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Report on Life Stabilization for Adult Learners in LBS Programs

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Life Stabilization

Purpose

In this report, Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) examines the challenges, successes and strategies used by community-based Literacy and Basic Skills programs in supporting the life stabilization needs of the learner.

This work was undertaken because life stabilization needs are critical in supporting people to become employment ready and to move toward increased independence.

Methods

For the purposes of compiling this report, the following were utilized as sources of information:

- A provincial survey of 25 Literacy and Basic Skills agencies
- A focus group of six of provincial community-based agencies
- Statistics – Employment Ontario
- Literacy and Basic Skills Learner/Profile Data

In addition, information was cited from the following for the purposes of this report:

- Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy – Frontier College Report
- What is Life Stabilization? – Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
- Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario (2020-2025) – Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
- A Year in Transition: Ontario Employment Services Transformation



Limitations

Our research relied on a limited number of interviewees reporting from 25 agencies within the province of Ontario. The survey relied on one interview per agency, which may lead to individual reporting bias and potentially skew findings. As well, not all Literacy and Basic Skills agencies were interviewed for the survey resulting in agencies that could have been included, being excluded.

The review of the literature on life stabilization of the learner was limited. A more comprehensive review of current options throughout Ontario and Canada may be required to fully examine the possibilities on life stabilization of the learner.

Overview

The feedback from the community-based agencies clearly indicates Literacy and Basic Skills programs play a much larger role in the life of the learner than merely learning. The relationship that agencies have with their learners is built on continuous interaction over time. Literacy agencies help learners gain confidence as well as skills and building confidence takes time. Once learners start to become confident, they begin to take more risks because the environment has become a safe space.

Confidence allows learners to begin working on the barriers that are keeping them in a state of crisis/poverty.



Key Findings

- Literacy and Basic Skills staff are overwhelmed with the workload and being under-resourced.
- The Employment Ontario coordinated service has not been adequately integrated with Literacy and Basic Skills; therefore, leaving a gap to services in some areas of the province.
- More supports are required for Life Stabilization to ensure that the client is moving closer to the labour market.
- One of the most significant challenges agencies are facing is staff burnout due to the time commitment required to support learners with high needs.

Recommendations

- The community-based agencies request the province provide more resources and funding to better serve their clients.
- Professional development opportunities must be made accessible to all staff members in this field.
- The common assessment that is in place as a result of the transformation to ES and OW/ODSP should be the referral point for Literacy and Basic Skills.

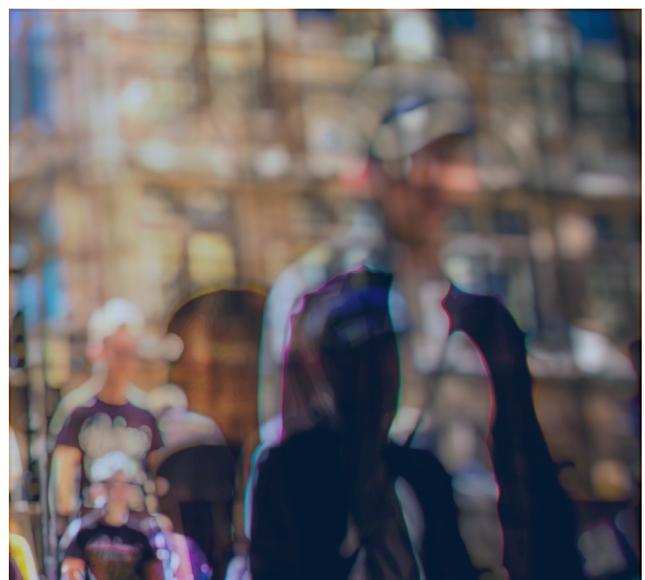
Discussion

This report outlines the relationship between life stabilization and Literacy and Basic Skills including successes, challenges and strategies.

Included in the body of this work are discussions in the following areas:

- Life Stabilization
- Transformation of Ontario Works (OW) and Employment Ontario Employment Services (ES)
- Successes
- Challenges
- Strategies

NOTE: For the purpose of this document, the Life Stabilization model used is the one the Government of Ontario adopted for the transformation of Social Assistance.



Literacy and Basic Skills and Life Stabilization

The role of Literacy and Basic Skills is critical in assisting individuals at the beginning of their journey toward life stabilization.

However, in order to be successful, learners often require the support of many agencies. Life stabilization is not about merely one need; it is many different needs that intersect. These needs can be met through different levels of service whether it is a specific wraparound support or referrals to agencies for a particular need.

Literacy and Basic Skills has always had a role in the life stabilization needs of the client/learners. (Please note for the purposes of this report, client/learners will be referred to as learners.)

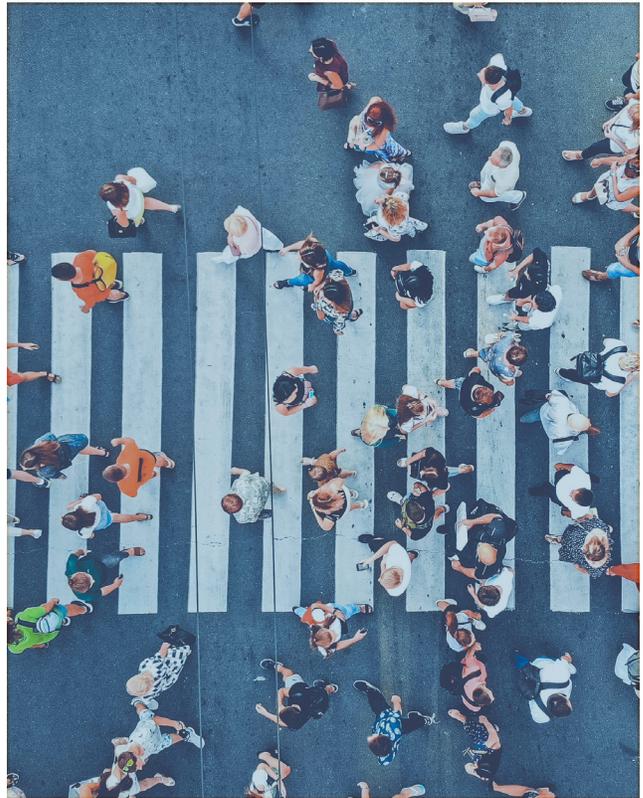
The Service Provider Guidelines for Literacy and Basic Skills state:

Without foundational literacy abilities, individuals are significantly disadvantaged in their efforts to pursue their career goals, maintaining employment, furthering their education, participating in training opportunities, and increasing personal independence.

The Literacy and Basic Skills program provides adults with a foundation from which to launch and pursue their goals.

This statement from the guidelines clearly articulates why the role of Literacy and Basic Skills is so critical in assisting individuals at they begin this process of life stabilization.

