

# Skills, Explore, Achieve, Revive (SOAR)



## PARTNERS

Murphy Centre Inc.



## LOCATIONS

Newfoundland and Labrador



## INVESTMENT

\$418,786



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## ☰ Executive Summary

The second-largest occupational group in Newfoundland and Labrador, comprising trades, transport, and equipment operators, faced significant challenges during COVID-19. As demand for tradespeople increased with the reopening of work, individuals who were early in their trades careers encountered difficulties in completing apprenticeships and meeting sectoral requirements. To meet local labour market needs, the Murphy Centre team created the SOAR (Skills, Explore, Achieve, Revive) program to provide free and accessible tutoring and counselling services to support retention of early career tradespeople and their longer-term career advancement.

This project highlighted the high demand for counseling and other mental health supports to enhance the overall well-being and resilience of tradespeople, ultimately improving their progression and retention in the skilled trades. The project also demonstrated the complexity of working collaboratively to address shared challenges.

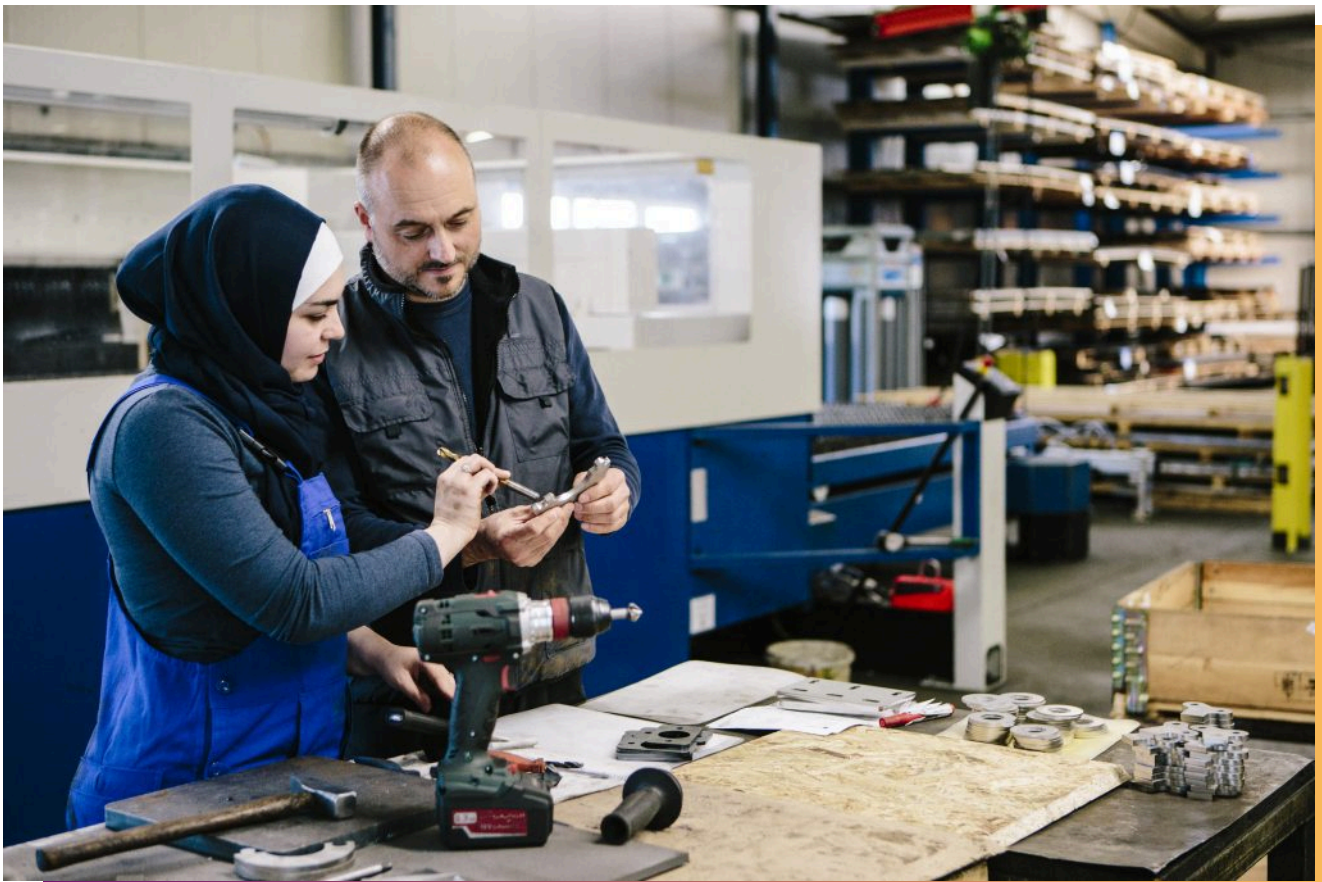
### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 136 participants in Newfoundland and Labrador received counselling and/or tutoring.
- 2 Participants had complex barriers keeping them from success, including learning disabilities, years of trauma, work-related stress, financial stress, interpersonal issues, anxiety, depression, addictions, and housing insecurity.
- 3 Programs can reach potential participants by promoting their services directly in addition to leveraging partner networks for referrals.

