multiple Barrier Clients Served and Challenges They Face

The respondents provide information about the sources of income of their clients (see Figure 7). Ontario Works recipients are the largest group: of the respondents, 38% report that OW recipients make up 20-49% of their clientele. Conversely, WSIB recipients make up the smallest proportion of clients since 54% of respondents indicate that such clients comprise 1-10% of their clientele, and 34% of respondents report no WSIB recipients as clients during the previous fiscal year.

Respondents estimate the proportion of their organization’s clients who are deemed vulnerable or distant from employment (see Figure 8). In their opinion, having less than a high school education is the most common feature of vulnerable or distant from employment clients: quarter of the respondents (22%) report that 75% or more clients have not completed high school, and 18% report that between 51 and 74% of clients have not earned a high school diploma. A significant percentage of clients are long-term unemployed (for six months or more): 13% of respondents estimate that 75% or more of their clients have been without work for over six months, and 18% report that between 51 and 74% of clients have not worked for a long period. Newcomers, those with insecure housing, and Aboriginals rarely accessed services, according to the respondents.
The respondents also provide information about the vulnerable groups they have seen most frequently in the last fiscal year (see Figure 9). Consistent with the information in Figure 8, 13% of respondents report that their organization most frequently sees clients who have not completed high school. Similarly, 14% of respondents state that they most frequently provided services to unemployed clients in the last fiscal year.
Respondents also indicate that a large proportion of clients belong to one or more vulnerable groups (see Figure 10). Over a third of respondents (36%) state that at least three-quarters of their clients face multiple barriers to employment, while 21% estimate that over half do so. No respondent says that not a single client faces multiple barriers. Clients with multiple barriers often require more intensive and complex supports, and agencies often provide or coordinate several services to address their needs.

Figure 9 - Categories of Vulnerable Adults Most Frequently Served by Respondents’ Organization

Figure 10 - Proportion of Clients Who Face Multiple Barriers to Employment, According to Respondent
Respondents also provide information about the specific challenges that vulnerable clients experience. The most frequently reported challenges are low income (81%), low self-esteem (75%), transportation difficulties (68%), and mental health issues (60%). The least frequent response is time constraint, though almost a third of respondents (30%) choose this response.

**Figure 11 - Most Common Challenges Faced by Vulnerable Adults Served by the Respondent’s Organization**
Challenges in Service Delivery

**Common Challenges**

This section of the report outlines some of the challenges in delivering services to vulnerable, distant from employment and multiple barrier clients. In total, 55 respondents answered an open-ended question. The responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Common responses were identified and colour coded into themes. Because the analysis of open ended questions consisted of a qualitative approach, quantitative data is not provided in this section. The goal of this type of analysis is to uncover general themes within the responses, not to report specific figures from the data. Major themes which emerge from the responses include:

1. **Lack of motivation among clients to complete training.**

   Several respondents identify low motivation as a major challenge in service delivery to vulnerable adults. Certain respondents suggest that this lack of motivation may stem from other barriers (food insecurity, housing stability, etc.). Such barriers make it difficult for clients to prioritize skills training. One respondent points to a sense of apathy among clients because previous attempts at skills interventions had failed. Low motivation often leads to inconsistent attendance, which threatens success.

   - “Client commitment - so many other issues preoccupy, such as having basic needs met.”
   - “Lack of initiative and drive.”
   - “Inconsistent attendance to programs, not understanding the time constraints required of educational institutions, awareness and understanding about the services offered”
   - “Lack of motivation and pathy of clients due to many failed referrals, etc. lack of change in their lives.”
   - “Most youth (18-29) lack commitment and follow-through to complete training program.”
   - “It is difficult to keep people with mental health issues focused on education. Pushing people into education before they are “ready” to commit to learning is a waste of time for all parties involved.”

2. **Insufficient resources, expertise and times**

   Service providers indicated that they had difficulty referring clients to support services in their The responses also reveal that service providers are overwhelmed by the complex nature of service delivery to vulnerable clients. Many believe that their organization does not have enough time or resources to address the multifaceted needs of such clients. Some respondents report that their organization lacks the capacity to address these needs, while others believe lack of expertise is a major issue.