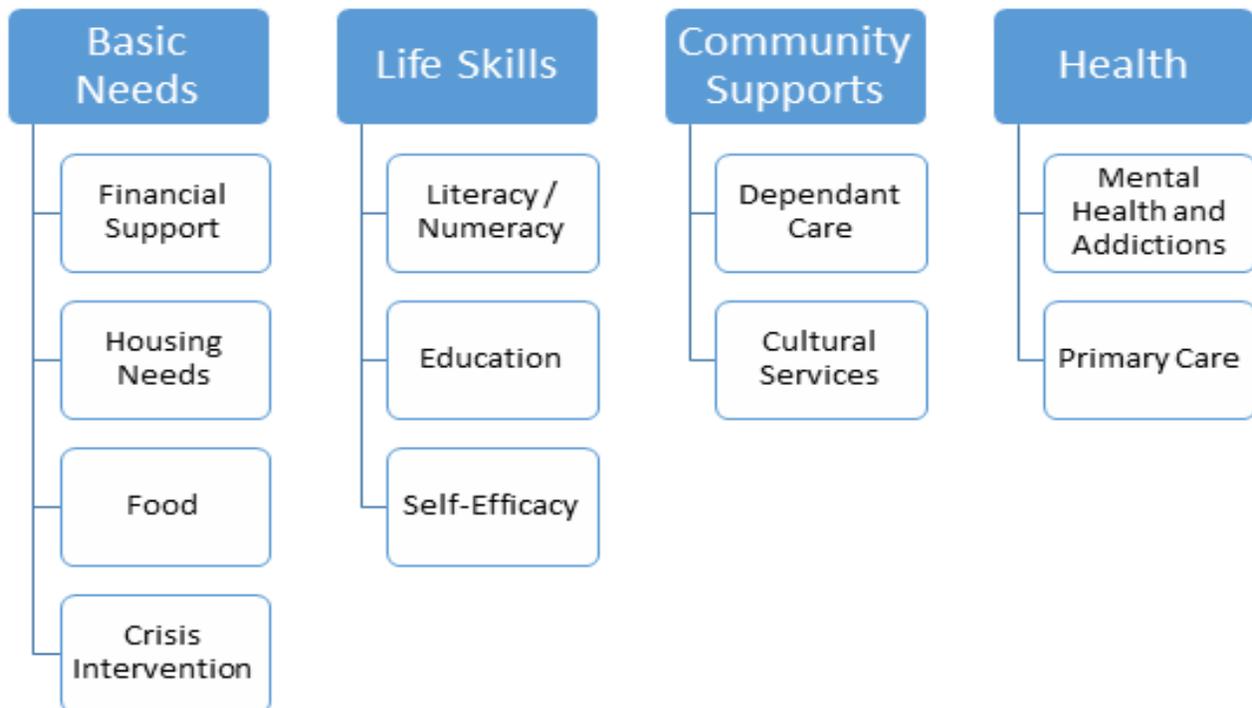
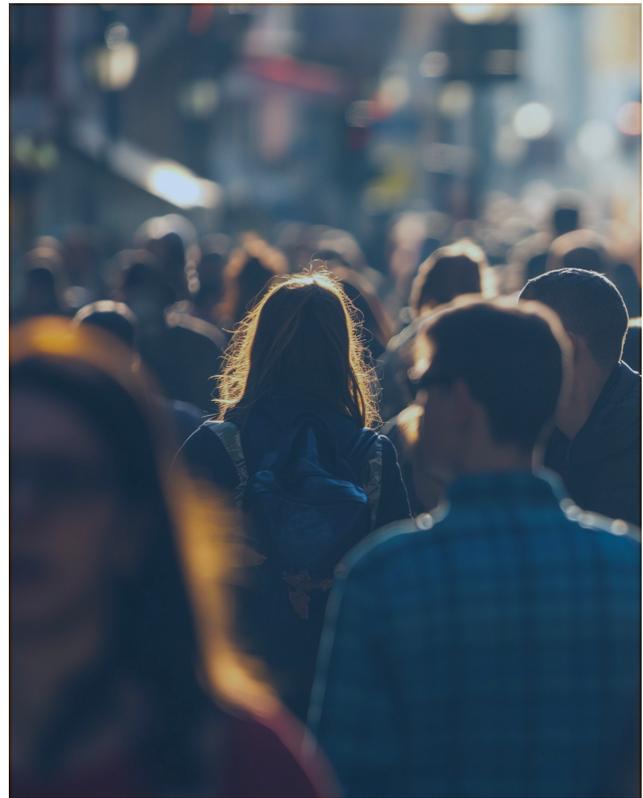
Most of the support we give is not ‘built in a box’.



How Do We Define Life Stabilization?

Life stabilization broadly means that needs are met to ensure that individuals can function in society. Life stabilization may be specific to health supports, such as mental health, disability supports or wellness support, or it may be immediate basic needs such as housing, food or financial. Or, life stabilization may be all of the above, at any one time.

Below is an overview of the most commonly cited aspects of life stabilization. For the purposes of this report, the focus of the discussion will be on Basic Needs.



Basic Needs

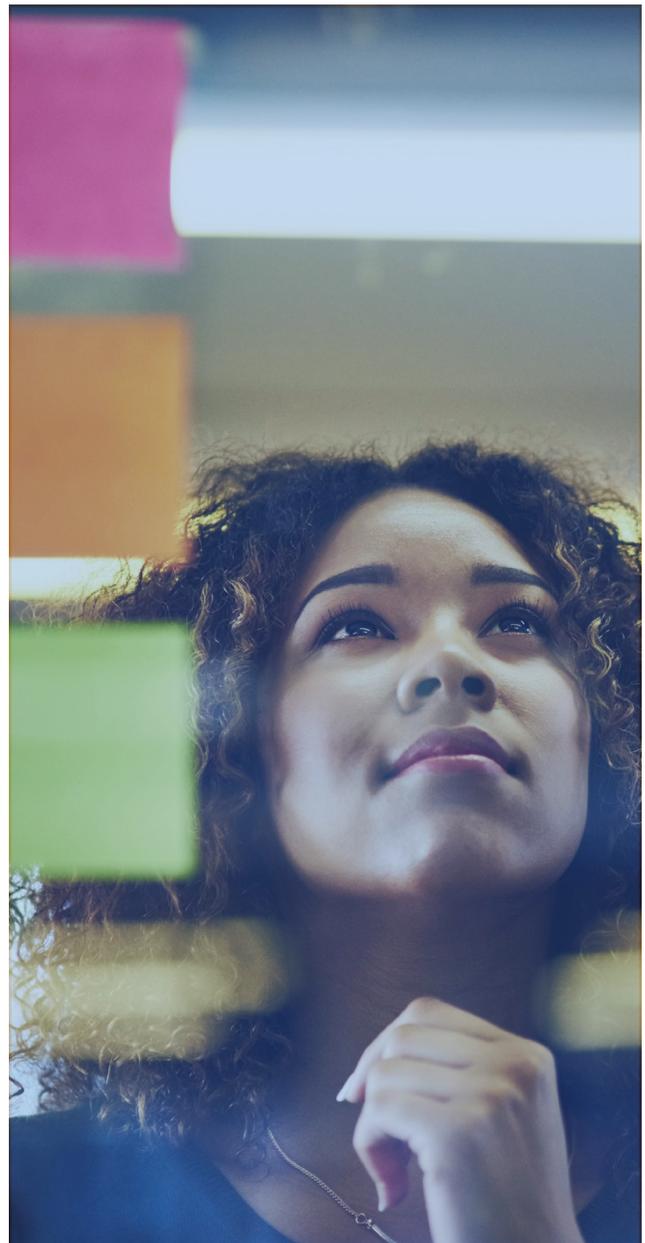
Basic Needs reflect immediate needs that can occur at any time in a person's lifespan. These needs must be met before any learning can take place. However, not all people require all supports for stability. There are four Basic Needs:

1. Financial Support – This can be addressed through referrals to Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program. Other financial support needs such as transportation, child care, employment related expenses, and training support may be necessary. Literacy and Basic Skills agencies may provide training support to clients as need arises.

2. Housing Needs – Literacy and Basic Skills organizations cannot address housing needs directly, but can refer individuals to the appropriate agencies. In addition, Literacy and Basic Skills organizations can support housing needs through education awareness of the resources available within the community, and are able to offer workshops on how to navigate this process or teach people about tenancy rules.

3. Food Needs – Most communities have food banks and information is provided at the Literacy and Basic Skills agency on how to access this service. If there is a food bank calendar for the community, it may be handed out to learners or posted. In some cases, Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have food available for learners or their own food bank.

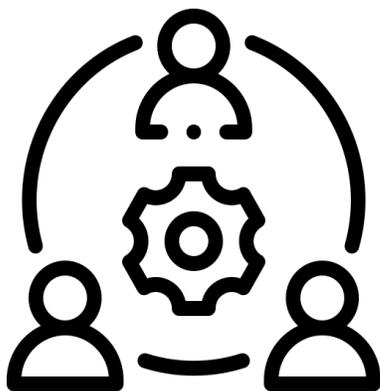
4. Crisis Resolution – Crisis resolution cannot be addressed through Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. The type of referral provided depends on the crisis and in some communities, the only way to access this need is virtually. If the learner does not have access to a phone, then Literacy and Basic Skills agencies may be able to provide a phone and private space for this support.



Wraparound Services: A Recommended Approach

The wraparound process is a team-based planning process that develops an individualized plan which uses the strengths of the learner and their team members to develop strategies the entire team takes on to effectively address the learner's needs.

This approach involves not only the organizations that serve the needs of the community but has the family or individual at the centre of service. The family or individual identifies their needs and help create and implement a plan of support. The supports that are required may involve a team of professionals within the community.



These various wraparound programs throughout the province support complex needs and are not limited to just one type of service. For example, they may include health or social service needs. Since wraparound supports the family, there may be needs that range from youth to seniors. Specialized services such as the LGBTQ2S+ or persons with disabilities are also included.

The concept of life stabilization has been around for numerous years and in the past, different terms have defined this concept. In more recent years, the term wraparound support has been used in reference to supporting the vulnerable within communities in Ontario. There are several communities that have wraparound support in place. Some of the largest communities including Toronto, Hamilton, Nipissing and North Bay, and Kitchener-Waterloo have embraced the wraparound services model.

Although some communities continue with wraparound, not all past wraparound support projects were successful, and this is usually due to a lack of funding. It is evident in the research that in order to provide wraparound support, a significant amount of financial and resource support is required. Overall, the wraparound service delivery approach involves a range of needs depending on the individual or family dynamic.

Unfortunately, not all communities in Ontario have these services nor are they able to support them. To be successful, this type of service depends on a coordination service of volunteers, professionals and, most importantly, funding. Because of the large amount of funding required and due to its dependency on a large number of resources, wraparound services, although effective, are not always feasible.

