

## Project Insights Report

# A Program for Young Moms in Northern Manitoba



### PARTNERS

Career Trek



### LOCATIONS

Manitoba



### INVESTMENT

\$179,326



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## ☰ Executive Summary

Career Trek recently launched the “M-Power North” Program to support young mothers between the ages of 15 and 25 in Northern Manitoba. The program provides hands-on, experiential lessons, spanning a number of sectors including trades, technology, natural resources, STEM and healthcare. The program also incorporates land-based education bringing learning from an Indigenous perspective. Program participants in M-Power North participate in skill building workshops on resume writing, networking, interview skills, financial literacy and other essential skills, and hear directly from other women in their communities about their own experiences.

However, as the program was implemented, it was more difficult than expected to engage participants and adapt to Northern Manitoba’s unique context and needs. To better understand current challenges in the program’s target communities (e.g. The Pas, Opaskweyak Cree Nation) and how M-Power North can best address these issues, Career Trek interviewed service providers that served similar individuals and spoke with a Council of Elders.

These stakeholders agreed that there was a need for a program like M-Power North, but advised that the initiative would be most successful if its content were embedded in pre-existing programs since they had already built awareness and trust with the community. Various suggestions were also made to further tailor M-Power North to participant needs, such as allowing program registration at the first session (instead of requiring pre-registration), avoiding activities during the winter months, and providing financial incentives for participation. Moreover, COVID-19 has made more participants reluctant to participate in skills development programs because they are less comfortable socializing with others or fear exposure to unvaccinated individuals.

Living costs are high in Northern Manitoba, especially for women with young children, and stakeholders said staff compensation should be adequate to attract qualified candidates. Potential options to make the most of available funding include hiring on a flat-rate basis (i.e. pay flat rate to facilitate career lessons, with performance-based bonus) and exploring opportunities with the region's "trading economy" to exchange work for support at another time or for a service.

This project highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders from target communities in the design process and illustrates concrete approaches for achieving this.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 New initiatives targeting Indigenous communities should consider embedding their activities into existing programs instead of creating standalone projects, as existing programs often have the trust and awareness of potential participants already.
- 2 COVID-19 has had long-term impacts on the willingness of participants to engage in skill development programs, with service providers noting that some people continue to find it overwhelming to socialize with others, while others continue to have anxiety that they will put their families at risk if exposed to unvaccinated individuals.
- 3 To gather insights on a particular geography, target group, or context, interviews with service providers serving the same participants can help to accelerate learning prior to gathering input from potential participants.

## ► The Issue

Family responsibilities and other priorities mean young mothers often require a different approach to building their career and education pathways so they can make the most of their aspirations and skills.

For over 25 years, Career Trek has operated as a charitable organization providing career education programming to children, youth and adults across Manitoba. Leveraging its experience with a similar program in Winnipeg, Career Trek created M-Power North – twice-weekly skill building workshops to help participants develop greater confidence and employability skills, establish education and career goals, and build even better lives for themselves and their children. The program also incorporates land-based education and Indigenous perspectives since many participants in Northern Manitoba come from Indigenous communities.

As the program was implemented, the Career Trek team found it more difficult than expected to recruit and engage participants, and Northern Manitoba's unique context and needs added to the complexity. Moreover, the pandemic had altered the labour market landscape. Career Trek remained committed to young mothers in the region and the program team determined a need to better understand:

- the current challenges faced by communities and how best to respond to them;

- the relevance and impact of M-Power North (and similar programs), and;
- potential areas of improvement that would ensure the program continues to meet community needs.



## What We Investigated

To understand the current challenges of communities in Northern Manitoba and how M-Power North can best address these issues, Career Trek planned a two-phased needs assessment:

Phase 1: Consultations with service providers in target areas (e.g. The Pas, Opaskweyak Cree Nation). The purpose of this phase was to leverage the knowledge of other support organizations working with similar communities and individuals as Career Trek. This approach recognized the deep expertise that already existed in the region and gathered insights based on personal, professional, and lived experiences.

