



Pathways to Opportunity

Addressing Barriers to Labour Force Participation
in a Changing World of Work

Design Report

October 2025

Blueprint

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Acknowledgements

About the Future Skills Centre

[FSC](#) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the [Government of Canada's Future Skills Program](#).

About Blueprint

[Blueprint](#) helps leaders use data and evidence to tackle complex public policy challenges across Canada.

We partner with government, community, philanthropic, and industry leaders to strengthen public systems and deliver better outcomes. Our team brings together policy analysts, evaluators, economists, data scientists, and implementation experts—people who know how to turn insight into action. Our work is grounded in deep subject-matter expertise, rigorous methods, and a real-world understanding of how systems operate and evolve. More than just an advisor, we're also partners in change. We provide key support at every stage of the policy and program lifecycle: from early strategy and design to implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.

The *Pathways to Opportunity (PtO) Design Report* is funded by the Government of Canada's [Future Skills Program](#).



1. Introduction

In fall 2024, Blueprint launched *Pathways to Opportunity: Addressing Labour Force Participation Barriers in a Changing World of Work* (PtO). PtO is funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC) and supported by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD), the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS), and the Toronto and Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Service System Managers.

PtO is an evidence-informed pilot that supports social assistance clients facing complex barriers to employment. The initiative responds to persistent policy challenges: growing social assistance caseloads and long durations on support alongside increasing complexities in fostering labour market attachment, including affordability pressures and shifting skills requirements in entry-level jobs. Through locally responsive, client-centred approaches, PtO helps participants move toward

sustainable employment and employers address their labour market needs. By building both individual opportunity and labour force capacity, the pilot aims to expand labour force participation and generate insights into the kinds of services that can ensure all Canadians have the opportunity to reach their economic potential.

This report describes the PtO service model, its rationale, objectives, and key elements. It also outlines how we developed the service model in collaboration with our service delivery partners, the pilot's implementation approach, and evaluation strategy. Blueprint will publish an *Interim Report* in 2026 and a *Final Report* in 2027 to document what was delivered, achieved, and learned throughout the pilot delivery phase (September 2025 to September 2026). These findings can help inform the evolution of employment and social assistance services in a changing world of work.

In this report

This report includes:

- 1. Background (pp. 5–11)** describes the project context, the current state of evidence on how to support labour force participation and employment for individuals with low income, and the opportunity that PtO presents for helping address changes and achieve system goals.
- 2. The Pathways to Opportunity model (pp. 12–18)** summarizes the PtO model, development approach, core service components, and intended outcomes.
- 3. Evidence generation approach (pp. 19–22)** outlines our learning agenda, approach, and data collection methods.
- 4. Next steps (p. 23)** outlines our planned implementation of the PtO pilot, ongoing evidence generation and sharing with partners, and post-pilot analysis and reporting to inform service improvement and potential scaling.

2. Background

2.1. Context

Engaging the full potential of all Canadians—including those currently excluded from the workforce—is essential for increasing labour force participation, helping employers meet their workforce needs, and sustaining economic growth. To help achieve this, employment service models must adapt to a changing world of work, where evolving skill requirements and affordability pressures pose particular challenges for people with low incomes.

Like most jurisdictions in Canada, Ontario faces increasing social assistance caseloads and longer stays on support.

Despite the efforts of governments, social service providers, and community organizations, social assistance caseloads in Ontario remain persistently high—even amid periods of economic growth—with many individuals staying on support for extended periods. While growth over the past 15 years has been driven primarily by rising Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) participation, Ontario Works (OW) has more recently begun to expand again after a decade of relative stability and gradual decline.ⁱ Caseloads, which had fallen to historic lows by 2021-22 (which may be attributed in part to the availability of COVID-19 pandemic-related federal emergency income supports,¹ as well as widespread labour shortages coming out

of the pandemic), have risen steadily since 2022. In 2024 alone, OW added nearly 28,000 cases (+12.7%) and 36,000 beneficiaries compared to the previous year.ⁱⁱ Importantly, longer durations on OW were already evident prior to the pandemic, with average stays rising from 14 months in 2014 to 35 months in 2018.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ontario is not alone in this challenge. In 2023-24, social assistance caseloads in Canada, including non-disability cases, increased after several years of decline, with 12 of 13 provinces and territories posting year-over-year growth.^{2,iv} For instance, in British Columbia, caseloads grew by 5.7% (9,626 cases), with two-thirds coming from the Income Assistance program. Quebec saw a 5.3% increase (approximately 12,900 cases) driven mainly by its core Social Assistance Program.^v

Social assistance recipients face complex barriers to sustainable employment, which are exacerbated by systemic and economic conditions.

