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CASE STUDY

## Choices for Youth Train for Trades

Canadian Homelessness Research Network

Choices for Youth's *Train for Trades* program creates employment opportunities within the construction industry for at-risk and homeless youth in and around the area surrounding St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. The underlying goal for all of Choices' programs is to help young people obtain housing and give them the support and resources they need to exit homelessness permanently. Not merely a youth skills training program, Train for Trades has emerged as a key program within Choices for Youth. They recognize that training alone would not likely work for the clients they serve, who are generally homeless, lack a high school diploma, and may have addictions and/or mental health issues. The needs of these difficult to serve youth are met with a comprehensive, client-centered approach that combines employment training with several other necessary components: housing, education, and intensive personal support. The program has produced genuine improvements in the lives of the young people who participate, with many obtaining their high school diploma, learning a skill or trade, obtaining and maintaining housing, and, in general, moving towards adulthood with confidence and stability.

## Background

In the wake of the closure of the Mount Cashel Orphanage, Choices for Youth was founded in 1990 as a response to an “identified need among youth, the community, and government to have an empowerment-based program available to youth for whom ‘home’ was not an option” (Choices for Youth, 2012a). The mandate of Choices for Youth is to work with youth who have experienced, or continue to experience substantial barriers or trauma in their lives, including homelessness, addiction, illiteracy and other issues relating to education, mental health, isolation, and difficulty finding employment. The name “Choices for Youth” stems from a foundational belief that the appropriate response to youth who are homeless and face hardship is to give them a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Empowerment is key to personal development, helping these youth to realize their goals, achieve personal stability, and most of all, feel that their accomplishments are truly their own. Choices for Youth exists to give these young people the tools and opportunities they need to overcome the barriers that are preventing them from leading healthy and stable lives. This reflects both the client-centered approach of Choices, and the degree to which they build their service model around the concept of youth development. In the twenty-two years that have followed their foundation, Choices for Youth has grown from an idea to a community-serving, not-for-profit organization built upon seven core programs. They have changed the lives of hundreds of young people, while also becoming a major provider of transitional housing for at-risk youth in St. John’s. One of the seven core programs, Train for Trades, expands Choices’ service mandate, offering program participants access to education, personal support, training, and employment in a growing sector: green retrofitting.

Established in 2008, the Train for Trades program was created as a means of providing employment opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth. The idea was to develop an all-inclusive training program to meet the needs and challenges of the most hard-to-serve homeless youth in St. John’s. Research on their client group reveals that the average participant had only completed schooling up to grade 8, 80% of participants had some history of involvement with the criminal justice system, 53% reported experiencing mental health issues, and 65% have or had a self-identified substance abuse issue (Button & Keating, 2011). Most importantly, three quarters of participants were unemployed or receiving financial assistance prior to their entry into the program (Button & Keating, 2011).

The idea of developing a training program that would coexist alongside other services emerged when Choices was in the process of retrofitting an industrial building to serve as a new transitional housing site. Inspired by Toronto’s Eva’s Phoenix program, and Youth Skills Zone, Choices employed

their clients in the refurbishment of the building. The Director of Choices made a decision to learn from Eva's – which likewise integrated employment into their Phoenix housing model, and employed youth in the building of the facility – and bring that approach to St. John's.

Train for Trades thus began as a program that employed participants to renovate the Lilly Building, a warehouse space located in downtown St. John's, which now houses the Train for Trades program and provides housing for participants in Choices for Youth's Supportive Affordable Housing and Employment program. The Train for Trades pilot saw ten participants successfully complete the training, in addition to creating fourteen units of housing. During this period, Train for Trades successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of their program model, and showed that it is possible to successfully use training and employment to help at-risk and homeless youth overcome barriers and achieve positive change in their lives. The first program of its kind in Atlantic Canada the pilot phase of Train for Trades was a success and connected a population in need with opportunities in the construction industry.

### Shift to Green Jobs

The pilot phase of Train for Trades proved to be so successful that Choices made the decision to continue the program. The second phase shifted the program's focus from general renovation to green retrofitting, – that is, retrofitting low-income and social housing for greater energy efficiency. The inspiration for this shift came from a growing local interest in energy poverty, and perhaps most significantly, from learning about an innovative green jobs program in Winnipeg.

