

Beyond the Urban Lens: Strengthening Rural and Remote Supported Employment Services in Canada

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Executive Summary

Building Equitable Employment Services in Rural and Remote Communities

Rural and remote employment service providers play a vital role in workforce development but operate with fewer resources than their urban counterparts. Geographic isolation, limited transportation, and inadequate support services create barriers, especially for individuals with disabilities. A collaborative approach is needed among policymakers, funders, service providers, and employers to ensure all Canadians can access meaningful employment.

Barriers to Workforce Participation

Rural and remote communities face unique employment challenges, including fewer job opportunities, inadequate social supports, and unreliable transportation. These barriers disproportionately affect individuals with disabilities, who also encounter digital exclusion and employer reluctance to accommodate their needs.

Key findings from recent research:

- 40% of people with disabilities have declined jobs due to transportation issues, and 25% have left jobs for the same reason (Tessier et al., 2024).
- 20% of adults with disabilities in Canada do not use the internet, compared to 9% of adults without disabilities (Jetha et al., 2023).
- While 82% of employers believe their workforce is diverse, only 49% of job seekers agree (Borgen et al., 2024).

Without investments in transportation, assistive technology, and digital literacy, many individuals with disabilities living in rural and remote communities will continue to be excluded from the labour market.

Research Approach

This study builds on the 2022 ASPECT BC report *Refocusing the Urban Lens for Rural and Remote Employment Services*, expanding the focus to include employment services for individuals with disabilities living in rural and remote communities. Conducted in partnership with provincial workforce development organizations and funded by the Canadian Association of Supported Employment, the study engaged 74 employment service

providers through virtual consultations in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia.

The research explored:

- Distance – Limited access to services and transportation.
- Workforce shortages – Challenges in attracting and retaining skilled career development staff.
- Connectivity – Internet access and digital literacy gaps.
- Funding structures – Rigid contracts and underfunded support services.
- Employer support – Training to promote inclusive workspaces.

Findings and Policy Considerations

1. Funding Does Not Reflect Rural Service and Supported Employment Costs: Standard per-client funding does not account for higher operating expenses or the need for adapted transportation.
2. Wraparound Supports Are Underfunded: Access to mental health, assistive technology, and case management are critical but often underfunded in employment service contracts for rural and remote communities and supported employment.
3. Rigid Outcome Targets Exclude Job Seekers: Funding models emphasize immediate job placements rather than incremental progress, limiting access for individuals with disabilities.
4. Multi-Year Contracts Do Not Adjust for Rising Costs: Most contracts lack cost-of-living adjustments, leading to funding shortfalls over time for the clients they serve and the people who deliver services.
5. Workforce Shortages Undermine Service Quality: Low wages and lack of training support make it difficult for employment service providers to attract and retain skilled employment service professionals.
6. Limited Digital Access Reduces Employment Opportunities: High internet costs and broadband gaps prevent job seekers from accessing virtual services and online work opportunities.
7. Employers Need More Support in Disability-Inclusive Hiring: Many employers lack knowledge of workplace accommodations, and some perceive them as costly despite their affordability.

Recommendations

To improve employment outcomes in rural and remote areas, interest-holders should work together to:

1. Adjust per-client funding to reflect regional cost variations and support transportation solutions, ensuring equitable access to supported employment services in rural and remote communities.
2. Expand funding for wraparound services, including mental health, case management, and assistive technology.
3. Implement milestone-based funding to recognize gradual employment progress.
4. Include cost-of-living adjustments in multi-year employment contracts for both clients and service providers.
5. Strengthen career development workforce recruitment and retention through wage increases and professional development funding.
6. Expand broadband infrastructure and digital skills training.
7. Enhance employer education and engagement through incentives and mentorship programs.
8. Develop a flexible, regionally responsive, and disability-inclusive funding model.

Conclusion

Tackling rural and remote employment challenges requires collaboration between policymakers, funders, service providers, and employers. Funding models must reflect real costs, long-term supports, and changing economic conditions. By working together on flexible, inclusive, and regionally responsive solutions, we can ensure that all job seekers—regardless of location or ability—can participate fully in the workforce.

Introduction

The Need for Equitable Employment Services in Rural and Remote Communities

Employment service providers in rural and remote regions play a critical role in supporting job seekers and businesses, yet they continue to operate with fewer resources than their urban counterparts. Geographic isolation limited public transportation, and a lack of

wraparound services create significant barriers to workforce participation, particularly for individuals with disabilities. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensuring that all Canadians, regardless of location, have equitable access to employment opportunities and the ability to fully participate in, and contribute to, the labour market.

Barriers to Workforce Participation for Individuals with Disabilities

Rural and remote communities have long driven Canada's economic growth, particularly in resource-based industries, and remain centres of resilience and innovation. However, they face distinct challenges, including fewer job opportunities, limited healthcare and social supports, and significant transportation barriers. For individuals with disabilities, these challenges are compounded by a lack of accessible transit, digital exclusion, and employer hesitancy to provide accommodations. Many workplaces perceive themselves as inclusive, yet job seekers with disabilities continue to encounter rigid job roles, insufficient accommodations, and persistent misconceptions about the cost of workplace adjustments. Without adequate supports, many individuals with disabilities in rural and remote areas remain disconnected from the workforce, limiting their ability to achieve financial independence and long-term career success.