This opens a door for Literacy and Basic Skills agencies as an economical and viable option for supporting the vulnerable populations in Ontario.

Social Services

In order to understand the importance of Life Stabilization it is important to understand both the Social Assistance and Employment Service transformation in Ontario.

In the 2020 transformation of the Social Assistance system in Ontario, the government created a social assistance life stabilization framework.

This framework included Basic Needs, Life Skills, Health and Community Supports as seen on the chart on page 5. Providing support to individuals so that they may be independent, participate in their community, and prepared and ready for work where possible, is the aim of the Ontario government.

The Ontario transformation to the Social Assistance system was a much-needed change. The population that is most vulnerable in the community must have their challenges addressed so they can have their needs met. However, only the individuals who are on Social Assistance and recognized within the provincial social service's system can get their needs met. This begs the question: What happens to the people who do not access these services?



Employment Services Transformation

The Employment Service system and the Social Assistance programs in Ontario underwent a transformation at the same time. The intention of the government was to integrate the Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (OSDP) under the Employment Ontario (EO) program umbrella.

This change was overseen by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) which is now called the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD). Literacy and Basic Skills remains part of the Employment Ontario system although is not utilized within the transformation.

The transformation of Employment Services is intended to put a Service System Manager (SSM) in place. This process has begun as a phase-in approach with a mix of not-for-profit and for-profit organizations as the SSM. The SSM is responsible for administering the contracts of the employment services in different regions throughout the province.

As the transformation took place, the Employment Service Providers in the pilot regions continued to provide guidance, training, and life stabilization resources for job seekers.

As noted in the report, “A Year in Transition: Ontario’s Employment Services Transformation” (www.firstwork.org), because of the overlap in services for individual clients between OW/ODSP and ES services, there may be a need for more wraparound supports.

The system is in place to stream clients into the following three categories:

- Stream A - the individual who is closest to the labour market
- Stream B - those who need little assistance
- Stream C - those who are furthest from the labour market and require life stabilization support.



There is a common assessment tool in place to assess the learner's stream. This tool is to be used as a way of ensuring there is consistent and appropriate service provision for individuals in place across Ontario, and it is key in the referral process between OW/ODSP and Employment Ontario.

In Module 1 of the Common Assessment, the following information is gathered:

- Administrative information – name, birth date, address, etc.
- Demographic information – residency/immigration, marital status, gender, etc.
- Essential Skills and Self-efficacy – reading, writing, job search self-efficacy, etc.
- Life stabilization – Internet/computer access, transportation, housing, etc.

However, most clients are referred directly to employment services.



As illustrated below, the process utilizes a case management system for the clients. Clients have the support of Social Assistance, which takes on the **Life Stabilization** needs, and the Employment Service, which takes on the **Skills Development** needs through a case management style for the clients.



Transformation Impact on Literacy and Basic Skills

The transformation of Employment Services contributes to Literacy and Basic Skills agencies seeing a drop in the number of referrals over the past several years.

The data that Literacy and Basic Skills agencies track includes referrals from ES, OW and ODSP. Even though all clients applying for Ontario Works complete a literacy screening and the national data indicates that four out of ten people experience literacy issues, the data from the four years between 2019 and 2022 shows a drop in the number of referrals from Ontario Works (see graph below).

Yet, the percentage of clients with an income source from OW and ODSP within the Literacy and Basic Skills program is significantly

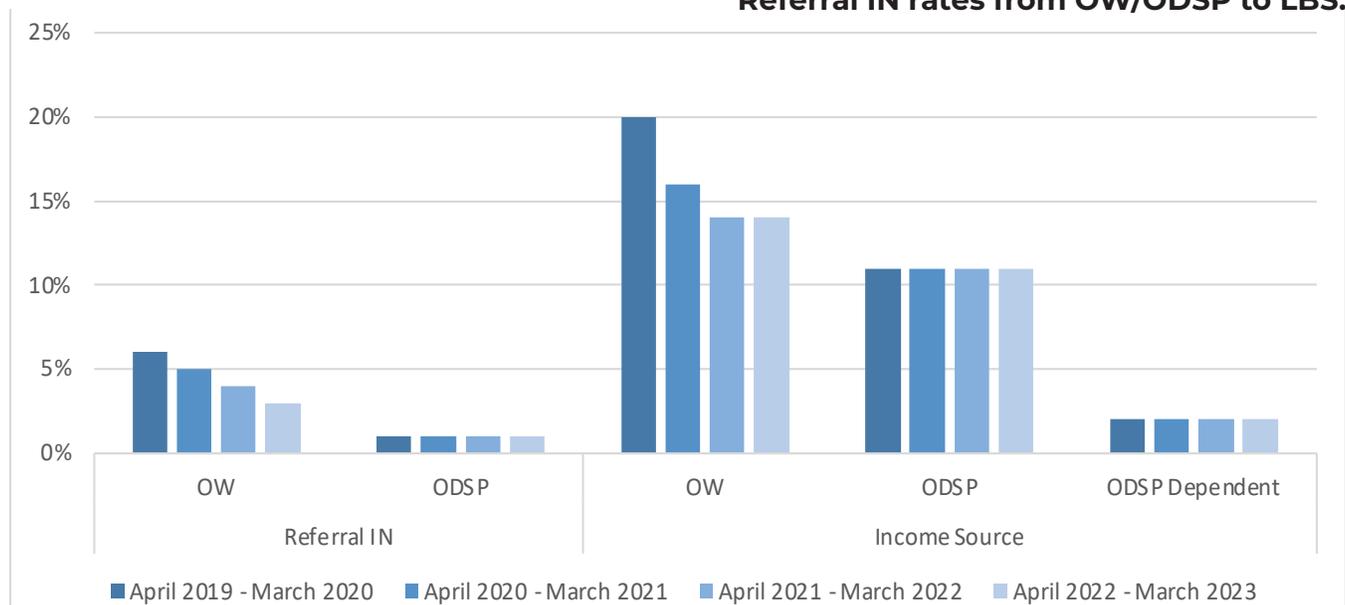
higher than the rate of referral. ODSP referral numbers remain unchanged over the same years.

The common assessment that is in place as a result of the transformation to ES and OW/ODSP should be the referral point for Literacy and Basic Skills, but the drop in referrals is evidence that this is not happening.

As of March 2023, the referrals from OW/ODSP combined were only at 4%. The referrals from Employment Service Providers were at 8%.

These numbers represent a significant drop in the ability of Literacy and Basic Skills agencies to support these clients at the most foundational level.

Referral IN rates from OW/ODSP to LBS:



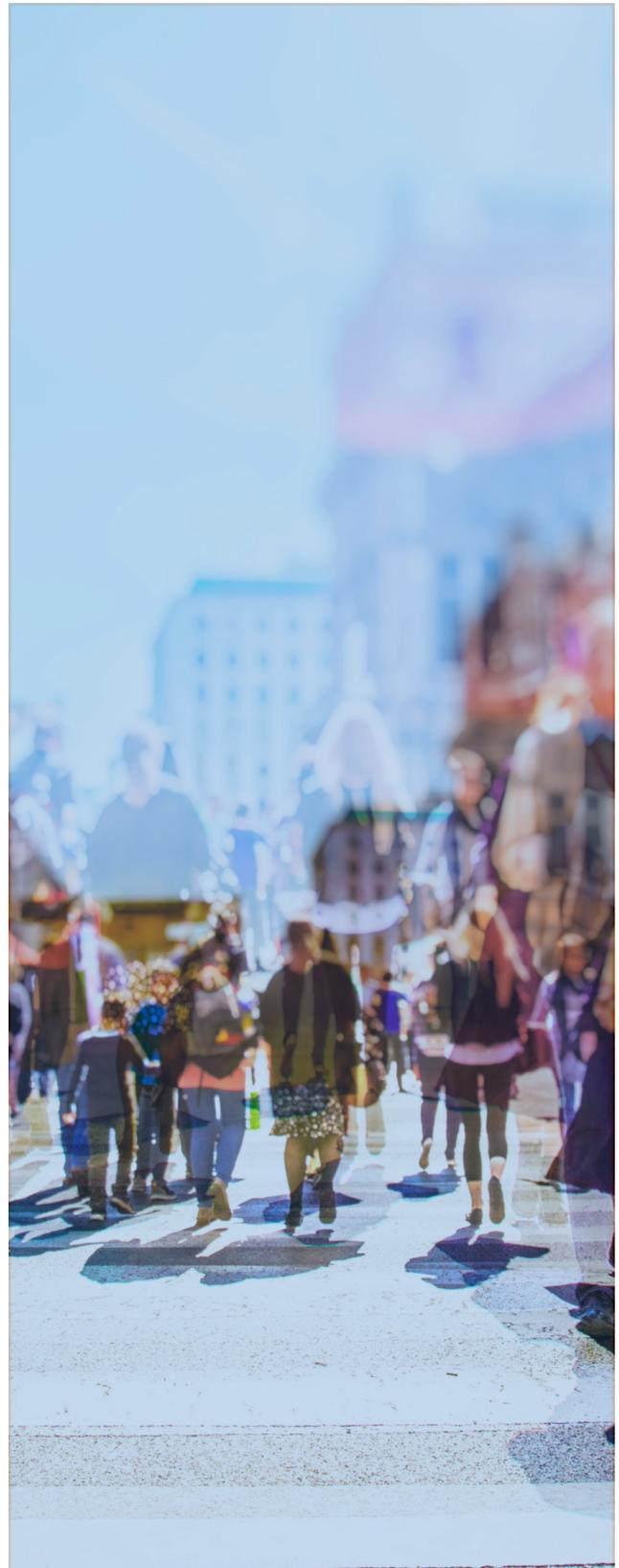
Employment Ontario - Literacy and Basic Skills Learner/Profile Data

The province has set a goal to shift social assistance recipients to employment from 35,000 to 60,000 by 2024. The government has stated:

“People on social assistance will benefit from the in-depth, personalized focus of life stabilization alongside coordinated access to Employment Ontario supports and services.”