*Warm Up Winnipeg* developed a successful model of employment training and job creation for youth and young adults (in this case, Aboriginal persons involved in inner-city gangs) with the goal of retrofitting houses to be more energy efficient. Once again, Choices demonstrated the benefits of adaptation, by applying the program's concepts to St. John's' circumstances. The focus on green jobs made sense for a number of reasons. First, people are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of energy efficiency. Energy prices are on the rise, and the number of households that are devoting ten percent or more of their resources toward energy continues to grow. The concept of 'energy poverty' is quickly becoming a critical issue, and concern, across Canada. Also, as provincial and municipal governments continue to divert large amounts of resources to subsidies as a response to rising energy costs, a case can be made that this money would be better spent on efficiency strategies, such as green retrofitting, which will help reduce consumption and total expenses over the long term.

The decision to shift the focus of Train for Trades to green jobs enabled Choices to link three key social issues: youth homelessness, unemployment and energy conservation. In a province where there is a shortage of people in skilled trades, Train for Trades plays an important role in building the number of skilled labourers within the provincial workforce. This has proven to be an incredibly successful program shift. Not only has the program succeeded in teaching homeless youth a highly in-demand skillset, it also has the added benefit of offering a cost-saving upgrade to qualifying families at a significantly lower rate than the industry average.

In the spring of 2011, ten youth completed Train for Trades' second round of training. These youth were also the first group to complete the refocused, energy retrofit version of the program. This year also marked the beginning of the third round of Train for Trades training, which continues to focus on green jobs. This third round will see an additional ten participants complete the training, 60 units of housing retrofitted, and the renovation of Choices for Youth's Duckworth Street location. Improving upon the program's initial successes, the refocused, green iteration of Train for Trades has demonstrated that the model can be modified and remain successful and effective. The shift in focus to green jobs has created new opportunities for its participants, placing them advantageously in a growing field. Green retrofitting is an extremely desirable skillset, and in today's energy- and cost-conscious world, this program and its lessons will benefit these youth for years to come.

## About the Program

Train for Trades and Choices for Youth share a core objective, which is to empower youth through their programming. They transition youth from dependence on income supports and other systems to sustainable, long-term employment by helping them overcome barriers and gain valuable job and life skills. They achieve these goals through a combination of training, employment, support and not insignificantly, stable housing.

It is important to note that Train for Trades made a decision to not simply provide opportunities for the most stable youth. In fact, the program is intended to help the most hard-to-serve youth who experience the greatest barriers to employment. According to Sheldon Pollett, who founded the program: "the higher you score on the risk factors, the more likely [it is] that we're going to accept you into the program, counter-balanced with your level of motivation. If we can get some indication that this youth wants something different, that's the piece we need – motivation. [The motivation] to have a different life. We can work with the rest" (Interview, 2012).

The training model, the foundation of both phases of Train for Trades, is one of the elements that makes the program so noteworthy. Again, this is not simply a training program. For homeless youth, who lack experience, have failed to complete high school, and who may have significant needs for support, it is advantageous that the training component is embedded within a larger system of support and learning. The Choices model achieves this by building their program around four pillars: housing, employment (income), training, and education. Housing is of key importance because obtaining and maintaining work is difficult without the stability and safety that a home provides. Employment is significant because it not only provides income, but gives young people the opportunity to learn “soft skills”, such as workplace conduct and money management, which will allow young people to maintain jobs in the future. Education is also important because if one wants to find genuine solutions to youth homelessness, and to ensure young people have a chance at long-term success, they need, at minimum, a high school education. These four pillars, when collectively implemented into a youth support program, represent a sustainable, long-term solution to youth homelessness.

The training program also incorporates an intensive model of support and case management. Many of the young people who participate have never lived independently, learned how to budget, or how to overcome crises. A large number are dealing with violence, substance use issues and/or mental health challenges. Few have had the chance to learn how to cope with the ups and downs of employment, the good (pay cheques) or the bad (conflict on the job). All young people – whether homeless or housed – need to learn the skills to live independently, obtain a job, and most importantly, maintain it. This program model provides young people with all the skills and supports necessary to achieve these goals. The result of this model is increased youth engagement, improved personal development, and increased housing options and stability.