Recent research highlights the impact of these barriers. Tessier et al. (2024) found that 40 percent of people with disabilities declined job offers due to transportation difficulties, while 25 percent left a job for the same reason. Jetha et al. (2023) identified a 'digital divide,' reporting that 20 percent of adults with disabilities in Canada do not use the internet, compared to 9 percent of adults without disabilities. These findings underscore the urgent need for increased funding for assistive technologies, digital training, and accessible transportation. Without these investments, individuals with disabilities in rural and remote communities will continue to face systemic exclusion from meaningful employment.

Expanding the Scope of Research

This position paper expands on the 2022 ASPECT BC report *Refocusing the Urban Lens for Rural and Remote Employment Services*, which examined employment service challenges in rural and remote British Columbia but lacked a focus on supported employment and areas outside of BC. The present study broadens the scope to include employment service providers from British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec. This research identifies systemic gaps in funding, policy, and service delivery, conducted in partnership with regional workforce development organizations and with oversight from the CASE.

Applying a Rural, Remote, and Disability-Inclusive Lens

By applying a rural and remote lens alongside a disability lens, this paper highlights the need for policy solutions that go beyond one-size-fits-all approaches. Equitable access to employment services is about securing jobs and ensuring that individuals with disabilities who live in rural and remote communities have the resources and supports necessary to thrive within the labour market. This paper aims to inform funders, policymakers, and advocates about job seekers' unique barriers in rural and remote communities and provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen employment services, improve workforce participation, and support economic resilience across Canada.

Methodology

Data Collection & Research Focus

This study uses qualitative research methods, including a review of academic and grey literature, to examine employment service delivery in rural and remote communities across Canada as they pertain to supported employment. The research explores the relationship between government and contracted social services and identifies challenges and strategies specific to supported employment. The study highlights the importance of tailored, inclusive workforce development approaches. The research was conducted in five provinces—British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec—to capture regional differences and common barriers. This position paper also identifies solutions to some of these barriers that participants identified throughout the consultations.

Consultation Process

On behalf of CASE, the researcher engaged 74 employment service providers with expertise supporting clients with disabilities in rural and remote communities. The study used a community-based approach to ensure the findings captured real-world challenges and solutions, drawing directly from frontline service providers' experiences. Participants represented rural and remote regions across five provinces, with specialists in disability employment services invited to contribute.

Recruitment efforts included newsletter outreach, targeted emails to members, national sector event listings, social media promotion, and collaboration with the Canadian Coalition of Community-Based Employability Training (CCCBET) members and their provincial

associations. A local service provider facilitated outreach in Manitoba, where no provincial association exists, connecting career development professionals within their networks.

There were five virtual consultations between January and March 2025. These sessions built on ASPECT's 2022 findings from Refocusing the Urban Lens of Rural and Remote Employment Services report. We used the 2022 findings in our consultations to create an investigative framework – a starting point for the discussions. Each meeting followed a structured format, allowing service providers to share their perspectives and shape the areas of investigation.

Technology & Analysis

There were five Zoom consultations providing an accessible platform for participants across vast geographic regions. In Quebec, a French-speaking facilitator led the discussions to address language considerations. Each session was recorded and transcribed, capturing verbal contributions and comments shared through the Zoom chat function. In Quebec, some respondents also provided input through emailed responses. A thematic data analysis identified common challenges, gaps, and strategies. This structured approach focused on actionable solutions, allowing recurring themes to emerge organically.

Each consultation explored four key themes:

- Distance – its impact on service accessibility, transportation barriers, and client engagement.
- Recruitment and Retention – challenges in attracting and keeping skilled staff in remote areas.
- Connectivity – internet access, digital literacy, and virtual service delivery issues.
- Contracts – how funding structures affect service sustainability and flexibility.

Participants responded to three guiding questions:

1. What challenges arise related to this theme?
2. What existing funding supports or resources help address these challenges?
3. What improvements would strengthen service delivery?

Although time limited discussions on every topic, recurring themes surfaced, reinforcing the need for systemic policy changes. The thematic analysis of the transcripts provided a data-driven foundation for the recommendations in this report, ensuring that the voices of rural and remote employment service providers informed policy solutions.

Anonymity

Participants' ideas and comments will remain anonymous, except for the province in which the information is shared. The researcher provided participants the opportunity to leave the virtual consultation before recording the session.

Language of Consultations

The consultation sessions were conducted in English, except in Quebec, where sessions were in French with facilitation support from a partnering association.

Key Themes and Findings from the Consultations

Distance

A significant challenge for job seekers with disabilities in rural and remote areas is the limited presence of employment service providers and the distances they must go to find services if they are not able to access services virtually. Many clients with barriers to employment require personalized, hands-on support to secure and retain employment, yet services in these areas are sparse, resulting in longer wait times, increased travel burdens, and reduced access to job placement opportunities.

While each province had unique insights during the consultations, it was striking how consistently distance-related challenges appeared across all regions.

Lack of Transportation & Accessible Transportation

Transportation is a fundamental issue affecting employment accessibility. Access to transportation is difficult in rural and remote areas, but we heard that they are especially lacking when it comes to accessible transportation. Many of the respondents gave examples of the challenges they face with helping clients navigate their transportation needs.

We don't have any public transit here. Transportation is a huge issue in northwestern Ontario. – Ontario, Speaker 2

The bus only goes once to Salmon Arm once a week. That's not helpful at all. – BC, Speaker 5

One barrier that I'm finding more common with my participants with disabilities is a lack of driver's license or even a learner's license. Lots of rural schools don't have the ability to offer Driver's Education to students anymore.
– Manitoba, Speaker 4

En fait, le transport dépend des horaires d'autobus scolaires. Donc s'il n'y a pas d'école, il n'y a pas de transport. – Quebec, Speaker 4
English: *The reality is that public transport depends on school bus schedules—so if there's no school, there's no transportation.*

While access to transit and transportation to employment services, job interviews, and retaining a job are challenging in rural and remote communities in general, the limited support for those living with disabilities is even more pronounced.

