



Supporting Life Stabilization for Adult Learners in LBS Programs

FACTSHEET #2: Challenges

In 2022, Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) surveyed twenty-five Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies across Ontario and conducted province-wide research for the [Report on Life Stabilization for Adult Learners in LBS Programs](#).

Life stabilization is not about merely one need; there are often many different needs that intersect, and learners often require services from several agencies. LBS staff help learners access services in the community as many cannot navigate them without support. Learners across the province also rely on staff at LBS agencies to assist with acquiring skills such as reading information provided by food banks or completing government documents required for accessing social services.

LBS practitioners have always had a role in the life stabilization needs of learners, and 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, maintain employment, further education, participate in training opportunities, and increase personal independence. The Literacy and Basic Skills program provides adults with a foundation from which to launch and pursue their goals.

CLO has created three factsheets based on the *Report on Life Stabilization for Adult Learners in LBS Programs*. The factsheets summarize the following topics:

1. [Successes](#)
2. [Challenges](#)
3. [Strategies](#)

This is the second fact sheet in the series, and it focuses on life stabilization *challenges* for LBS practitioners and learners.

Learners in Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs often face multifaceted challenges. LBS agencies surveyed across Ontario indicated that learners with life stabilization issues may be unaware of what services are available and how to access them. To identify challenges, agencies were asked for input on the following key topics.

NEEDS THAT ARISE

Learners often share their challenges with LBS staff once they have built a trusting relationship. LBS agencies surveyed identified the life stabilization issues that often arise with their learners such as:

- housing instability
- financial insecurity
- food insecurity
- mental health issues & addiction
- ability to maintain employment
- involvement with the justice system
- transportation
- childcare
- chronic health issues
- lack of access to services

“I’d say the biggest challenge is finding suitable, sustainable employment, even with the help of Employment Services. Also, some are caring for older family members with chronic health issues who need near-constant care. They may be aware of support, but do not access it because of their own cultural norms. In our region, there are a lot of cultures and there is a sensitivity to accessing community support.”

RETENTION

The challenges that learners face jeopardize attendance and have an impact on retention within LBS programs. 75% of agencies indicated that learners leave programs because of life stabilization issues.

The government is moving most services to an online model, yet those in poverty have the least access to technology. Learners may not have a phone, internet access or digital skills, which affects retention and creates an injustice for those who are unable to advocate for themselves.

“It is hard for a learner to commit time to LBS when they are hungry, worried about paying bills, or where they will get their next meal. Sometimes we are unable to reach a learner due to them not having a phone.”

“There is very limited housing availability in our area. This forces some learners to couch surf, live at the shelter, and not know where they will end up. What doesn’t help is the racism and stigma that is also present in the community.”



INTEGRATED SUPPORT

LBS programs and local community agencies often refer learners to each other to provide life stabilization support.

Integrated support has become more challenging with the transformation of Social Assistance and Employment Services (ES) in Ontario that began in 2020. The purpose of this change was to integrate the Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) under the Employment Ontario umbrella to create a life stabilization framework.

However, the Employment Ontario coordinated service has not been integrated with LBS programs. In addition, the transformation ended the mandate for OW/ODSP/ES to send referrals to community partners such as LBS agencies, so there is no longer an incentive for caseworkers to do so.

This has left a gap in service and the data shows a significant drop in the number of referrals to LBS agencies since the transformation began. These numbers make it very challenging to support learners at the most foundational level.



LOCATION

Other challenges include the catchment areas that LBS programs serve. Rural areas rarely have public transportation and learners are unable to access the services they need. As a result, learners in these locations often rely more on LBS agencies for support, which can be challenging due to the lack of resources.

“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.”

“Transportation is a huge issue within rural communities, and lack of affordable food. Most rural towns only have one grocery store, which happens to be extremely high-priced.”

“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.”

“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.”

“I think network support in general is a good thing to do, but I think most people forget that there is a lack of resources in rural communities.”

AGENCY RESOURCES

One of the most significant challenges agencies face is staff burnout from supporting many learners with high needs. LBS agencies are overwhelmed, under-resourced, and understaffed due to the great deal of time it takes to address life stabilization issues.

LBS agencies receive funding from the Government and have not received an increase for seven years, which limits program offerings.

In addition, agency staff have not received an increase in salary, which puts staffing at risk. Some agencies receive funding from other sources as well to deliver specific programs throughout the year, but this funding is not permanent and limits the ability to provide consistent support.

Many agencies supported learners struggling with food insecurity through the use of grocery gift cards. However, [a directive in 2022](#) from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development stated that this practice was to cease immediately. For agencies that cannot provide food directly to learners, this means that they no longer have a way to support those with food stability issues.

Learning cannot take place when clients are suffering from hunger, and lack of food increases the difficulty for clients to move closer to the labour market.

It is clear from the research that more supports are required for LBS agencies to support learners and address life stabilization challenges effectively.



“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.”

“We had a staff member resign for her own sense of safety when learners are unstable. Often our learners are in crisis or have experienced traumatic experiences. We are providing much more than LBS services to our learners.”

“I can’t count the number of times I have had learners in tears in my office about their life situations.”

“We could use more financial support to offer more food.”

“We are primarily a Literacy and Basic Skills agency and having to find other agencies to support a learner can take the staff away from their core roles or push them towards burnout.”

“We strive to serve our learners but sometimes we just don’t have the bandwidth, contacts or expertise to be a wrap-around service.”

CONCLUSION

To learn more about the successes and strategies that LBS agencies encounter when supporting life stabilization issues with learners, please see [the other two factsheets](#) in this series titled *Successes and Strategies*.

The factsheets based on the [Report on Life Stabilization for Adult Learners in LBS Programs](#) were researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO). CLO is a provincial literacy network that serves english language, community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. To learn more about our organization, [visit our website here](#).

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