The Train for Trades training program is comprised of a combination of instruction and real world, jobsite experience. Spanning one year, each round of training includes ten youth participants. The first 3 weeks of the program focus on workplace training, with one week of soft skills and 2 weeks at the Carpenter’s MillWright College. In these opening weeks, participants learn about basic life skills, how to conduct oneself in the workplace, money management, and how to manage their new responsibilities. Following this initial stage, participants are given the opportunity to train at a local carpentry college for 2 weeks and are educated on job-specific skills, including Fall Arrest, First Aid/CPR, Powerline Hazard, Confined Spaces, Back Injury Prevention, Ramset Certification, Tool Handling, Construction Awareness, Insulation Theory and Asbestos Abatement Training, all of which will positively increase their skill base for post-Train for Trades employment opportunities.

Following these in-class training sessions, participants transition to working on real-world retrofit projects. What differentiates Train for Trades from mainstream employment programs is that at this stage, they do not transition their participants into employment within the construction industry. Instead, as a core element of their training, Train for Trades takes on contracts to retrofit a number of housing units, putting program participants to work under controlled conditions alongside externally-sourced general contractors. The great thing about this work is that it is repetitive. Not only are these youth learning a valuable skillset, they are doing so in real-world environments that demand they repeatedly practice these skills, ensuring their understanding and ability is thorough and high-level.

Train for Trades is a social enterprise. They are contracted, by the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, to conduct energy retrofits on social housing units. The work is done at a professional level, and must pass city inspections, to the same stringent standards as any other professional contractor's work. They pride themselves on doing a highly professional job and staying on time, on code, and on budget. The fact that it is at-risk youth who are doing the work makes no difference – Train for Trades does quality work that is on par with any other company in the construction industry. Trades participants exit this program well trained and with real work experience.

Over the course of their training, in addition to the unit retrofits, Train for Trades participants also use their new skills to give back to the community. Past projects have included building an extension to a community center, construction of a stage at a local jazz festival, as well as work with Habitat for Humanity. In addition to allowing participants to further practice and refine their new skills, the additional projects give the Train for Trades program increased legitimacy within the greater community, which serves to alleviate concerns and deter instances of NIMBYism, and increase the visibility and positive perceptions of the program and its participants.

The overall mission of Choices for Youth is to improve the lives of at-risk and homeless youth. Part of this work involves giving Train for Trades participants the opportunity to further their education. This can include GED preparation or, in the case of participants with low literacy skills, participation in Choices for Youth's Youth at Promise program, which aims to, "help participants transition to further educational or employment-related programming" (Choices for Youth, 2012b). Not only does this help motivate participants to increase their education, but it does so in an environment that is supportive, nurturing, and positive.

An additional benefit of Train for Trades, and their lengthy training program, is that the youth, many of whom have experienced significant social barriers in their lives, are given the opportunity to learn new skills in the company of other youth with similar backgrounds. The year-long training program provides an incredible amount of time for participants to build relationships with each other, learn teamwork, camaraderie, and above all, work alongside people who share their goals and challenges – all in a positive, nurturing environment. These relationships are an extension of Choices for Youth’s mission of empowerment, as well as a program result that can be nurtured to aid the long-term development of the youth participants.

Train for Trades also provides participants with an “intensive support model”, giving youth access to a support worker at any time for the duration of the program. This means a participant is able to contact and consult with one of Choices for Youth’s support workers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Should they find themselves in need of support, advice, assistance, or aid, they are able to contact a youth support worker directly. These workers are trained in both construction and youth support, which allows them to respond to the needs of program participants, whether it be a personal or professional matter. The intensive support model, although resource-intensive, allows the program to be highly reflexive to the needs of participants, and by helping them work through crises and barriers, reflects Choices for Youth’s mission of youth empowerment.