Il n'y a pas de financement pour le transport adapté dans certains endroits, ce qui signifie que les gens ne peuvent tout simplement pas se rendre au travail ou en formation. – Quebec, Speaker 2

English: There is no funding for adapted transportation in some areas, which means people simply cannot get to work or training.

Lack of Supporting Services

Wraparound services such as assessments, housing, assistive technologies, mental health, and food security supports are far less available in rural and remote communities than in urban areas and expensive to deliver. Clients often face long wait times or must travel great distances to access these essential supports. For those with disabilities, these inequities are even more pronounced. Throughout the consultations, we heard that while some services exist, accessing them comes at a significant cost—one that employment contracts do not cover—leaving individuals to rely on the generosity of community members and other social service agencies for support.

In some rural communities, there's a lack of wraparound supports available. Sometimes, the employment service provider is the only service in the community—even though it's not a direct or billable part of services. – Alberta, Zoom chat 2

De plus, il y a beaucoup moins de services communautaires en région et l'offre de certaines mesures (ex: PAAS-action) est plus restreinte. L'accès à tous les services offerts en présentiel est complexifiée en raison du manque de transport de la clientèle desservie. – Quebec, Written Response 3
English: There are far fewer community services in the regions, and the range of measures on offer (e.g., PAAS-action¹) is more limited. Access to all in-person services is complicated due to the lack of transportation for the clients served.

¹ PAAS Action (Programme d'aide et d'accompagnement social) is a social assistance and support program in Quebec, offered by Emploi Québec, designed to help individuals who are distant from the labor market improve their socio-professional skills and integrate into the workforce. (Croissance Travail, n.d.)

The wraparound services are all supposed to be there, but they're not as accessible as they seem either. Either really long wait times or all of those other organizations don't have the manpower and are kind of stretched as thin as they possibly can. – BC, Speaker 10

We need more support. The wait list for other agencies is two to three years, and I'm talking just to get on, you know, disability employment support to do mental health support. – Ontario, Speaker 5

We do have access to Work-Related Employment Supports through our contracts, but it is limited to \$511 per person per year. To spend those funds on transportation depletes that very quickly and leaves nothing for other supports that the client may need, such as work clothes or cell phone minutes. – Alberta, Zoom chat 3

As a result, many individuals are left waiting years for essential services that directly impact their ability to secure and maintain employment, forcing them to remain outside the labour market until adequate support becomes available.

Ensuring job seekers with disabilities in rural and remote communities have equitable access to employment opportunities requires comprehensive wraparound support services and flexible funding models that address their unique barriers, from accessibility and assistive technology to mental health and transportation.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruiting and retaining qualified career development professionals in rural and remote communities is a significant challenge due to a limited labour pool and competition from post-secondary institutions, government agencies, and large resource companies. Once trained, many career development professionals leave for higher wages, stable funding, and better career opportunities.

Funding cutbacks, stagnant wages within existing contracts, and position consolidation create further barriers for employment service organizations. Since supported employment services require specialized training, many staff members are learning on the job, often without formal training, which affects the quality and consistency of support for clients with disabilities.

Limited Labour Pool and Competition from Other Sectors

Recruitment and retention is a big issue as well, of course. We often get applicants that have little to no skill or even transferable skills for the postings. We do need people that can have specialized skill or can work with the inclusion groups and with specialized populations. – BC, Speaker 10

Recruitment is a major issue. Our wages are not competitive, and we're losing staff to the public sector and private industries. It's difficult to find candidates with experience in employment services, so we're constantly training new hires who often leave once they gain skills. – Manitoba, Speaker 6

The competition here with other social service agencies is really tough. They're offering at least \$10 more per hour than we can afford to pay. – Ontario, Speaker 5

On forme des gens, et ils partent ensuite pour des emplois mieux payés ailleurs. – Quebec, Speaker 4

English: We train people, and then they leave for better-paid jobs elsewhere. We just can't compete with salaries in other sectors.

It's very challenging to recruit. The expectations set out in some of the contracts—wanting someone with a degree and specific experience—are great, but in a town of 5,000 people, those people have already moved elsewhere for better pay. – Alberta, Speaker 2

Funding Constraints and Lack of Wage Increases

We need more funding to hire more staff to do our jobs. Being one person providing all services and wraparound support is not sustainable. – Manitoba, Speaker 13

Présentement, je suis seule de mon équipe qui est supposée être de quatre personnes. – Quebec, Speaker 4

English: Right now, I'm the only one left from my team, which was supposed to have four people.

With the budget crisis we've been operating in for the last year, it's a race to the bottom. It's really hard to keep long-term staff because you can't work in wage increases—they're not built into budgets. – Alberta, Speaker 6

We're losing staff to federally funded Indigenous employment services. They can offer higher wages, and we just can't compete. – Ontario, Speaker 1

We can have job postings up for months, reposted and reposted, and still not fill the position. – BC, Speaker 10

Lack of Formal Training and On-the-Job Learning

We find the training curve never really ends for our organizations. The Government of Alberta implemented numerous new data entry tools, and the responsibility falls on us to figure out when updates are needed. The increased requirement for data management within our contract is a staffing strain. – Alberta, Zoom chat 6

For us, we work exclusively with folks with disabilities, so they learn on the job through regular orientation and onboarding. But specialized training is something we have to develop in-house. – Alberta, Speaker 2

On forme des gens, et ils partent ensuite pour des emplois mieux payés ailleurs. On ne peut tout simplement pas rivaliser avec les salaires des autres secteurs. – Quebec, Speaker 4

English: We train people, and then they leave for better-paid jobs elsewhere. We just can't compete with salaries in other sectors.