In an attempt to achieve this goal, a common assessment is being utilized within the coordinated services of OW/ODSP and ES to determine the level of need for the client and the stream that the client should be attached to.

In the government’s, Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario (2020-2025), the government reiterates the need to move individuals from social assistance to meaningful employment, and states one of the key principles is that the shift is “Partnership Driven: work collaboratively and share responsibility.” Yet this does not always happen when there is such a strong focus on moving clients from social assistance to employment services. Additional evidence of this is indicated in the First Work Report completed for the initial phase-in of the Service System Manager (SSM).



Individuals who were receiving these stabilizations are beginning to be approached by Employment Ontario service providers to help them begin or continue their job search and prepare for the labour market. This employment support service is replacing social assistance services, which would usually help connect individuals with the continued life stabilization supports they require.

The gap left behind by the end of the pandemic-related financial assistance programs requires a coordinated and tailored approach from social assistance and employment services sectors. As the pandemic has exacerbated social, mental, healthcare, financial, and a multitude of barriers for Ontarians, a lack of Government-led, wrap-around supports and coordinated response could continue to impact marginalized communities and those furthest from the labour market disproportionately.

A Year in Transition: Ontario Employment Services Transformation pg. 26

The overlapping of client services is an indication that more supports are required for Life Stabilization to ensure that the client is moving closer to the labour market.

However, the Employment Ontario coordinated service has not been adequately integrated with Literacy and Basic Skills, which has left a significant gap to services in some areas of the province.



The Role of Literacy and Basic Life Skills and Life Stabilization

As the graphic below demonstrates, Literacy and Basic Skills has always played a key role in the life stabilization needs of learners.

Feedback from community-based agencies clearly indicates Literacy and Basic Skills plays a much larger role in the life of the learner than just learning. The relationship that agencies have with their learners is built on continuous interaction over time. Literacy agencies help learners gain confidence as well as skills and building confidence takes time.

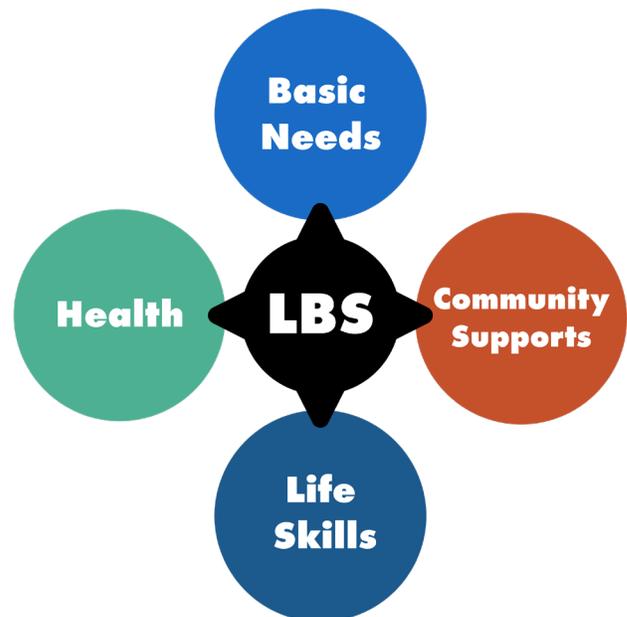
Once the learner starts to become confident, they start to take more risks while in an environment that is a safe space. Confidence allows learners to begin working on the barriers that are keeping them in a state of crisis and poverty.

Literacy and Basic Skills supports life stabilization in numerous ways. Most often, a learner receives a referral from Literacy and Basic Skills to another agency that has the expertise to deal with the issue that has been identified.

Referrals can be made easily within urban centres, but the support may vary depending on a community's remoteness and proximity to a larger urban centre.

Especially in rural communities, the ability to refer to other agencies is not always possible because these communities may not have the required services available. In addition, learners do not always have access to transportation to get to these services.

There are a number of further barriers and challenging circumstances including not owning a telephone and lack of internet connectivity. In some situations, Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have developed unique programs that address life stabilization issues. Further barriers, challenging circumstances, and LBS responses will be discussed in the body of this report.



Survey Results

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have developed unique programs that address some of the life stabilization issues.

CLO undertook a focus group and a survey where 25 Literacy and Basic Skills agencies across the province participated to gain an understanding of how agencies deal with and support life stabilization issues of learners.

The Literacy and Basic Skills agencies across the province were asked for input on the following key topics:

Successes

1. Continuous support
2. Basic needs
3. Onsite programming
4. Community partnerships and referrals

Challenges

1. Needs that arise
2. Retention
3. Integrated support
4. Location
5. Agency resources

Strategies

1. Current
2. Other
3. What can you do?

Agency Support

1. What do agencies need to support life stabilization?



Successes

Learner success occurs through innovative ideas when dealing with life stabilization within the Literacy and Basic Skills program.

1. Continuous Support - Agencies were asked to provide examples of how they support learners with life stabilization needs.

Approximately 24% of the agencies that responded indicated that they provide minimal or no support to learners with life stabilization issues, citing the lack of funding and/or expertise.

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies take time to listen to the learner particularly when they are in crisis.

Agency staff take steps to find out if learners have a plan or staff guide them through the necessary steps to identify the resources required to come up with a plan. Staff discuss with learners' strategies that may work to help solve an immediate need.

Although agencies are not mandated to do this, the very nature of the program builds in trust and rapport with learners. The learner spends a great deal of time at the agency learning and that helps form these relationships. Below are three examples of how Literacy and Basic Skills staff are flexible in meeting and accommodating the needs of the learner to ensure success.

"We often utilize mobile crisis and counseling services to our learners. Many of our learners have mental health illnesses and addiction problems and at times, display episodes of psychosis when their medication regime is irregular. Mobile crisis has provided assistance for health issues that enables learners to return to LBS participation."



"Most recently, we had a learner join our independent study group. Attendance was sporadic and although he utilized the food pantry, and was given a bike lock, he was not settled enough, or aware of communicating conflicted appointment times to reach any progress. We connected with his Salvation Army worker, and agreed he would leave our independent study group, and be connected with a tutor. She would need to provide support to make sure he understood the importance of appointments, etc. or he would not be able to continue. He expressed he was happier with a one-on-one match than in a group. We connect with his worker if there are any concerns. She in turn visits him, or sometimes reaches out to a roommate. He is still with us."

“We have an on site food bank that we add to when we can with donations from local board members, staff, or community members. We have also had some support from the Community Health Unit to provide cooking lessons and they give us grocery store gift certificates to buy food. This helps for short time fix for those taking classes. We have a list of important numbers to call if anyone needs help with housing, mental health etc. – however, many are in North Bay not Sturgeon Falls and most learners have no transportation. We have called OW on behalf of learners to advocate, and we have sat and listened many, many times, but we are not counsellors.

If we had more funding, we would hire a part time social worker or counsellor for our learners to talk to, but our funding is too low to allow for this. Our ED has called hotels even for learners to help find housing and we provide lunch to learners most days (if they are hungry, they cannot learn). We have an approved kitchen by the health unit in the back. We wear many, many hats and are a staff of 2.5 and we spend a lot of our time showing our care and compassion and understanding with trying to help on a day to day basis. I can't count the number of times I have had learners in tears in my office about their life situations. This survey is so important to do to hopefully provide the tools staff need or more funding etc.

We have had learners need help calling their family doctor to make appointments and with their consent we have called on their behalf with them present.”