## Partnership Model

Key to the long-term success of Train for Trades has been their ability to form lasting, positive partnerships with the construction industry, government, and local partners. Over the years, Choices has developed partnerships with and received support from:

- Provincial Government - Department of Advanced Education and Skills (formerly Human Resources, Labour and Employment)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Housing Corporation (NLHC)
- CUPE
- Carpenter’s Millwright College
- Warm Up Winnipeg
- Eva's Initiatives, Toronto

In fact, it can be argued that without the key three-way partnership between Choices for Youth, CUPE Local 1860, and the NLHC, Train for Trades may not even exist.

Gaining the support of local partners, especially CUPE Local 1860, helps legitimize the program, builds a positive reputation, and lends credibility to the training and its participants. It also helps Train for Trades connect with private funders and gain access to additional resources and projects. Without the support and endorsement of community members and organizations, Train for Trades may not have secured adequate funding for projects beyond their pilot phase. CUPE Local 1860, who “jumped at the opportunity” (CUPE, 2010) to get involved, represent the working unions that youth who complete the Train for Trades program will be looking to join. CUPE’s support of the program, assistance during the training stages, and placement of youth following the program, have been vital to participant success and will continue to factor heavily in the long-term feasibility of Train for Trades.

Partnerships with government agencies, such as the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation, have also proven to be important to the operations and structure of the program. The NLHC has been the source of all their contracted green retrofit work to date, and per the terms of their contracts, has supplied them with materials for their projects. They have also signed a memorandum of understanding with Train for Trades, regarding contracting for future social housing construction projects. For Train for Trades, fostering positive partnerships with the provincial government has served as a means of securing funding, as well as contracted work, both of which are crucial for the long-term sustainability of the program.

## Program Outcomes

Program staff track participant outcomes at the end of each term, including whether participants secured employment or enrolled in post-secondary education. To date almost half (48%) of participants have secured employment after participating in the program, while one fifth (21%) have gone on to post-secondary education for a total of 69% either furthering their education or accessing employment as a result of participating in the program.

An external evaluation of the program’s first two cohorts was conducted in July of 2011, by post-doctoral students from Memorial University. Similar levels of employment and educational achievement were found and considering approximately 80% of program participants were either without a steady income or receiving financial assistance from the government prior to enrolling in Train for Trades, this is a significant turnaround (Button & Keating, 2011). As well, Train for Trades employs the TOWES test (test of workplace essential skills), as an additional program evaluation tool. Testing applicants in 3 essential skill areas, including literacy, document handling and numeracy, Train for Trades assess ap-



plicants' aptitude in these skill areas prior to training, and then a second time following their completion of the program. These evaluations have shown consistent improvements for participants across all tested areas (Button & Keating, 2011).

During interviews and focus groups, participants have commented that the program has been integral to overcoming the barriers they faced. Approximately 42% of youth who took part in the first two years of the program sought intervention or counseling for addiction (Button & Keating, 2011). Others remarked that the program and its support model helped them learn to better manage their anger, and develop patience (Button & Keating, 2011). It was also found that the personal, "soft" skills that participants gain (e.g., teamwork, problem solving, communication, money management, etc.) have had positive effects on self-esteem and confidence.

## The Cost of Train for Trades

Train for Trades targets the most challenging homeless youth: youth who are unemployed, without stable housing, lack education and have other challenges (addictions, mental health) that make obtaining and maintaining employment difficult. The intensive support model of Train the Trades is key to its success. Yet, while immensely successful and beneficial for program participants, it is a resource- and labour-intensive model that requires excellent, dedicated staff to make the program work. In operating a year-long program, there are also operating costs to consider, primarily associated with housing, food, training, supplies, materials, and transportation. Overall, the cost per participant for one year totals approximately \$55,000 (Pollett, 2012).

Train for Trades carefully tracks expenditures, and keeps in-depth accounts and records of the "interventions" conducted for each youth. Essentially a record of the assistance and services provided to each participating youth, these records detail if they had to provide housing, food, help with addiction, and so on. These records give the staff of Choices for Youth insight into what needs are arising from program participants, how effective the program is in addressing barriers that individual participants may be affected by, and the overall effectiveness of training. This allows the program, in future iterations, to be reflexive and adaptive for participants, while continuing to empower youth to achieve long-term, sustainable employment.