Addressing recruitment and retention challenges in rural and remote employment services requires systemic changes to funding structures, wage competitiveness, and professional development opportunities. Without stable funding to offer competitive salaries, service providers will continue to lose trained staff to better-paying sectors, perpetuating high turnover and service disruptions. Additionally, the reliance on on-the-job learning due to limited formal training opportunities weakens the ability of career development professionals to effectively support job seekers, particularly those with disabilities. To build a sustainable workforce, targeted investments in training programs, wage subsidies, and long-term funding commitments are essential to attracting and retaining skilled professionals in rural and remote communities.

Connectivity

Virtual employment services are expanding, but many job seekers with disabilities in rural and remote communities remain excluded due to poor broadband infrastructure, limited telecommunications availability, and the high costs of accessing internet and cellular services. However, reliable internet is essential for those who rely on assistive technologies such as screen readers and voice-to-text software. Without these supports, individuals with disabilities face even greater isolation from virtual employment opportunities.

While funders, program designers, and policymakers in urban areas may occasionally experience “dead spots” in Wi-Fi or cellular service, these disruptions are persistent and widespread in rural and remote communities. The need to shift the urban lens becomes especially clear when considering the impact of connectivity gaps on access to supported employment services.

Even when internet access is available, digital literacy remains a significant barrier. Many job seekers, particularly older workers and those with disabilities, struggle to navigate online job applications, remote work tools, and employment services. Yet, specialized digital skills training is often unavailable in rural areas, further limiting access to employment opportunities and supported employment services.

L'impact pourrait être décrit comme la fracture démographique du numérique. Comme l'accès numérique est inégale sur le territoire, l'infrastructure parfois lente ou déficiente et la popularité de la culture numérique, les services de l'emploi doivent repenser et soutenir les chercheurs d'emploi en lien avec la littératie numérique. – Quebec, Written Response 1

English: The impact could be described as the digital demographic divide. As digital access is uneven across the territory, the infrastructure is sometimes slow or deficient, and the popularity of digital culture means employment services need to rethink and support job seekers in relation to digital literacy.

Even if they do have the skills, they actually have no access to the technology. Some of our communities don't have a library. They don't have anywhere to even go to access it. – Alberta, Speaker 2

There are streets where, if you're on one side, you have Internet, and if you're on the other side, you don't. This makes it very difficult to offer alternative solutions for people who do not have transportation. – BC, Speaker 7

Bridging the digital divide is essential to ensuring equitable access to employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities in rural and remote communities. Limited broadband infrastructure, high costs, and a lack of accessible technology continue to exclude individuals from digital employment services, creating additional barriers to workforce participation. Even when internet access is available, digital literacy gaps prevent many from effectively using online job platforms, remote work tools, and assistive technologies. As one consultation participant noted, there is no public access to technology in some communities, making it impossible for job seekers to engage with virtual services. Others described internet access as inconsistent, with connectivity varying from one street to the next, further limiting access to digital employment supports. To address these challenges, employment services programming and funding must rethink how they support job seekers in developing digital skills while advocating for expanded broadband infrastructure and affordable technology solutions. Without these critical investments, rural and remote job seekers with disabilities will continue to face disproportionate barriers to employment.

Addressing these barriers requires a fundamental shift in how employment services are structured, ensuring that people with disabilities, particularly those in rural and remote communities, have equitable access to job opportunities.

Contracts

Across all consultations, participants emphasized that employment service contracts do not adequately reflect the needs of rural and remote communities. While challenges related to distance, workforce shortages, and connectivity were widely acknowledged, another key issue emerged—the rigidity of funding contracts.

Contract Funding Levels Do Not Reflect Rural and Remote Needs

In all the contracts that I've worked on in the past 25 years, there's never been enough funding to have the amount of staff needed. And because the funding is lower for rural communities, those positions are usually the first to be eliminated. – BC, Speaker 2

One of the basics of many contracts is a 10% administration fee, but based on our analysis, the reality is that it should start at 25% because of all the additional costs involved in rural service delivery. – Ontario, Speaker 2

We have to bring in specialized assessors to meet contract requirements, but there's no reimbursement for that. It comes out of fixed fees, and we try to group clients together to reduce costs, but it's still an ongoing issue. – BC, Speaker 6

Rigid Outcome Targets for Job Seekers with Disabilities

Outcome targets that measure direct connections to employment are not always suitable for job seekers with disabilities. Career development professionals (CDPs) often work with clients facing multiple barriers, requiring a more flexible approach that recognizes progress through various stages of employment readiness. Some contracts include provisions for milestone-based outcomes, allowing for individualized support, but this is not a standard practice across all agreements. Without broader adoption of these flexible measures, many job seekers with disabilities may not receive the tailored assistance they need to achieve sustainable employment.