Persistent caseload growth and longer durations on social assistance likely reflect an interplay between individual challenges, broader systemic conditions, and rising economic pressures.

Social assistance recipients face complex barriers to sustainable employment, including life

1 The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was a temporary income support program from March 15 to September 26, 2020, offering \$2,000 per four-week period (\$500/week), with applications accepted retroactively until December 2, 2020. The Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) ran from September 27, 2020 to October 23, 2021, in two-week payment periods, for workers not eligible for EI who had lost income due to COVID-19, with up to 27 such periods (54 weeks) available.

2 All provinces and territories, with the exception of Manitoba, experienced increases in their non-disability social assistance caseloads in 2023-24. In jurisdictions without a separate disability program (e.g., NS, NWT, NU, YT), the main Social/Income Assistance program is treated here as the non-disability caseload.

circumstances such as health issues,^{vi} inconsistent childcare,^{vii} food insecurity, and mental health challenges. Chronic financial insecurity compounds these challenges: in 2023, OW provided just 36% of the official poverty line,^{viii} making it difficult for recipients to meet basic needs and leaving them vulnerable to housing instability and food insecurity. Prolonged unemployment can also erode confidence, mental health,^{ix} social connections,^x and readiness to re-engage in the labour market.^{xi,xii}

Social assistance program design and delivery factors also play a role. Even when OW recipients are motivated and ready to move into employment, they encounter reductions in benefits when their earnings increase, including the loss of certain health and housing supports.^{xiii} They also encounter low-wage and insecure jobs that may not lift them out of poverty.^{xiv} In 2024, Open Policy Ontario noted that with the minimum wage set at \$16.55 per hour and the maximum monthly benefit at \$733, the \$200 monthly earnings exemption allowed for approximately 12 hours of work per month without affecting benefits. Beyond this threshold, earnings are subject to a 50% clawback, with benefits phasing out entirely at an annual income of \$20,400. This total remained below the 2024 poverty line, estimated at \$20,920 in rural Ontario and \$24,864 in the Toronto CMA. As a result, program rules can limit the extent to which employment improves overall financial circumstances.^{xv}

OW recipients also face the risk of becoming unemployed again and having to reapply for assistance. The reapplication process itself may be a deterrent, as benefits are suspended until destitution is demonstrated. Earnings exemptions only take effect after three consecutive months on the program and reset with each reinstatement — further compounding the difficulty of workforce re-entry.^{xvi}

These challenges are not entirely new, but commentators point to economic factors that may be exacerbating hardship and contributing to rising caseloads.

Rising housing and food costs are intensifying financial hardship, with increasing lack of housing affordability (at its worst level in four decades in 2023)^{xvii} and nearly half of Canadians reporting concerns in 2024.^{xviii} At the same time, shifting labour market dynamics are creating additional challenges: automation threatens a large share of low-skill jobs,^{xix,xx} while most employment growth is projected in high-skill occupations.^{xxi} As opportunities for less-educated workers decline, gig work has expanded significantly, nearly doubling its share of the workforce between 2005 and 2020.^{xxii} Although gig work offers flexibility, it is typically considered low-paid, insecure, and lacking benefits, leaving social assistance recipients vulnerable to cycling between unstable work and income support. Together, these economic and labour market trends reduce access to stable, decent employment and limit pathways out of assistance.

PtO supports social assistance clients facing complex barriers to employment through locally responsive, client-centred approaches.



2.2. Existing evidence

There are persistent evidence gaps in understanding what works for supporting social assistance recipients into sustainable employment ...