2. Basic Needs - Many agencies have onsite food available whether it is in the form of a food bank/pantry or having food available so the learner can eat and learn. However, having a food bank can be dependent on donations from board members, staff or community members, which means that the food availability can be inconsistent. Other forms of support for food insecurity are the availability of cooking classes. These classes may be delivered through the local health units or through the Literacy and Basic Skills agency. Although not always, there may be a food voucher provided once the learner completes their participation in these classes. This supports life stabilization, at least in the short term.

Clothing is sometimes available to learners. Each agency differs in their support.

Success may be as important as providing a phone for the learner so they can make a phone call, or the agency making a referral to the appropriate agency for support.

Transportation support is considered a success for the learner. Agencies have the funds to support the learner through bus passes or other means of transportation support. The type of support will depend on what's available within the community. Most often only the urban areas have transportation options available and many rural communities do not have the same transportation options.

3. Onsite Programming - Literacy and Basic Skills agencies deliver workshops and classes to support learners that need life stabilization skills. These workshops can include:

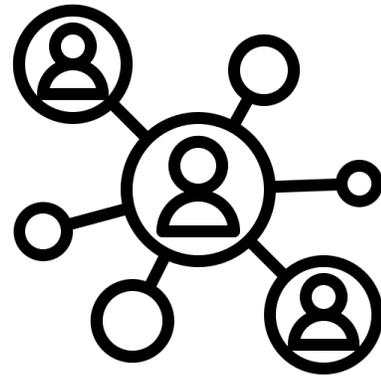
- Financial Empowerment
- Digital Literacy
- Soft Skills

For example, one agency indicated it has created a program that supports the basic food need of the community with the involvement of the learners and the local community. This involves having the learner gain math skills through participation in a local market project.

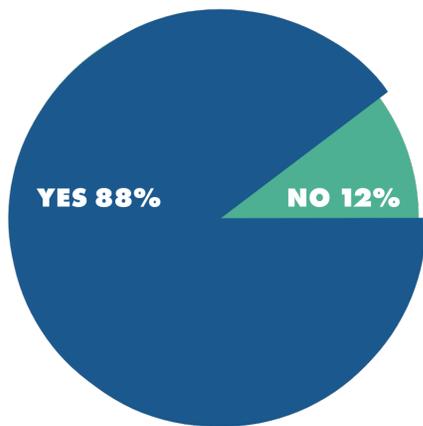


The learner works through many aspects of the market including the math involved in ordering products, counting the products necessary for the market and the math involved in the purchasing of the final product. It allows the learners to participate in the community and purchase food at an affordable rate. This is not funded through Literacy and Basic Skills, but rather through another source. Again, the funding to support life stabilization becomes an issue at the Literacy and Basic Skills agency even though literacy/numeracy is a part the Ministry framework of life stabilization.

Another example is an agency has opened their site on Fridays. This enables the Literacy and Basic Skills agency to help other agencies with space, and it brings services to learners, creates awareness of Literacy and Basic Skills and provides some much-needed support to the Literacy and Basic Skills agency.



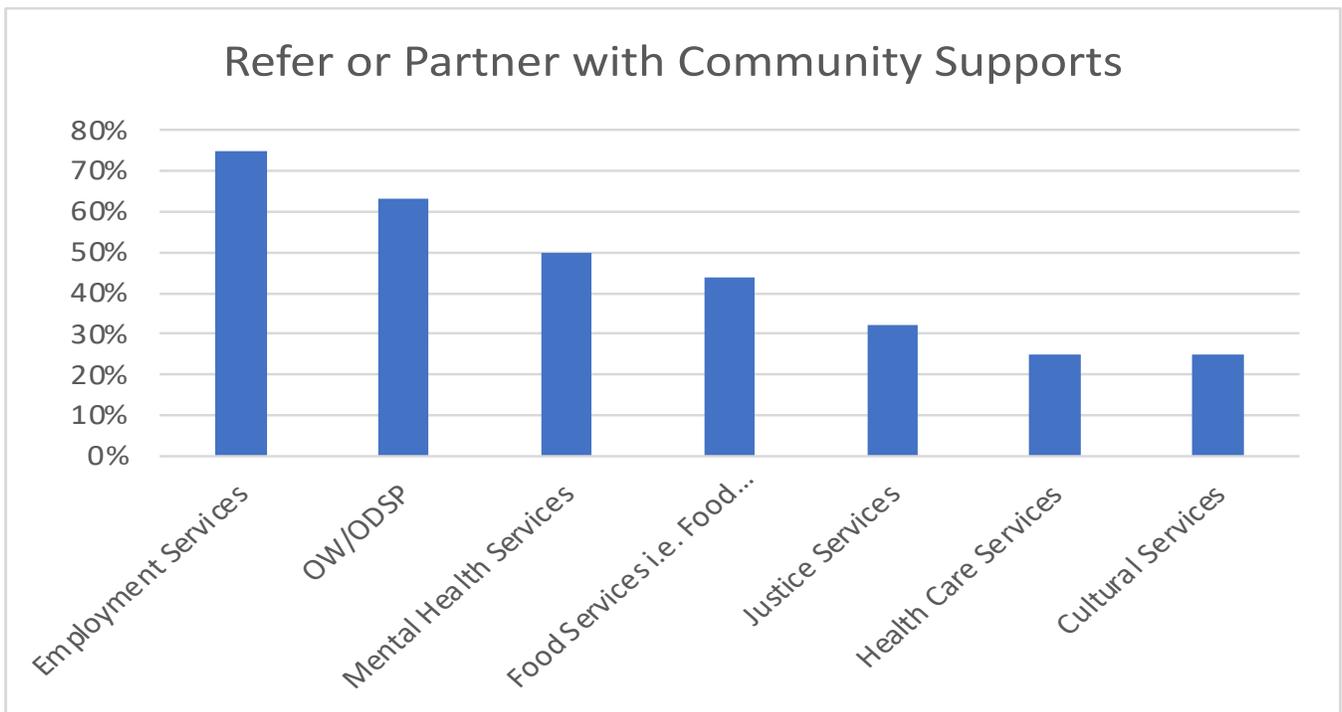
Community Partnerships That Support Life Stabilization



4. Community Partnerships and Referrals

- Community partnerships are key to having success with learners. All Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have some type of partnership with other agencies whether they are formal or informal.

Agencies that were surveyed indicated that they refer or partner with the following community supports:



Agencies also mentioned the following community supports:

- Mobile Crisis and Counselling
- CMHA
- Local Food Banks
- Community Living
- Cultural Connections
- Domestic violence and shelter support

Below are examples of community partnerships or support that agencies require to develop or enhance community partnerships.

“We are doing what we can; however, we can benefit from additional support. It would be good to establish a system of support for each learner upon intake, and as needs arises. It would also benefit clients to have a hub of support. We are trying to accommodate this approach through our agency.”

“Networking opportunities with the different agencies would be beneficial. Currently there aren’t many avenues for this.”

“No, we are well connected with other agencies - as have a local group called Helping Hands where we all come together, share new initiatives and problem solve.”

Challenges

The number of challenges that the learners in Literacy and Basic Skills face are multifaceted. Agencies that completed the survey indicated that the challenges include:

- Not aware of the services available
- Not understanding how to access the services
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of connectivity
- No phone
- Lack of trust
- Unable to advocate on their own behalf

44% of agencies indicated learners are unfamiliar with community supports available to them.

94% of agencies indicated life stabilization services are available in the community.

Learners rely on someone to provide information. Quite often, learners are told to call this number or email that person. However, learners may not have a phone, internet access or digital skills. In addition, they find it difficult to advocate for themselves.

75% of agencies that responded advocate on behalf of learners for life stabilization support.

Although this survey did not ask specifically about under-represented groups, this may also be a challenge with addressing life stabilization. Cultural norms can create challenges as well. There can be both cultural and language barriers so the individual does not understand what is available to them. An additional challenge is that they may be embarrassed to ask for help.