## ▶ The Issue

Trades, transport and equipment operators make up the second-largest occupational group in Newfoundland and Labrador and were some of the hardest hit by COVID. As work started to open back up and demand for tradespeople increased, early career tradespeople struggled to complete apprenticeships and meet sectoral requirements. Educational institutions offering trades education wanted to retain the students at risk of dismissal and employers wanted to retain workers who were facing termination.

Existing support services, often available to tradespeople through their employers or unions, have their limitations. These services can be expensive, inaccessible, or insufficient to meet training needs and barriers—such as mental health challenges—which ultimately limit worker success. Studies have shown that those working in skilled trades, particularly in the construction industry, are more likely to experience mental health issues such as burnout and suicidal ideation from long working hours, tight timelines, job uncertainty, financial pressures, and working away from home. These studies point to an industry culture where mental health conditions and seeking help are perceived as personal weakness, a prevailing attitude across all levels of the industry, from executives to site managers and early career tradespeople.



## What We Investigated

The Murphy Centre in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, provides person-centered adult education and career and personal development services. It led a network of trades-related unions, training institutions and community organizations to create the Skills, Explore, Achieve, Revive (SOAR) project to help meet local labour market needs for skilled tradespeople.

The SOAR project aimed to provide free support services like exam prep, math tutoring, career counseling, and personal counseling to apprentice and early career tradespeople, in hopes these services would support them to progress through their training and stay in the skilled trades.

The SOAR project was accessible to residents of Newfoundland and Labrador who were looking to explore careers in the skilled trades sector, were currently enrolled in skilled trades training, or were employed in the skilled trades sector.

## ✔ What We're Learning

Between 2020 and 2023, the SOAR team served 136 program participants: 62% of participants received counselling, 32% received tutoring, and 6% received both.

Of the 186 people who were initially interested in SOAR, 50% were youth between 15-29, 34% were women, 33% were living with a disability, and 31% were people lacking essential skills.

Of the 22 participants that completed a post-program survey, 86% reported feeling extremely satisfied by the support they received. All of these respondents felt SOAR met their needs very or extremely well and 86% reported they were extremely likely to use the services again, while 73% reported they were extremely likely to recommend the program to others.

### **Partnership building and recruitment challenges**

Recruitment of participants was lower in the beginning because of challenges developing the partnership network meant to be the key sources for referrals. By revising its communication strategy to focus on directly promoting the program to its target participants, the SOAR team was able to reach them more effectively. These efforts included social media campaigns, posters, and promotional videos. Referrals also came through other service providers, with whom connections led to changes in offered services to reduce duplication, and referrals for services beyond the project partners scope.

### **Complex needs**

Many of the participants who engaged with SOAR required in-depth support, requiring individualized needs assessment and plans. Participants presented with learning disabilities, years of trauma, work-related stress, financial stress, interpersonal issues, anxiety, depression, addictions, and housing insecurity. Many of these challenges required far more time than was initially made available, so the project partners reduced the career counselling (as it was also offered by other partners) and focused on offering more personal counselling. Counselling sessions provided a safe space for participants to discuss their work-life, training, or personal issues affecting their ability to train or perform their work.

## Trade-specific tutoring

Originally, the intent of tutoring was to provide academic support to students, including apprentices, who struggled to pass exams and progress to higher levels of their apprenticeship. The project partner anticipated that training institutions would share their curricula so that SOAR tutoring could be designed to focus on specific training topics. However, the training institutions belonging to the partnership network were reluctant to share proprietary training curricula out of concern that material could be used to develop competing programs. Project partner staff instead designed tutoring support around the provincial essential math skills curriculum that outlines the key math skills required for various skilled trades. While this change meant the program was able to broaden eligibility to include those outside of skilled trades who wanted to improve their math skills, the tradespeople served by the program often needed trade-specific tutoring.

## ★ Why It Matters

The skilled trades sector faces worker shortages across the country, and the demand is expected to deepen as Canada makes the transition to a net zero economy and addresses the housing crisis. There are widespread efforts to recruit more people into the skilled trades, including young people, newcomers, women, and racialized groups. This project made an effort to support retention and progression of workers in the skilled trades by supporting their progress along their apprenticeship and via the provision of personal counselling to address mental health and wellbeing issues that prevent workers from doing their jobs.

However, this project highlights the complexity of working across sectors, even when there is agreement on a common goal — in this case retaining and progressing workers in the skilled trades. Employers, unions, and training institutions have to co-create solutions alongside community service agencies, not just identify problems. In this project, a lack of shared understanding among partners about the proposed solution, specifically referrals and curriculum, undermined the outcomes for participants.

Many skills and training projects benefit from partnering with social service agencies to provide supports that address barriers in worker's lives, such as housing security, mental health challenges, and addictions. Skills interventions alone will not suffice to keep workers facing these barriers in the labour market, or bring them back if they've left. Decision-makers should look to incentivize collaboration between skills and training organizations and other social service agencies to address the complex needs that many workers are facing today.



### **State of Skills: Innovation in Training, Recruitment and Upskilling for Skilled Trades**

Canada needs to address long standing shortages of skilled tradespeople to advance policy priorities around decarbonization, affordable housing and transforming industry to add more value to what we produce

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Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### **How to Cite This Report**

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