Determining which services most effectively help social assistance recipients secure sustainable employment continues to be a persistent policy challenge in Canada and beyond. Over the past few decades, many employment interventions have been tested, but most have delivered mixed or modest results. Rigorous research conducted over the past three decades using randomized controlled trial (RCT) designs—such as the Canadian [Self-Sufficiency Project](#) and the U.S.-based [National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies \(NEWWS\)](#) evaluation and the [Employment Retention and Advancement \(ERA\)](#) demonstration—highlight this challenge. These large-scale demonstrations targeted low-income individuals, and while some achieved positive impacts in the short-term, there were limited to no *lasting* improvements in earnings, job stability, or economic well-being. While some pilot sites did better than others, there was often no clear explanation for this variance. This raises critical questions: which program design elements work best, for which types of jobseekers, and under what conditions?

... but research points to promising program features.

Luckily, we do not need to start from scratch to investigate these questions. Evidence suggests some specific program features and approaches are promising, raising the question of whether they have potential to produce meaningful impacts if combined as part of a comprehensive, multi-

service program. We describe these features and components below. **Box 1** on p. 9 provides a summary of the evidence for each.

- **Subsidized jobs** are time-limited jobs for which public funds temporarily cover part of wages. Funds are used to either pay workers an earnings supplement or to provide employers a subsidy to lower the cost of hiring and help individuals with barriers gain work experience. Evidence shows that supplementing wages for social assistance recipients can encourage full-time employment and produce higher earnings. More supports are needed once the supplement ends to encourage continued upward mobility.
- **Transitional jobs** provide short-term, subsidized employment alongside support services. These models aim to build basic work experience, re-establish employment routines, and create pathways to unsubsidized jobs. Evidence shows they have the potential to build employment momentum for those facing barriers. However, similar to subsidized jobs, these positive impacts often disappear once supports end, suggesting that longer-term retention and advancement supports are needed.
- **Skills training interventions** include a wide range of training programs, such as technical training and certifications and foundational/transferable skills training to enhance essential skills needed for further training and employment. Evidence suggests skills training has larger impacts on employment and earnings relative to job search assistance, but these impacts can take a long time to appear. Some of the most successful training programs are sector-based—they target specific sectors and occupations, offer

wraparound services to help overcome barriers, and provide job placements or internships.

- **Sector-based models** focus on targeted training and high-quality placements in in-demand sectors, supported by wraparound services, post-placement coaching, and continuous improvement. These models have shown strong employment and earnings impacts for job-ready participants who are interested in and motivated to work in the targeted sector. Sector-based models generally require a baseline level of work readiness and may be less effective for those with more complex barriers.
- **Case management** provides one-on-one support to assess client needs and connect them with services such as career counselling, job search assistance, or training. While most models show only modest employment impacts, the Integrated Case Management approach—where a single case manager coordinates both welfare and employment services—produced more consistent results. This suggests that more intensive, coordinated models may be better suited to supporting long-term self-sufficiency.
- **Intensive coaching** involves providing individualized guidance to address employment barriers and support career planning. The process emphasizes relationship-building between the coach and client and focuses on personal empowerment, goal setting, action planning, and

executive skills building. While research is still emerging, evidence suggests that intensive, one-on-one coaching can spark work search and initial labour-market attachment, but sustained income growth may be more likely if it is reinforced with other services like job development, skills training, and wraparound supports.

- **Financial empowerment programs** provide services designed to help people—particularly those with low or moderate incomes—gain the knowledge, skills, tools, and access needed to improve their financial well-being and long-term stability. Services may include financial literacy training, personalized coaching, support accessing financial products or programs, and asset-building supports. Evidence suggests integrating financial empowerment into employment services may equip participants with the confidence and information they need to make informed, sustainable decisions and increase engagement in employment.
- **Wraparound supports** are a holistic set of services provided alongside a core program (such as employment training or education) to address the broader barriers that individuals face in achieving their goals. Research indicates that integrating wraparound supports into employment services improves employment outcomes for individuals facing multiple, complex barriers.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that no single intervention is likely to be sufficient on its own. Achieving meaningful and lasting impacts for social assistance recipients will require combining promising approaches into integrated service models that address both employment readiness and broader barriers to work.