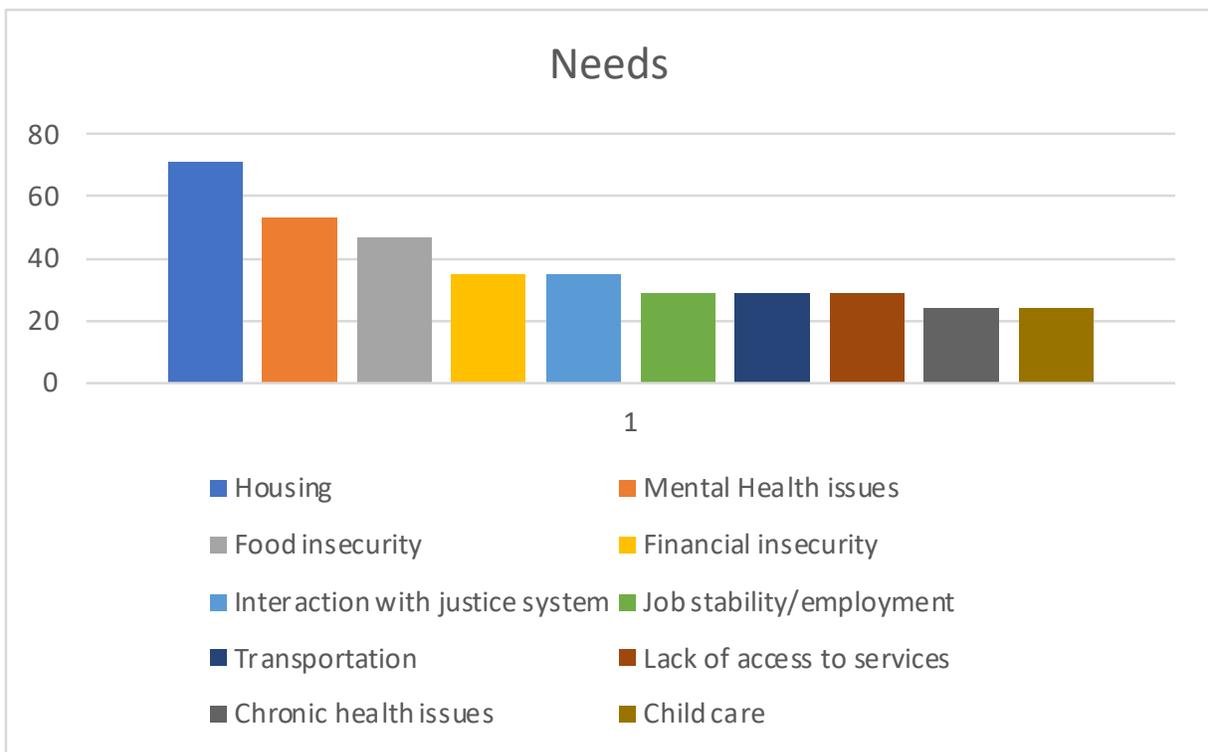
CLO conducted research in 2022 to better understand the needs of under-represented groups across the province and how LBS can meet their needs. This research found:

“While learners are given the opportunity to self-identify in several demographic categories during program registration, the nature of self-identification continues to be a challenge.”

1. Needs that arise - Agencies were asked to define the life stabilization needs that arise with their learners

Life stabilization challenges identified include, but are not limited to, the following: (see chart below)

Learners most often talk with the Literacy and Basic Skills agencies when they have built a trust relationship. Once this trust is in place, learners begin to open up about their struggles and needs.

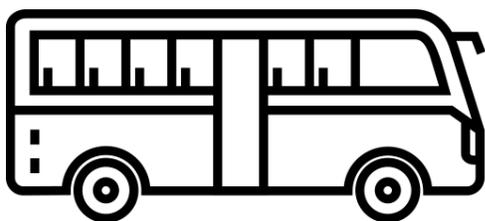


Agencies are then able to assist clients with referrals to the appropriate supports. These supports may include, but are not limited to, Ontario Works, food banks, debt counselling, shelters and mental health services.

Learners facing a housing crisis will often couch surf as indicated by survey respondents. One aspect of the housing crisis is the financial barriers that learners have in making ends meet. This is another example of the intersectionality of the basic needs of life stabilization that are currently not being met.

“The largest gap that we see is that they are not aware of the services and often don’t know how to advocate for themselves. In our region, there are a lot of cultures and there is a cultural sensitivity to accessing community support.”

“We serve a very small, rural community. We do not have a local Adult Learning Centre so our learners who want credit or post-secondary, must do so online. If they need to go out of town to go to school, transportation is very limited.”



“I know learners who wanted to take part in free LBS programs through the college but due to having no transportation, they are unable to attend. Having online classes becomes an issue when the learner cannot afford internet. Lack of affordable food is an ongoing issue. Rural communities do not have soup kitchens where they can get a free meal and only being able to access the food bank once a month is a problem. There is also very little support when it comes to dealing with any mental health issues.”

Many agencies have been supporting learners through the use of gift cards for the purpose of assisting with life stabilization needs. One such need is food insecurity. However, a directive (May 10, 2022) from the ministry indicated that this was an inappropriate use of ministry funding even though there are several studies that outline that learning cannot take place when an individual is suffering from hunger.

As outlined in the Frontier College National Research Report:

“Access to food is a challenge that many learners living in poverty face. Limited access to healthy foods, the cost to purchase nutritious foods, and the lack of necessary skills to prepare healthy meals leave many learners feeling hungry and unable to concentrate in a classroom.”

2. Retention - The challenges that our learners are facing have an impact on retention within Literacy and Basic Skills programs. Learners' attendance can be sporadic which jeopardizes completion of a program. Their focus is always on the current crisis they are facing in their lives and, at times like this, learning is usually the least of their concerns.

3. Integrated Support - We asked if agencies refer clients to other supports prior to starting with Literacy and Basic Skills. Some indicated they do but referrals are always determined on a case-by-case basis and depend on the circumstances the client is facing. Often the learner may have been referred from agencies offering support.

75% of agencies indicated that learners leave Literacy and Basic Skills programs as a result of not having their life stabilization needs addressed.

88% of agencies indicated learners are receiving life stabilization support while attending Literacy and Basic Skills programs.



The services learners are receiving include:

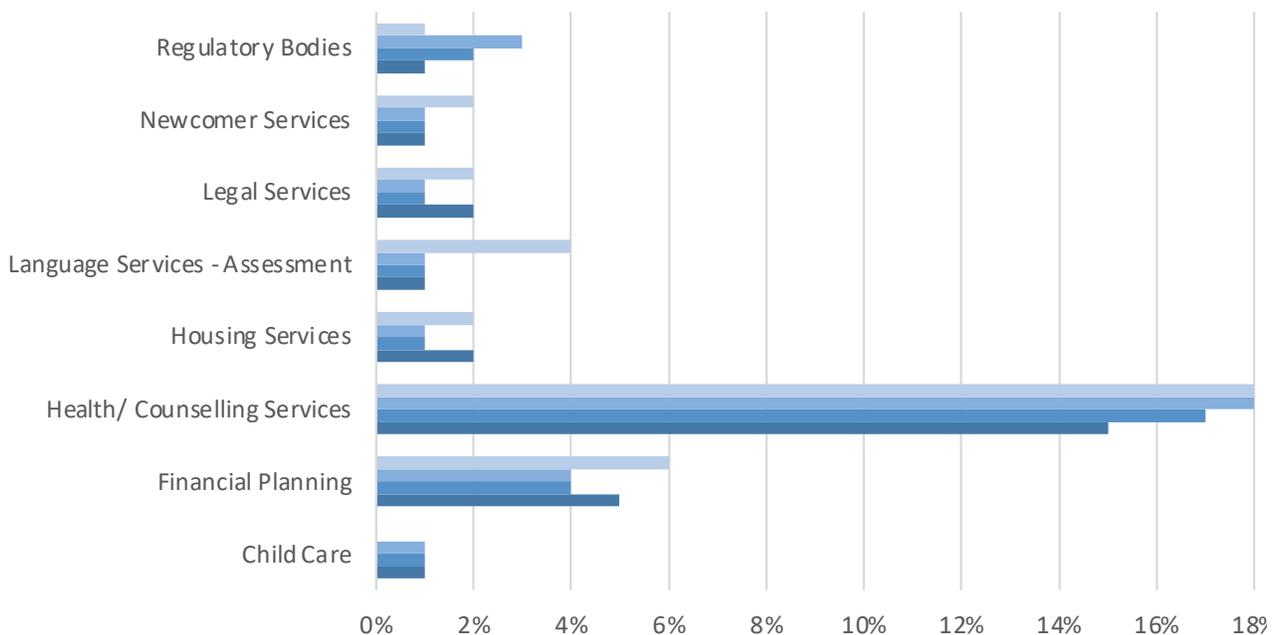
- OW/ODSP
- Mental Health
- Food Support
- Addiction Recovery Program
- Employment Services
- Financial Education
- Family Health Teams
- English Conversation Classes

As is demonstrated in the chart below, Literacy and Basic Skills programs refer to other agencies to help learners meet their life stabilization needs. The following chart displays data from the Ontario Rollup Reports for the past four years. This information shows an increase in most referrals to additional community supports, even in the year that COVID 19 had the greatest impact (2020-2021).

4. Location - Other challenges include the catchment areas that Literacy and Basic Skills programs serve. The agencies may be in small communities where other support is very limited. Rural locations do not lend themselves to having service available to vulnerable populations. For example, if a community is spread across a large geographic area that only has one large centre, that centre is where services will likely be located. This makes it extremely difficult for someone, who lives in the outer edges of that catchment area, to access the services they require.

As a result, learners will rely on Literacy and Basic Skills agencies for assistance with support; this may include advocating on their behalf, providing them with information, having a food supply available or providing transportation costs if transportation is even available.