In some contracts, payments are tied to job placements rather than recognizing the progress clients make along their employment pathway. But for many job seekers with disabilities, the journey to work includes multiple milestones that don't fit into standard outcome measures. – BC, Speaker 2

We need more flexible contracts that recognize the realities of rural and remote employment services, especially for those with disabilities who may require long-term or intermittent support. – Ontario, Speaker 2

The cost limits per client are restrictive. Clients with barriers to employment are more expensive to serve, but some contracts impose ceilings that make it difficult to provide the necessary level of support. – BC, Speaker 4

Challenges with Multi-Year Agreements and Cost Increases

The contract terms can also be a challenge for supported employment service providers. Multi-year agreements must reflect the increases in costs year over year. Operating with year one funds in years two to five of a five-year contract is equivalent to funding cuts for

each year of the contract. According to Statistics Canada (2025), the cost of living in Canada rose by 17.4% between 2020 and 2024. While contractors can request funding increases, the average annual rise of 4.35% far exceeds the 2–2.5% adjustments seen in contracts before 2018 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017). Without built-in cost-of-living adjustments, employment service providers struggle to sustain services over time.

Operating with year one funding in years two, three, four, and five of a multi-year contract is essentially a funding cut. Our costs go up every year, but our budgets remain static. – Manitoba, Speaker 6

The cost of living has skyrocketed, but contract increases haven't kept up. Before 2018, a 2% to 2.5% annual increase was reasonable, but with inflation rates averaging over 4% per year, contracts need to reflect real costs. – Ontario, Speaker 2

They recalculated the living wage here, and it's now at \$27.40 per hour. We simply can't match that with the fixed wages outlined in government contracts. – BC, Speaker 11

Funding Constraints and the Impact on Service Delivery

The contract and service delivery chasm increases considering the additional costs associated with delivering services in rural and remote areas, adding to that the increased costs associated with delivering supported employment services. While the standard for many contracts is 10% for administration, in reality, a 25% administration fee is needed. With ongoing funding cuts, critical wraparound services are increasingly unavailable, both job seekers and employment service providers are left without the necessary resources for long-term success.

With funding cuts, we've lost additional funding sources but are still expected to serve the same number of clients with fewer resources. – Manitoba, Zoom chat 1

Certaines municipalités reçoivent à peine assez de financement pour faire fonctionner un seul service d'emploi, alors que d'autres en obtiennent beaucoup plus—il n'y a aucune cohérence. – Quebec, Speaker 4
English: *Some municipalities receive barely enough funding to operate a*

single employment service, while others get much more—there's no consistency.

We don't have the budget to provide ongoing wraparound services, even though we know they're critical to long-term employment success. – BC, Speaker 10

Every contract we have says we can't move money around—even when we need to shift funds to better support our clients. That level of rigidity makes it harder to be responsive to actual community needs. – BC, Speaker 4

The rigidity of employment service contracts in rural and remote communities creates significant barriers to delivering effective and sustainable programs. Fixed budgets fail to account for rising operational costs, leaving service providers struggling to cover expenses like transportation, specialized assessments, and skilled staff recruitment. Rigid outcome targets further complicate service delivery, particularly for job seekers with disabilities who may require ongoing, milestone-based support rather than immediate job placement. Multi-year agreements that do not adjust for inflation result in de facto funding cuts over time, reducing program stability and effectiveness. Additionally, the inability to shift funds within some contracts limits service providers' flexibility to respond to evolving community needs. To maintain accessibility and responsiveness in employment services, contracts should include enhanced financial flexibility, address actual cost increases, and acknowledge the various pathways to achieving employment success.

Employer Training

The stigma surrounding the employment of individuals with disabilities remains pervasive across Canada. Many employers lack awareness of the value of hiring people with disabilities, leading to discriminatory hiring practices and reluctance to provide accommodations. Limited employer knowledge about assistive technologies that facilitate inclusive workplaces compounds this issue. Many businesses assume that accommodations are costly or complex when, in reality, they are often simple and cost-effective. What we hear and what is supported by the literature is the need for targeted employer education programs to address these misconceptions.

During the discussion about employer hesitation and stigma surrounding disability employment, one respondent remarked:

I feel like it's 50/50. Some [employers] are very open, very willing, very accepting, and others are a little bit more standoffish about it. I don't know if it's just because they feel like there's a stigma attached to it or they feel like it's going to require more training. — Ontario, Speaker 5

Recent research highlights the need for employer education programs on accessibility and accommodations in rural and remote communities. Many employers lack awareness of the barriers faced by job seekers with disabilities. They are unfamiliar with practical, cost-effective solutions. Community representatives have expressed frustration over insufficient funding and limited services, making it even more challenging to support inclusive hiring practices (Diversity Disconnect, 2024, p. 50).

Workplace accommodations are also frequently misunderstood. Employers may resist providing necessary modifications due to a lack of knowledge about legal obligations under accessibility laws. As a result, job seekers with disabilities often face undue challenges in securing and maintaining employment. CASE has created toolkits and resources for employers as well as other across Canada (Canadian Association for Supported Employment, 2021).

What we heard during the consultations was a call for increased employer training and engagement to promote inclusive hiring practices and emphasize the importance of accommodations as essential components of a productive workplace. Furthermore, a recent report from the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC, 2023) highlights that employer awareness regarding legal obligations for workplace accommodations remains inadequate, as nearly 30% of persons with disabilities in Canada reported requesting workplace accommodations that were not provided. Additionally, Statistics Canada (2025) found that 69% of employed persons with disabilities or long-term conditions faced at least one barrier to accessibility at work. In rural and remote communities, this employer training may be harder to access than in urban areas.

A solution could be to utilize existing career development professionals and employment service providers. They are perfectly positioned to provide this training to employers because of their expertise and close connections to both clients and local employers. Additional funding is needed to provide this training.

Case Studies and Best Practices

During our consultations, innovative employment programs were mentioned that are worth noting in this position paper. The ideas show the innovation of employment service providers, the success that comes through collaboration, and the success of some of the current employment service funding.