   - “Lack of expertise in helping people with multiple barriers.”
   - “Lack of resources—time and staff.”
   - “Our location makes transportation challenging. Some clients we can not provide the services they are looking for.”
   - “Funding does not take into account the amount of time needed with clients to prepare them for successful employment.”
• “Lack of training, time constraints, limited programs/services for clients with barriers.”
• “Uncertainties about child care, insufficient basic support from OW [Ontario Works], inadequate computers and devices, inadequate essential skills (avoidance of writing/editing/upgrading/customizing of job search documents, poor document use skills in service of job search, tendency of program graduates to isolate themselves and struggle to make the right kind of job search efforts, unstable living arrangements and changing phone numbers make it hard to follow up with graduates, grads are referred to EO [Employment Ontario] agencies that are not financially motivated to actually find jobs for clients.”

**Contract Challenges**

Another open-ended question asks that respondents evaluate whether contract requirements hamper their organization's capacity to provide services to vulnerable and multiple barrier clients. In total, 46 respondents answered this question. Common themes that emerged from the responses are:

1. **Contract requirements do not hamper ability to provide services**
   Roughly 35% of respondents indicate that contract requirements do not hamper their ability to provide services. Most simply replied “no” to this question without elaborating on their response.

2. **Cumbersome administrative requirements**
   Many respondents explained that the administrative work and data collection required under existing contracts taxes existing resources, which often limits the amount of time and effort for dedicated service delivery to vulnerable clients.
   
   • “Yes when admin takes up more time than service, it is a problem”
   • “Given our limited staff and limited time, our resources are already stretched to tend to the needs of current clients/students. Reaching out to potential vulnerable clients is a major project that we are working on, but it takes time to develop the contacts, attract and retain the clients.”
   • “Yes as we have had to cut the resources we had in place for case management and other client support.”
   • “Too much paperwork and not enough one-on-one time”
   • “Limited training and time to be able to handle specific issues so clients are referred elsewhere but they often return looking for additional help. Not able to provide much.”
   • “Yes. Far too much time is spent on government reporting, which costs client one-on-one time.”
3. Unrealistic targets

Many respondents express frustration about the achievement targets mandated in funding contracts. Some believe that these targets are unattainable for many vulnerable clients. Others feel that programs may take on additional clients to meet these targets, putting additional strain on resources. Some respondents point out that vulnerable clients require longer periods of time to reach the achievement targets but that longer intervention do not always align with contract priorities.

- “In the case of Federal Youth programming like Skills Link, yes. Provincial MTCU [Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities] outcomes include credit for serving the vulnerable so it is more realistic, but still expects significant progress.”
- “Yes. It seems we are being asked to focus on higher level clients who can get through our programs quickly. Those who are lower level and more at risk are seen as a lower priority, and so developing resources for this group is not seen as a focus.”
- “Yes - unrealistic targets mean that we have to take many other clients, not in this group and that takes away from the time/energy to work with vulnerable clients.”
- “Yes- EO [Employment Ontario] requires achievement above what many clients are able to attain particularly within the time frames specified.”
- “Yes, some of the most vulnerable show insufficient progress and don’t fit into the ministry criteria.”

Funding Challenges

Another set of questions asks respondents to describe funding structure challenges their organization has encountered and program innovations to address these challenges. A total of 39 respondents answered these questions. The following themes emerged from the responses:

1. Inadequate funding to address complex service needs

A number of respondents note that the funding structure limits the ability to provide needs assessments and vital supports. This problem is heightened in areas where access to other community services is limited.

- “Disability testing for adults with undiagnosed learning disabilities. Testing costs around $1500 per person, and many of our clients have undiagnosed learning disabilities. While we can provide certain accommodations within our program, students “crash and burn” in their college-level, apprenticeship-level training without supports. Supports aren’t provided unless a student has documentation from a medical professional of a learning disability.”
- “Restrictions around the use of training supports (i.e., only for transportation or child care).”
- “Programs can’t afford multiple locations or are not designed to serve the needs of vulnerable learners. We need food pantries, to be easily accessible in the neighbourhoods where people live.”
- “Our assessment service remains fee-for-service so we require a community agency to subsidize assessments for clients. If we had funding to provide this service, many more clients would get the service they need to be successful.”
• “Limited funding so cannot offer more on site support.”
• “Yes - what funding can be used for what service? Some of our services are covered by funding - some are not. “

2. Funding priorities and criteria
Many respondents indicate that funding priorities and criteria are not consistent with the realities of delivering services to vulnerable adults. Such clients often require long interventions before showing signs of progress, but the funding prioritizes demonstrated results within a short time frame, according to respondents .