Referrals to other supports



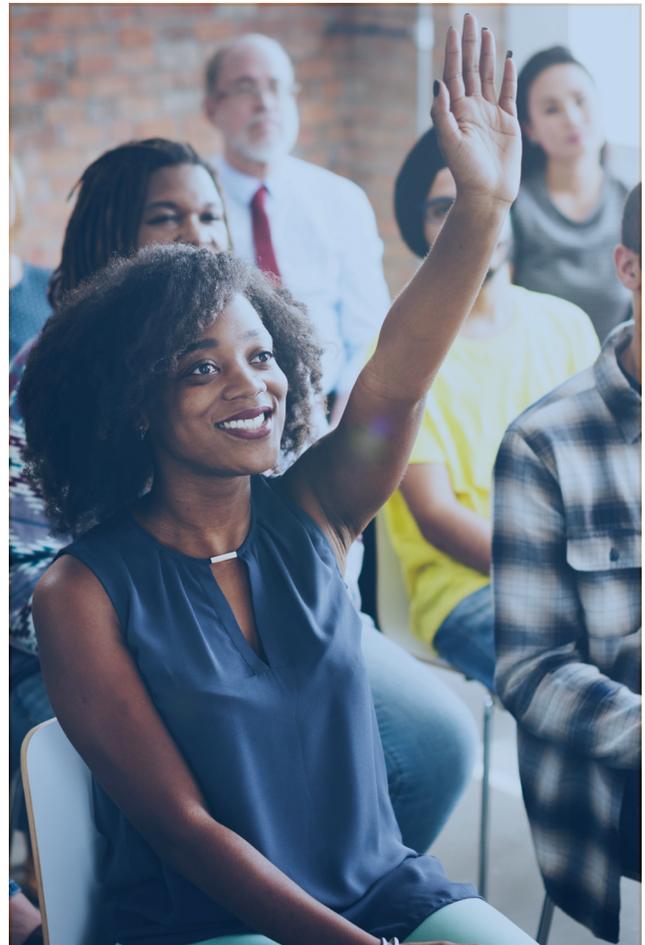
Research conducted by Frontier College outlined that the need for reliable transportation is greater than ever. Particularly affected are the rural poor. Rural areas rarely have public transportation and, if the learner has no access to a vehicle, they are unable to access the services they need.



5. Agency Resources - One of the most significant challenges agencies are facing is the time commitment and staff burnout from supporting learners with high needs. Most agencies indicated that it takes a toll on their staffs' mental health. In some cases, staff have resigned for their own sense of safety. The lack of staffing resources causes frustration for agencies because of the great deal of time it takes to address learners' life stabilization issues.

81% of the agencies surveyed indicated that the amount of time required to support a learner can be overwhelming.

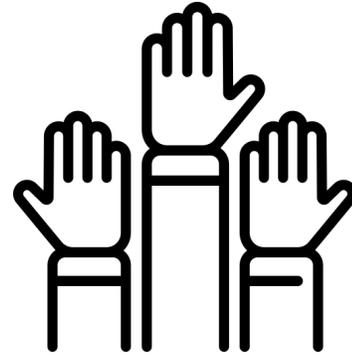
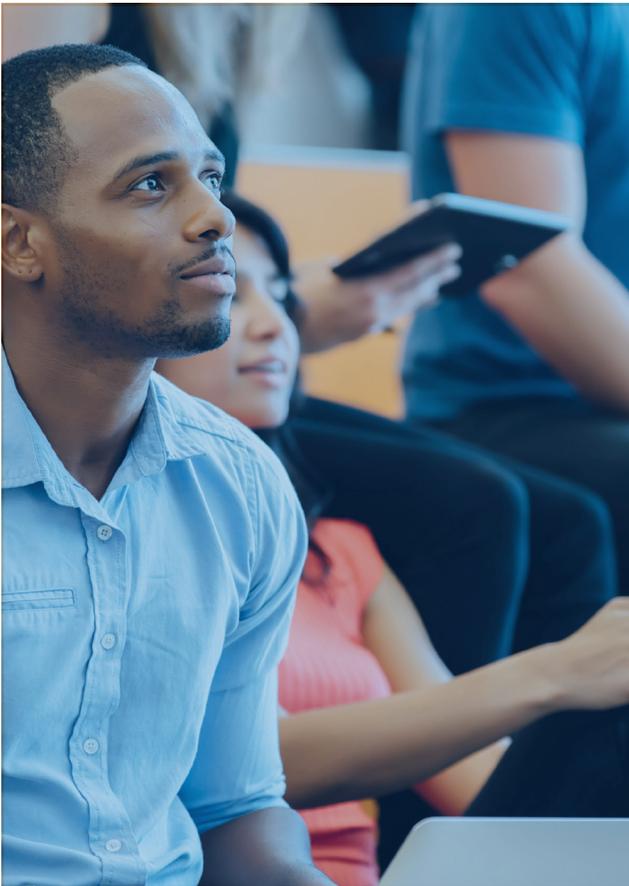
“We are primarily a Literacy and Basic Skills agency and having to find other agencies to support a learner can take the staff away for their core roles or push them towards burn out. We strive to serve our learners but sometimes we just don't have the bandwidth, contacts or expertise to be a wrap around service. Many learners have never gotten help and become very needy, very quickly once they see someone is helping them on our staff. Learners don't always realise or appreciate that these are not core job responsibilities for my staff. We do the best we can as we have lots of empathy care about helping them.”



Strategies

Through the survey we learned that Literacy and Basic Skills agencies are offering some unique and innovative strategies for assisting learners with life stabilization.

“We do a combination of things to support learners while they are learning with us. This includes a food bank on site, a lunch program, sharing of other supports/ contacts to call depending on needs, refer back to worker if they have one to discuss needs. If we cannot help, we refer when we can - all situations are so unique and individual.”



“Advocacy is embedded in our daily interactions with learners. We are always trying to support learners with the tools they need to advocate for themselves. We will take learners to different community agencies if they are nervous to make the initial meeting on their own. We also have a small office where we invite community partners to meet with learners so they can meet in a space they feel comfortable in. We also support learners with writing letters of enrollment for childcare support or for their OW worker to support their education path.”

“All of the above. Most impactful is creating a trustful relationship and investing time in that individual.”

“Tutors sometimes assist with filling in forms; computer instructor sometimes assists with password recovery, phone set-up, on-line forms, navigating email use between phone and computer. Most are referrals as they may not be needs that are within our scope of expertise.”

1. Current Strategies - Agencies across the province are aware of the community resources available and provide a warm hand-off to ensure the learner is less intimidated. Approximately 75% of the agencies advocate on behalf of the learner for life stabilization supports.

a) Other service agencies are providing support by teaching various skills. For example, teaching math skills through programs such as Market Math. The Market Math program builds the skills of the learner through participation in a market throughout the local area. Skills range from learning how to use the Canada Food Guide, working in a local market, to taking orders for the market and preparing for the market day.

b) Another strategy being used by an agency has been to open their space to other agencies one day per week. This allows learners to become comfortable with other community partners and potentially gain trust and assistance from those partners. This may be an opportunity for agencies to look at the usage of their site and potentially be able to share some space with other agencies. If OW or ES were able to participate in using the space, whether it's their clients or Literacy and Basic Skills clients, it would make referrals easier for the client/learner. This strategy builds an understanding of the Literacy and Basic Skills program with partners. If the learner requires a referral, they can come to a location that is comfortable for that warm hand-off.

c) There is also a Pathways Coach co-located with the City of Kingston. The role of the Pathways Coach is to have a conversation with the client from OW and refer them to the most appropriate support. Although the Pathways Coach does work part-time with the Literacy and Basic Skills agency, the role as a Pathways Coach is funded through the city. Since the coach has knowledge of the other agencies within the area, she can share that information with the staff of the Literacy and Basic Skills agency to increase their understanding of the various services.

Although this is an excellent use of staff, it may not work in all communities because some communities do not have the supports available or the staff to support a similar process.

Some of the above strategies may already be happening organically but not consistently. For services to happen on a consistent basis, a formal partnership agreement may be required, with appropriate funding attached.



2. Other strategies - Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have much to offer. There are several curricula available, and it may only be a matter of reframing how it is offered. It may be as simple as using the curriculum you have to address life stabilization needs. For example, many agencies offer Point of Sale (POS) training or pre-PSW which draws in individuals whose goal is to join the workforce. In this situation Literacy and Basic Skills agencies are supporting life stabilization while making the learning more meaningful and relevant.

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies quite often think in broad terms such as Financial Literacy – Budgeting. Is there a way to change course titles so it means more in the daily life of someone struggling with money? How about with housing; can we provide instruction on how to understand the tenancy rules while incorporating the reading, writing and numeracy skills necessary to empower the learner?

Where food intersects with health, Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have a curriculum to address this issue. Once again, it may be beneficial to rename the title of the course being offered so it is more accessible to the learner.