Phase 2: Survey of potential participants of M-Power North program. If the insights gathered from service providers were not sufficient to answer certain key questions, Career Trek would implement a second phase where potential participants would be surveyed to collect any information that was still missing.

Career Trek understood that the most appropriate way to gather honest insights and feedback was to work with someone that the target communities knew and trusted. Consequently, the team engaged a contractor who had lived in the region for over 20 years and who had a strong network in the education sector.

Between January and March 2023, the contractor spoke with nine service providers to gather their insights and recommendations. During this time, Career Trek's CEO also had the privilege to meet the University College of the North's Council of Elders. This council was able to comment on and add to the data collected from service providers as well. The information provided by service providers and the Elders was very rich and Career Trek determined that Phase 2 of the evaluation was not needed.

## ✔ **What We're Learning**

### **Embed support within existing programs**

Everyone Career Trek spoke with overwhelmingly agreed that the M-Power North program was needed in the target communities, especially its provision of a dedicated space for young mothers. However, those interviewed also suggested that the program would be most successful if its activities and content were embedded within pre-existing programs instead of creating another stand-alone initiative. Existing service providers have already built trust and strong relationships within the community, which are critical since word of mouth and personal recommendations are the primary method used by participants to judge whether to enroll in a program. Recognizing the importance of building upon initiatives from other organizations already established in the community that engage the same participants was a key insight.

### **Tailor programs very specifically to target communities**

Service providers and Elders offered various recommendations on how Career Trek's program design could better fit the needs and constraints of young mothers in Northern Manitoba. For example:

- Career Trek asked participants to pre-register for the program with application forms, but the regional culture favours registration upon arrival on the first day.
- Sessions should be short (2 hours maximum) and limited to small groups to build a safe environment for engagement; sessions should not be held during the winter months either given the difficulty and expense of traveling during that season.
- Many programs provide incentives to encourage attendance and program completion. Popular incentives include gift cards for groceries, gas, or meals.
- Successful programs provide critical wrap-around services (e.g. transportation, financial resources, food, diapers and formula, support to fill out housing or sponsorship applications, support getting driver's license or identification cards, assistance in job search skills and networking) as well as reliable access to mental health services.
- Programs should result in concrete benefits, such as recognized certificates (e.g. CPR and First Aid, Food Handlers) or microcredentials recognized by employers.

### **COVID-19 still impacting engagement levels**

Following the pandemic, many young mothers noted they find socializing with others more stressful and some are reluctant to join a program if they do not know the other participants. Moreover, their children may have difficulty interacting with others due to the isolation during the pandemic and there are fears of exposing themselves and their children to unvaccinated individuals.

## ★ **Why It Matters**

There is well-reasoned wariness of service providers in many Indigenous communities, especially if those service providers come from outside the community. In addition, rural and remote communities like those in northern Manitoba have been chronically underserved, making resources and capacity scarce.

Given this reality, understanding the lessons and practices of existing service providers helps new organizations to build on existing insights and better tailor their solution to local needs from the outset, especially for those who are scaling an intervention from a different region.

For both funders and practitioners of organizations looking to expand programming and service to new regions, especially if those are rural and remote, this implies an allocation of appropriate time and resources for these consultations and analyses.



### **State of Skills: Supporting Indigenous and Northern Entrepreneurship and SMEs**

Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurship and businesses play a crucial role in bolstering local economies by supporting economic diversification, job creation and community development.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Finally, COVID-19 may have had a longer term impact on the needs and habits of participants. Policymakers and practitioners should validate that pre-pandemic practices still fit the preferences of target communities and make adjustments as appropriate (e.g. greater discomfort or cognitive overload in social settings, fear of exposure to unvaccinated individuals).

## **► What's Next**

Career Trek is actively collaborating with other service providers in Northern Manitoba to embed key elements of their career education programming into initiatives already being implemented in the region. This approach avoids duplication of effort and supports locally-driven initiatives within the community.

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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