Bicycles for Success (Manitoba)

Addressing Transportation Barriers for Rural Job Seekers

In Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, the Bicycles for Success initiative was launched to tackle the severe lack of public transportation in rural communities. Recognizing that the absence of transit options was a primary barrier to employment, the program provides job seekers with bicycles, allowing them to travel to work, training, and employment services independently.

Program Details:

- Bicycles and Equipment: Job seekers receive a bicycle, lock, and maintenance kit.
- Ownership Upon Completion: After completing 375 hours of work placement, participants keep their bikes permanently.
- Temporary Transit Support: Until they receive their bicycles, job seekers are provided with taxi fare to and from training and their first weeks of work.

Impact:

- Increased employment accessibility for individuals who cannot afford personal vehicles.
- Improved job retention rates, as workers gain reliable transportation.
- Enhanced well-being and community integration for job seekers.

Quote:

“We received a grant to buy 22 bicycles, and the difference it has made is incredible. But come winter, we’re back to square one with transit issues.” --
Manitoba, Speaker 2

Quebec's Public Transit Expansion

Enhancing Transportation Access for Job Seekers with Disabilities

In Bas-Saint-Laurent and other rural Quebec regions, a major public transit expansion initiative has been underway to improve mobility for individuals with disabilities. The program aims to bridge the gap between rural communities and urban employment centers by introducing subsidized inter-regional public transit routes.

Key Features:

- **Flexible Scheduling:** The new routes align with work hours to better serve employees with disabilities.
- **Municipal and Regional Collaboration:** Involves multiple municipalities working together to ensure accessibility across different jurisdictions.
- **Funding Adjustments:** Previously, provincial funding models failed to account for the real cost of rural disability transit. The expansion included increased subsidies for fuel, maintenance, and driver wages.

Challenges Addressed:

- Incompatible transit schedules that previously forced workers to leave hours before or after their shifts.
- Limited rural employment options, as many job seekers with disabilities had been effectively confined to their local areas.
- Lack of affordable transportation alternatives, as taxis or specialized transit were often prohibitively expensive.

Quote:

Oui, on l'a fait, au niveau régional, il y a un comité de partenariat CPMT [Commission des partenaires du marché du travail²] Effectivement, c'est une préoccupation qui avait été soulevée en fait que les solutions ne pouvaient pas venir d'un seul endroit, mais qu'il fallait mobiliser les acteurs. – Quebec, Speaker 4

English: Yes, we did it. At the regional level, there is a CPMT partnership committee. Indeed, it was a concern that was raised that solutions couldn't come from a single place, but that stakeholders needed to be mobilized.

Employer Training Grants (Ontario & BC)

Encouraging Inclusive Hiring in Rural Workplaces

Ontario and British Columbia have implemented Employer Training Grant Programs aimed at incentivizing rural businesses to hire, retain, and accommodate individuals with disabilities. These grants provide financial assistance to employers who:

1. Offer customized job training for employees with disabilities.
2. Modify workplaces for accessibility (e.g., installing ramps, providing adaptive technology).
3. Develop long-term inclusive hiring strategies.

Program Details:

- Wage subsidies covering up to 50% of a new employee's salary for the first six months.
- Reimbursement for specialized training in accessibility, mental health accommodations, and workplace adjustments.
- Grant tiers based on company size and rural location, ensuring small businesses can participate.

Impact:

² The CMPT is a provincial consultation body that brings together representatives from business, labor, education, community and governmental organizations dedicated to improving the efficiency of the labour market. These labour market stakeholders pool their expertise and ideas in order to enhance public employment services and foster workforce skills development and recognition. (Future Skills Centre, n.d.)

- Increased employer willingness to hire individuals with disabilities.
- Higher retention rates, as workers receive the necessary accommodations for long-term success.
- Enhanced community awareness, reducing stigma surrounding disability employment.

Quote:

Some employers were hesitant at first, thinking accommodations would be costly. But with these grants, we're seeing them become champions of inclusive hiring. -- Ontario, Speaker 5

Empowered Employment (BC)

Building Self-Advocacy and Workplace Accommodation Skills

The Empowered Employment program in British Columbia is a self-advocacy and workplace accommodation training initiative that equips job seekers with disabilities with the skills needed to navigate employment challenges, request accommodations, and secure stable work.

Program Components:

1. Self-Advocacy Training: Participants learn to communicate their needs effectively in the workplace.
2. Legal Rights Education: Covers employment law, human rights protections, and accommodation rights.
3. Workplace Role-Playing Scenarios: Helps participants practice real-life job interactions, including negotiating accommodations with employers.
4. Digital Literacy Support: Ensures that job seekers have the technological skills required for modern work environments.

Success Stories:

- Several graduates of the program have successfully transitioned into employment and report greater job stability due to their ability to self-advocate.
- Employers involved in the program express greater confidence in hiring individuals with disabilities, as they better understand how to provide reasonable accommodations.

Quote:

Our clients now walk into job interviews knowing their rights, how to ask for accommodations, and how to explain their strengths. It's been a game-changer. -- BC, Speaker 7

These case studies highlight the practical solutions being implemented across Canada to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities in rural and remote areas. While transportation, employer hesitancy, and digital access remain critical challenges, these innovative programs demonstrate that community-driven solutions, strategic funding,

and employer engagement can create meaningful change. By learning from these models, policymakers and service providers can take proactive steps toward a more inclusive and accessible labour market.

Policy and Funding Implications

The findings from the consultations reveal significant gaps in current public employment funding models, particularly in their ability to support rural and remote service delivery and disability-inclusive workforce supports. These gaps highlight the need for policy and funding adjustments that prioritize flexibility, accessibility, and long-term sustainability to ensure equitable employment opportunities for all Canadians.