Given that Train for Trades is helping the most difficult to serve and at-risk population of homeless youth move off, and stay off, the streets, the operating cost of the program, \$55,000 per participant (which includes 60 retro-fits), is a good investment. There is a considerable body of research in

Canada that speaks to the costs associated with keeping people homeless. These costs accrue not only to individuals, but to communities, as well. The costs continue to accumulate the longer one remains unemployed.

When people remain homeless, they rely on emergency services. The annual cost for one person to stay in an emergency shelter is between \$13,000 and \$44,000 (Pomeroy, 2005). When young people are homeless and unemployed, they are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Their mental health challenges and addictions issues may worsen. The annual cost of such institutional care (prison/detention and psychiatric hospitals) ranges from \$66,000 to \$120,000 (Pomeroy, 2005). Even at an individual level, hospital stays for homeless patients can cost, on average, over \$2,500 more than those of a typical housed patient (Hwang, 2011). Though exact figures can vary from province to province and community to community, the truth is that it can cost up to \$100,000 annually to support an average homeless Canadian (Gallagher, 2010). Again, considering Train for Trades is able to break the cycle of youth homelessness, educate, train, and place their participants on a sustainable employment path, all at a fraction of the cost of keeping someone homeless, there can be no doubt of the program's value and importance.

## Conclusion

Poverty and homelessness in St. John's are complex issues. In 2008, it was found that, across Newfoundland and Labrador, construction of new housing units was being conducted at a rate of 64 per 10,000 citizens, slightly higher than the national average of 63 per 10,000 citizens (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012b). Despite this, as of 2009, Newfoundland and Labrador's rental vacancy rate was 1.0%, the lowest in the country (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012b). In 2006, Statistics Canada reported that 15.5% of St. John's families were living in low-income situations (Statistics Canada, 2012). As well, 14.2% of Newfoundland and Labrador's households, accounting for nearly all the aforementioned low-income families in St. John's, were found to be in core housing need, which greatly outpaced the national average of 12.7% (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012a). Given that the population of St. John's was 100,646 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2012), this meant that approximately 15,600 of those living in St. John's could be seen as living below the low-income cutoff (LICO), which, for that year, was \$33,930 (for a 4-person household in an urban population of 100,000 to 499,999) (Statistics Canada, 2007). Though there is no guarantee that those who are living below the LICO will become homeless, having such a large population living under economically precarious circumstances poses an unnecessary and dangerous risk. In fact, a 2004 report by Human Resource-

es and Social Development Canada estimated that between 2000 and 2007, St. John's' homeless population increased 400%, from 305 to 1,267, which places increased importance on these LICO statistics (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2007). This same report assessed that 40.2% of St. John's' low-income population were at risk of becoming homeless, representing over 13,000 people (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2007). Of this population at risk of homelessness, 29% were estimated to be under the age of 18 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2007). Taken together, these facts all underscore the importance of Choices for Youth and Train for Trades, and how their program benefits the greater St. John's area. They help at-risk and homeless youth overcome the economic, social, and psychological barriers that prevent them from achieving successful employment, and break what could become a cycle of homelessness and poverty.

There is no reason the Train for Trades model could not be replicated in other communities, or adapted to improve upon existing program models elsewhere. While the program itself has flourished in St. John's as a result of strong partnerships between Choices for Youth and its community, a byproduct of operating in a small, interconnected community, there is no reason that similar linkages or partnerships could not be forged in other communities. While these have been proven by Choices to be essential for securing funds, projects, post-training employment for participants, and minimizing concerns between the program and local industries, any current or prospective youth empowerment program will have similar partnerships in place to some degree, allowing the Train for Trades model to be introduced into any community context with minimal difficulty.

The cost of running Train for Trades should not act as a deterrent for those considering adopting or adapting the overall program model. Though its Intensive Support Model is resource- and labour-intensive, the benefits of the program and its support structures far outweigh its costs. It demands a high level of commitment and energy from staff, but the resulting level of support and corresponding positive developments in the lives of the young people participating in the program, not to mention the financial benefits that come from keeping these young people out of homelessness, certainly justifies the commitment of resources. The Train for Trades' proven track record and long-term, permanent financial benefits make the Train for Trades model an attractive prospect for private funders and government partners alike. The question remains, then, not whether one can bring the Train for Trades model to their organization or community, but when?

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