Turning to math, is there a way to frame how math skills are offered? Can it be related to the basic or current need of the learner?

Renaming the curriculum so they are more accessible to the learner is something Literacy and Basic Skills agencies need to consider.

3. What can you do?

- Is your website accessible to learners?
- Do Employment Services and Social Services know what you are offering?
- Are you able to present your information directly to clients?
- Can you be flexible to address the community needs?
- Use the website Customized Outcomes Measurement and Skills Assessment (COMSA) to enhance understanding of life stabilization needs with learners



Agency Support

We asked the agencies what type of support they require to be more supportive with learners.

100% of the agencies surveyed indicated that the support required to be more supportive with learners is additional funding.

Here are several examples of their requests:

“More funding to make community stabilization support a core role on our team rather than existing staff wearing multiple hats.”

“Not sure how to answer that. Most of the support we give is not ‘built in a box,’ so formalizing support would be cumbersome. Of course, more time is always needed!”

“We would like to hire part time staff but would need additional funds.”

“More funding to hire more staff to help with counselling on site; we have not received increase in funding in over 7 years for our regular programming - this is not working!”

“Training support for staff for Crisis Prevention Intervention, Suicide Intervention, trained counsellor or LBS Case manager that can liaise between LBS Agency and stabilization supports.”

¹COMSA is a survey tool that can capture the needs of clients. If used it can provide additional statistics for agencies to utilize.



Key Findings

Supporting Literacy and Basic Skills

In order for Life Stabilization needs to be addressed at Literacy and Basic Skills agencies, they require additional funding. Without additional funding, Literacy and Basic Skills agencies are unable to adequately serve clients that access our programs.

Many of the Literacy and Basic Skills community-based agencies have fewer than ten staff members and, in some cases, have five or less staff members. The need for more resources has never been greater. The increase in individuals requiring support has grown in the past few years as it has in most sectors. Additional funding would enable agencies to create consistency of service across the province.

1. Professional development opportunities should be accessible to all staff members in this field. Professional development that addresses the Life Stabilization Framework from the province is something that would be beneficial to all Literacy and Basic Skills agencies.

Professional development for staff may include:

- Trauma-informed Care
- Diversity and Inclusion Training
- Self-care and Wellness
- Understanding the Employment Services Transformation
- Understanding the Social Assistance Transformation



2. Literacy and Basic Skills staff are feeling overwhelmed and under-resourced with the responsibilities that come with working with vulnerable clients.

“Absolutely staff burnout and lack of time. We need a professional for mental health in our agency even two days a week - no money for this!”

“Being a community agency in a small rural town we find staff experience compassion fatigue and burnout often. This is something we need support with and are trying to change.”

“Staff burnout, short staffing. Not enough time or staffing to do outreach as well as maintain the offices.”

“Yes; it can take a lot of staff time and can have a toll on staff’s mental health.”

3. The community-based agencies would like to request the province provide more resources and funding to better serve our clients.

“Centralized and updated list of life stabilization supports in the community - especially useful for staff who are new to LBS.”

“More funding to make community stabilization support a core role on our team rather than existing staff wearing multiple hats.”

“Training support for staff for Crisis Prevention Intervention, Suicide Intervention, trained counsellor or LBS Case manager that can liaise between LBS Agency and stabilization supports.”

“More staff, higher wages, a qualified social worker on staff at least part time.”

Funding

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies receive annual operating funding from the Ministry of Immigration, Labour, Training and Skills Development. Some agencies, but not all, receive funding from other sources to deliver specific programs throughout the year. This additional funding is not consistent nor is it permanent. This limits the ability of agencies to provide the lasting impact that government, community and clients expect.

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies have not received an increase in operating funds for seven years. This lack of funding increase is holding agencies back in developing creative and innovative ways of delivering literacy that the current market demands. Agency staff are not receiving any increase in salary either, which puts staffing at risk since agencies cannot be competitive in the current labour market.

Conclusion

There are several considerations that need to be taken into account when working with learners within Literacy and Basic Skills.

Learners in the Literacy and Basic Skills programs across the province rely on LBS staff to provide guidance in not only learning but accessing services in the community. Learners do not have the skills necessary to be able to navigate the system of services in the community without support. Learners need skills such as those outlined in the Ontario Adult Curriculum Framework (OALCF) and which progress is measured against, to be able to move forward. Some of these skills required may include being able to read the information provided by food banks or navigate a government document that needs to be completed for social services.

Although the government is moving most services to an online model, individuals in the poverty cycle have the least access to technology creating an injustice to those with the least skills to advocate for themselves.

As our survey indicates, LBS agencies spend a great deal of time with learners to advocate, advance skills and build confidence.

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies are poised to be the strategic partner that can be a driving force in helping Ontario meet its objectives and assist Ontarians with working their way out of the never-ending cycle of poverty.

As noted in the Here to Help: Research Report on Supporting Adult Learners from Underrepresented Groups in LBS Programs:

“No learner comes to an LBS program with only a single need, and those that are most apparent may be helped or hindered by the learner’s other barriers or challenges. To uncover those diverse and multi-layered needs, LBS programs need additional time to devote to these learners.”

The government of Ontario has a five-year strategy to reduce poverty. This strategy has 4 pillars:

- Encouraging job creation and connecting people to employment
- Connecting people with the right supports and services
- Making life more affordable and building financial resiliency
- Accelerating action and driving progress

Each pillar emphasizes the importance of integration and coordination to support those in need. We are aware that any change requires funding, and that funding is an ongoing challenge. However, the integrated and coordinated model must include Literacy and Basic Skills because Literacy and Basic Skills is prepared and poised to be the foundation of support for individuals struggling with life stabilization.

The government of Ontario uses a performance management system that is driven by data which may affect funding. The province also has a shared responsibility of a highly effective and quality program to provide the vulnerable population of this province the best possible outcome. Yet, it does not take into consideration the breadth of the support offered within the Literacy and Basic Skills program.

Learners don't know what they don't know.



Literacy and Basic Skills agencies spend a great deal of time with individual learners to provide support and ensure success regardless of the metrics required.

The report, Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy, states:

“The positive effects of literacy skills are not limited to economic well-being, however. Literacy skills are necessary to complete even the most basic tasks in a person’s life. Taken a step further, literacy can empower individuals to make informed choices about their lives. These skills help individuals make better decisions about how to manage their finances, how to manage their health, how to use technology, and how to understand the institutions that govern their lives, which in turn allows them to engage more fully. Literacy is a key step on the pathway not only to employment but also to broader social inclusion and full participation in valued-dimensions of society such as social, civic, and political engagement that are critical to the inclusion and well-being of all Canadians.”

The contributions of Literacy and Basic Skills agencies seem to be truly undervalued by the Government of Ontario but play a key role in the success of people across this province. For Ontario to have true integration and coordination within the communities consistently across this province, Literacy and Basic Skills must be included as a valued partner and funded appropriately.

Appendix A

Survey

1. Please define some of the life stabilization needs that arise with your learners. Some examples, moving from house to house or not being able to locate food services, etc.
2. Does your agency refer learners to other community organizations when faced with a life stabilization need? Do you make more than one referral for individual learners?
3. Please identify the type of referrals you make. For example, to OW, financial, child care, etc.
4. Are life stabilization resources available in your community?
5. Does your agency try to support learners with some of the needs of life stabilization without referring? Please provide some examples.
6. Can you tell us when learners have had success with life stabilization support? What type of support did the learner receive? Did the learner stay in LBS as a result of these successes?
7. Can you tell us when learners have had challenges with life stabilization support? Please provide details of the challenges. That may include, not having that particular support in the community, not being aware of the support or not being able to advocate for themselves.
8. How has life stabilization impacted learner's retention within LBS?
9. Does your agency have learners currently receiving life stabilization support from other community partners. If yes, please describe.
10. Have learner's left LBS as a result of not having their life stabilization needs met?
11. Can you tell us the strategies used to support learners within your agency who require additional life stabilization supports? Do you encourage the learner to advocate for the support, provide referrals or warm hand-offs?
12. Does your agency advocate on your learner's behalf for life stabilization support?

13. Does your agency redirect clients to other life stabilization supports before starting in LBS?
If yes, please provide some examples of the type of referrals made.
14. Does your agency have partnerships with organizations that support life stabilization needs?
15. Does your agency require support to develop or enhance those partnerships? For example, network support.
16. Does your agency find the support you provide can be overwhelming to the staff? For example, not enough time, staff burnout, etc.
17. What type of support would your agency require to be more supportive with your learners?
18. Would you be open to speaking with us to provide additional information?

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. Successes working with learners with life stabilization issues
2. Challenges working with learners with life stabilization issues
3. Strategies used for working with learners with life stabilization issues
4. What do you want the ministry to know?

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