Public Employment Funding Models Do Not Reflect the Real Costs of Rural & Remote Service Delivery

Geographic barriers, transportation challenges, and service availability constraints significantly increase the cost of delivering employment services in rural and remote communities. However, many public funding models fail to account for these cost differences, applying uniform per-client funding regardless of location. Additionally, a lack of accessible transportation options disproportionately affects job seekers with disabilities, yet existing funding structures rarely include dedicated financial support for adapted transportation services.

Adjusting per-client funding formulas to reflect regional cost variations would help address these disparities. Introducing dedicated funding for transportation solutions, such as paratransit services, travel subsidies, and flexible community-based transit programs, would ensure that job seekers in rural and remote areas can reliably access employment services and workplaces. Furthermore, integrating regional cost adjustments into funding agreements would ensure that rural and remote service providers receive allocations that accurately reflect their higher operational expenses.

Employment Service Contracts Do Not Adequately Fund Wraparound Supports

Wraparound services, including mental health support, assistive technology, and disability accommodations, play a critical role in employment success for job seekers with disabilities. However, these supports are often underfunded or entirely excluded from employment service contracts. Employment providers in rural areas frequently become the primary provider for multiple services, despite not receiving designated funding for

wraparound supports. As a result, clients experience long wait times for essential services, delaying their ability to secure and maintain employment.

Expanding employment service funding to cover wraparound supports would ensure that job seekers with disabilities have access to housing, mental health services, and assistive technologies that are essential for long-term employment stability. Incorporating dedicated case management funding into employment service contracts would enable service providers to offer holistic, individualized support for clients facing complex barriers to employment. Establishing multi-service community hubs, where employment services are co-located with disability supports, housing programs, and health services, would also improve service accessibility and coordination.

Rigid Outcome Targets Do Not Reflect the Realities of Disability Employment

Many funding models prioritize immediate job placements rather than recognizing the longer, more complex employment pathways of job seekers with disabilities. Some funding agreements tie payments to immediate employment outcomes, discouraging providers from supporting individuals who require incremental, milestone-based progression toward work. Additionally, low per-client funding caps make it difficult to provide the level of personalized support necessary for job seekers with disabilities.

To address these challenges, public employment funding models should incorporate milestone-based funding structures that recognize incremental progress toward employment, including skills development, job readiness milestones, and workplace accommodations. Increasing per-client funding caps to reflect the true costs of providing individualized support—particularly for those requiring assistive technology, extended training, or workplace modifications—would improve service effectiveness. Additionally, ensuring contracts include funding for long-term post-employment support would recognize the reality that many job seekers with disabilities require ongoing assistance to sustain employment success.

Multi-Year Contracts Do Not Adjust for Inflation or Cost of Living Increases

Many employment service contracts do not include cost-of-living adjustments, resulting in service providers operating on static budgets while expenses increase. Between 2020 and 2024, the cost of living in Canada increased by 17.4%, yet contract funding levels have not kept pace with inflation. As a result, employment organizations are forced to operate with

year-one funds throughout the contract duration, leading to service reductions, staff shortages, and fewer resources for job seekers.

To prevent funding erosion, all multi-year employment service contracts should include annual cost-of-living adjustments, ensuring contract budgets align with inflation and real cost growth. Establishing a minimum annual contract increase of at least 4% would allow providers to sustain programs, retain staff, and deliver consistent services. Additionally, adjusting funding agreements to reflect changing economic conditions would ensure rural and remote service providers have the resources needed to maintain quality services over time.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges Threaten Service Quality

Rural employment service providers face significant challenges in attracting and retaining skilled career development professionals, as wages are not competitive with government agencies, post-secondary institutions, and resource-based industries. Workforce shortages contribute to burnout among staff, making it difficult to deliver high-quality, individualized support to job seekers with disabilities. Additionally, limited funding for professional development means many career development professionals lack formal training in disability-inclusive workforce development, relying instead on on-the-job learning.

Increasing base funding for employment service providers would allow organizations to offer competitive wages and retention incentives for career development professionals. Establishing dedicated professional development funds would ensure that staff receive specialized training in disability employment services, workplace accommodations, and assistive technology. Incorporating wage progression into contracts would also prevent wage stagnation, reducing turnover and ensuring a stable, skilled workforce.

Digital Connectivity Gaps Limit Access to Employment Services

Limited broadband infrastructure in rural and remote communities prevents job seekers from accessing virtual employment services, online training, and remote work opportunities. Even where internet access is available, high costs and a lack of public access points create additional barriers. Many job seekers with disabilities also require assistive technology and digital literacy training, yet few employment programs provide these supports.

Expanding government investment in broadband infrastructure would ensure all communities have reliable digital access, improving engagement with employment programs. Creating subsidies for internet access and technology grants for job seekers with disabilities would reduce financial barriers to participation in virtual employment services. Additionally, funding digital literacy training for job seekers with disabilities, including assistive technology training and remote work readiness programs, would improve employment outcomes.

Employer Engagement is Critical for Expanding Disability-Inclusive Hiring

Many employers lack awareness of workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities. Small businesses in rural areas often do not have HR departments, leaving them with limited knowledge on inclusive hiring practices. Additionally, many employers assume that accommodations are expensive or complex, despite evidence that most accommodations are simple and low-cost.