• “Fast-tracking learners out the door, when literacy at community based programs requires long-term (1-2 years of ongoing work) to meet goals. AOLC [Academy of Learning College], needs more focus on the independence path. It is clear the funder set the bar inappropriately high, and will be setting up barriers to access! Programs will start to serve only easier to serve clients...we see this at the classroom programs downloading learners to small community programs, who have to meet the same provincial performance targets as college and TDSB programs have.”
• “Shift in federal funding for youth programs away from ‘vulnerable youth’ toward ‘higher achieving youth.’”
• “Funding is based on ‘successful’ clients who enter and exit quickly. The majority of our clients require long term support, but their stats are not counted until they leave our program.”
• “In order to serve ‘the best; clients and meet our quota of learners, multi-barrier clients take longer in our program and cost more to support.”
• “Academic Upgrading at the college is measured by the same suitability requirements as other community organizations. However, we each serve very different demographic populations, so the statistics are actually not measuring what we do well.”

Challenges with Service Referrals
The final section of this report summarizes the findings from a set of questions about service referral processes and challenges.

The respondents provide information about the frequency of their organization’s interactions with other service agencies in the local community (see Figure 12). Only 4% of the respondents report that their organization rarely interacts with community agencies. Most respondents state that their organization interacts with other agencies monthly. More than half report interacting with other community agencies on a weekly or daily basis.
The respondents also report on the frequency of interactions with employers (see Figure 13). These responses contrast sharply with those to the previous question. Of the respondents, 36% state that their organization rarely interacts with employers, and a quarter that their organization does not interact with employers at all. However, almost half of respondents (41%) report interaction with employers on a monthly, weekly or daily basis.
Service referral within the EO network is also an integral aspect of service delivery to vulnerable and multiple barrier adults. Respondents estimate the rate at which their organization referred clients to other community services in the previous fiscal year (see Figure 14). The majority (28%) indicate that their organization referred between 20 and 49% of their clientele to other services during that time period. A minority (20%) estimate that only 10 percent or less of clients were referred out. No respondent states that the organization did not refer a single client was referred to other services.

Figure 14 - Referrals of Clients to Other Services in the Community (Previous Fiscal Year)

Respondents also provide information about the most common types of service referrals (see Figure 15). The most frequent response is mental health and substance abuse counselling (66%). Other common responses include transportation (52%), child care (45%), and housing (48%). Family support and financial planning are the least frequent responses to this question.
The respondents evaluate if unfulfilled needs exist within their community for the support services listed in Figure 15 (see Figure 16). The majority (79%) responded “yes” to this question.
Respondents evaluate which services have the most unfilled needs in their community (see Figure 17). Respondents transportation services (56%), is the most common response, housing (51%), child care (35%) and mental health/substance abuse counselling (38%). These services also receive the most referrals (see Figure 17), which suggests that these services cannot meet the demand for them.

Figure 17- Respondents' Evaluation of Unfulfilled Local Service Needs

A follow up question asks whether the respondent’s organization provides any of the supports mentioned in Figure 17 (see Figure 18). Of respondents, 58% report that their organization provides at least one service internally while 42% state that their organization provides none of these supports.
Respondents provide detail on the categories of support mentioned in Figure 17 that their organization offers internally (see Figure 19). The respondent’s organization most frequently sponsors transportation (74%). Other supports that agencies provide internally are child care (34%), financial planning (26%), newcomer services (29%) and food and nutrition education (24%).
In answer to a further follow up question, the majority of respondents (61%) state that their organization does not have the capacity to provide the supports mentioned in Figure 17 internally (see Figure 20).

Figure 20 - Respondents’ Evaluation of Organization’s Capacity to Provide Supports Internally

A final set of questions inquire about the challenges associated with service referrals and the level of awareness of EO services among other community organizations and the general public.

The respondents describe how clients become aware of their services (see Figure 21). According to the majority of respondents (82%), clients discover their organization’s services through word of mouth or media (ads in newspapers, transit or internet). Only 15% of respondents suggest that their clients most often discover their services through other EO organizations.
The majority of respondents (61%) believe that other service organizations are unaware of their organization’s services (See Figure 22).
The respondents identify the challenging aspects of service referrals from the following choices:

- I don’t find service referral challenging
- Finding appropriate service organizations in my area
- Lack of solid referral channels
- Clients are unable to get to service organization
- Clients fail to report to service organization
- All of the above are equally as challenging (see Figure 23)

The majority of respondents (82%) find service referral challenging in some way, with only 18% reporting that they have no difficulties with the process. The most common choice is “All of the above are equally as challenging,” with a little over a third of respondents (34%) selecting this answer. Another 28% of respondents find that “Clients fail to report to service organization” is the most challenging aspect of service referral.

![Figure 23 - Most Challenging Aspect of Service Referral, According to Respondent](image)
Conclusion

Many clients of employment and training organizations face multiple barriers to success, and they often require complex and intensive supports to participate successfully in employment and training services. This report contains data about an aspect of this situation that has been rarely studied: service providers’ perceptions of the challenges they must overcome when addressing the complex needs of vulnerable and multiple barrier clients. As such, the survey results summarized here can contribute to the continuous improvement of employment and training services in Ontario.
For the purposes of this report, a “vulnerable client” has one or more of the following characteristics: criminal record, mental health issues, youth (18-29), older worker, health issues, single parent, less than high school education, newcomers, living in insecure housing or homeless, unemployed for over six months, Aboriginal, disability. These characteristics are derived from EOIS suitability criteria and groups that Lankin and Sheikh (2012) identified as distant from employment.


Lankin and Sheikh, 2012; Rowen, 2011.

The list of characteristics was established using indicators from EOIS suitability criteria and groups identified as distant from employment in Lankin and Sheikh (2012).

Lankin and Sheikh, 2012; Rowen, 2011.
Appendices
Appendix A: Survey Questions

Below is a list of the questions that were asked in the Understanding Vulnerable Individuals in Programming survey.

1. Our organization is located in

2. Please specify the types of services your organization provides {check all that apply}

3. The size of your organization is best described as:

4. How many clients in total did your organization offer direct service to last fiscal year?

5. For the last fiscal period, please estimate the proportion who accessed your services who were:

6. Below is a list of groups that are at a higher risk of being distant from employment. For the last year, please estimate the portion of people that fall within one or more of these categories that accessed your services within the last year.

7. Of the groups listed in Question 6, please indicate the three most frequently served by your organization.

8. Please indicate the proportion of clients that face multiple barriers to employment (belonging to one or more of the “distant from employment” groups)

9. In your experience, what are the most common challenges faced by ‘vulnerable’ and/or multiple barrier clients in your community? (check all that apply)

10. How often do you connect with (phone, email, and in-person) other community agencies?

11. How often do you connect with (phone, email, and in-person) employers in your community?

12. What proportion of your clients were referred to other services in your community in the last fiscal year?

13. Which supports does your organization most frequently refer ‘vulnerable’ and/or multiple barrier clients to? {check all that apply}

14. Do you think there is an unfulfilled need for any one of the above services in your community?

15. If you answered yes to the question above, please check all of the services that apply.
16. In your experience what is the most challenging aspect of service referral? {choose only one}

17. What is the most common way clients find our about your program or service? {Choose only one}

18. Do you feel that most of the other service organizations in your community are aware of your organization and the services you provide?

19. Does your organization provide any of the above supports internally?

20. If you answered yes to the question above, please state which supports {check all that apply}

21. Does your organization have the capacity to provide these services?

22. Please list some of the major challenges encountered when providing services to ‘vulnerable and/or multiple barrier clients.

23. Do the existing policies in place help you meet the service needs of ‘vulnerable’ and/or multiple barrier clients?

24. Do contract requirements hamper your ability to serve ‘vulnerable’ and/or multiple barrier clients? {please provide details}

25. Are you or your organization considering any of the following program innovations? {check all that apply}

26. Can you identify some of the funding structure challenges that impede on you organization's ability to serve ‘vulnerable’ and/or multiple barrier clients?

27. Are there any other important challenges to providing services to ‘vulnerable’ and/or multiple barrier clients that have not yet been discussed in the survey? Please explain.
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