Expanding employer education programs would improve awareness of inclusive hiring practices and workplace accommodations. Providing financial incentives, such as wage subsidies and tax credits, for businesses that hire and retain workers with disabilities would encourage greater participation in disability employment programs. Establishing regional employer networks and mentorship programs would help businesses adopt long-term, sustainable disability inclusion strategies.

The Need for a More Adaptive and Equitable Employment Funding Model

The current public employment funding model in Canada does not adequately reflect the realities of rural and remote employment service delivery or the additional costs associated with supporting job seekers with disabilities. Without targeted policy and funding adjustments, service providers will continue to struggle with transportation barriers, rigid contracts, recruitment shortages, and insufficient wraparound supports.

Policymakers must adopt a funding model that is flexible, regionally responsive, and inclusive—one that prioritizes the unique needs of rural job seekers, integrates disability accommodations into employment services, and ensures long-term financial sustainability. By implementing these policy and funding reforms, government agencies can build a more effective and inclusive workforce development system, ensuring that job seekers with disabilities, regardless of location, have equitable access to employment opportunities.

Recommendations

We recommend that funders, program designers, and policymakers use both a rural and remote lens and a diversity and inclusion lens to ask: *What happens when expected resources and services are unavailable, and how can we ensure equitable access?*

Consensus from consultation participants agreed that rural and remote employment services function differently from urban services because of limited access to essential resources and greater logistical challenges. They recommended that funders apply a rural and remote lens when designing programs and setting policies to anticipate the impact of their decisions on clients and address barriers before implementation. Participants emphasized the need to localize employment programs by providing flexible, creative solutions with adequate funding.

Applying a rural and remote lens alongside a disability and inclusion lens challenges funders, program developers, and policymakers to rethink how employment services are designed and delivered. While some barriers may seem entrenched or complex, practical solutions exist to reduce their impact. The following recommendations provide actionable steps to create more equitable, accessible, and sustainable employment opportunities for job seekers in rural and remote communities, particularly those living with disabilities.

1. Adjust Per-Client Funding to Reflect Regional Cost Variations

- Modify funding formulas to account for the higher costs of rural and remote service delivery.
- Introduce dedicated funding for adapted transportation solutions such as public transit, travel subsidies, and flexible community-based transit programs.
- Integrate regional cost adjustments into funding agreements to ensure equitable financial support for service providers.

2. Expand Funding for Wraparound Supports

- Include adequate housing, mental health services, assistive technology, and disability accommodations in employment service funding.
- Adequately support dedicated case management funding to support clients with complex barriers to employment.
- Establish multi-service community hubs that co-locate employment services with disability supports, housing programs, and health services to improve accessibility.

3. Implement Milestone-Based Funding Models

- Shift funding structures to recognize incremental progress toward employment, including skills development, job readiness, and workplace accommodations.
- Increase per-client funding caps to reflect the actual costs of providing individualized support for job seekers with disabilities.
- Ensure funding agreements include long-term post-employment support to sustain workforce participation.

4. Ensure Multi-Year Contracts Include Cost-of-Living Adjustments

- Implement automatic annual cost-of-living adjustments in multi-year employment service contracts for employment service providers.
- Adjust funding agreements periodically to reflect changing economic conditions and ensure service sustainability.

5. Strengthen Employment Services Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategies

- Increase base funding to enable employment service providers to offer competitive wages and retention incentives for career development professionals.
- Establish designated professional development funds for disability employment training, workplace accommodations, and assistive technology.
- Incorporate wage progression structures into contracts to prevent wage stagnation and reduce workforce turnover.

6. Improve Digital Connectivity for Remote Employment Services

- Expand government investment in broadband infrastructure to ensure all communities have reliable internet access.
- Fund digital literacy training programs, including assistive technology training and remote work readiness initiatives.

7. Enhance Employer Engagement in Disability-Inclusive Hiring

- Expand employer education programs on workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and inclusive hiring best practices.
- Introduce or expand financial incentives such as wage subsidies and tax credits for businesses that hire and retain workers with disabilities.
- Establish regional employer networks and mentorship programs to promote sustainable disability inclusion strategies.

8. Develop a More Adaptive and Equitable Employment Funding Model

- Shift toward a funding model that is flexible, regionally responsive, and disability inclusive.
- Integrate disability accommodations and rural service delivery needs into standard employment service contracts.

For employment services to be truly inclusive and effective, government funders, program designers, and policymakers must tackle both geographic barriers and challenges specific to disabilities in service delivery. Employment service contracts should accurately reflect the actual costs of providing disability-inclusive workforce development, and funding must be flexible, sustainable, and adjusted for inflation. Right now, many employment service providers are subsidizing these needs.

By implementing these policy and funding reforms, government agencies can create a more equitable and responsive workforce development system that supports job seekers with disabilities, enhances rural service delivery, and generates long-term employment opportunities for all Canadians.

Conclusion

This position paper underscores the urgent need for policy and funding reforms to support employment inclusion in rural and remote areas. Collaboration among funders, policymakers, service providers, and employers is essential to addressing key barriers such as transportation gaps, rigid contracts, workforce shortages, and underfunded wraparound supports. Current funding models fail to account for the higher costs of rural service delivery and the complex employment pathways of individuals with disabilities. To build a more inclusive workforce development system, policymakers must adopt flexible, regionally

responsive funding that integrates disability accommodations, milestone-based employment progress, and cost-of-living adjustments. Expanding wraparound supports, broadband access, and employer engagement programs will further ensure that rural job seekers living with disabilities are not left behind.

Achieving employment equity requires a fundamental shift in how employment services are designed, funded, and delivered. This paper provides a roadmap for change, offering practical, evidence-based solutions to build a more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive employment services for all Canadians

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