Box 1 | Summary of evidence on promising interventions for supporting improved labour market outcomes for social assistance recipients

Subsidized jobs. Canada's [Self-Sufficiency Project](#) (SSP) demonstrated the power of this approach: single parents who left welfare for full-time work were offered a generous earnings supplement, leading to large—but temporary—gains in employment, earnings, and poverty reduction while the supplement was in force.^{xxiii} [SSP Plus](#) then tested whether adding job search assistance services could deepen those effects. Participants received the same supplement plus intensive job-search assistance, employer outreach, and case management. During the first two years, SSP Plus boosted full-time employment by roughly eight percentage points beyond the supplement-only offer, showing that coaching and job development can accelerate take-up and early stability. Yet, as with the original SSP, most of the impacts faded after both the services and the financial incentive expired.^{xxiv} These results highlight that while earnings supplements can quickly boost employment, and pairing them with job-search assistance can extend those gains in the short term, neither approach alone is sufficient to deliver sustained longer-term impacts—underscoring the need for more comprehensive or durable supports.

Transitional jobs in the U.S., such as in the [Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration \(STED\)](#) and the [Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration \(ETJD\)](#), tested transitional job models for individuals with low income and high barriers, including prior incarceration and long-term unemployment. Both studies found that transitional jobs reliably increased employment during the subsidy period, though long-term earnings effects were limited or mixed across sites.^{xxv} San Francisco's *STEP Forward* combined strong job placements, employer incentives, and careful participant screening, producing sustained earnings gains over a seven-year follow-up.^{xxvi} In Canada, [Manitoba Works!](#) produced measurable increases in social assistance exits over two years through employer-aligned training, job matching, and subsidized placements.^{xxvii} These programs show how time-limited, supported work experiences have the potential to build employment momentum for those facing barriers.

Sector-based models,^{xxviii} such as in the [WorkAdvance](#) demonstration, have found sustained earnings gains for participants in the later years of follow-up, particularly where programs were tightly aligned with local employer demand and effectively integrated advancement supports.^{xxix} However, [sector-based models](#) generally require a baseline level of work readiness and may be less effective for those with more complex barriers.

Case management generally has modest impacts on employment outcomes. A review by the Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse found that, on average, case management produced small increases in annual earnings and long-term employment. Impacts on public benefit receipt were limited, with only slight long-term reductions in the proportion of clients receiving benefits and modest decreases in benefit amounts. Only a few models—such as Integrated Case Management—showed consistent positive effects across multiple domains, while most interventions yielded little or no significant improvement in employment, earnings, or education outcomes.^{xxx} Integrated Case Management assigns clients a single case manager to coordinate both welfare and employment services. This approach demonstrates consistent positive effects across multiple outcomes, including increased earnings and employment as well as reduced reliance on public benefits.^{xxxi} This raises the question of whether more intensive and coordinated forms of case management, which provide streamlined and personalized support, may be better positioned to improve long-term self-sufficiency compared to standard models.

Intensive coaching provided pre- and post-employment may help participants with deeper or intersecting challenges. For example, [MyGoals for Employment Success](#) paired executive-function-informed coaching with financial incentives to support goal-setting and the development of skills and behaviours to support job search and retention. While its short-term earnings impacts were limited, it demonstrated the importance of combining coaching with complementary supports to shift behaviours and mindsets related to work. The MyGoals approach embeds Motivation Interviewing (MI), which is another promising intervention. A Canadian pilot that trained caseworkers in MI generated positive short-term employment impacts,^{xxxii} while a 2017 systematic review of MI in return-to-work services found small but positive effects on job entry,^{xxxiii} yet little evidence of lasting earnings gains. Together, these studies suggest that MI-based executive skills coaching can spark initial labour-market attachment, but sustained income growth may be more likely when mindset shifts and executive functioning skills are reinforced with other services like job development or skills training.

Financial empowerment programs like [WoodGreen's Income Transition Project](#) in Toronto raised OW recipients' willingness to use employment services and seek work or training, and gave them a healthier, better-informed outlook on returning to work. An evaluation of the U.S.-based [Financial Opportunity Centers](#) found that clients who received integrated financial and employment coaching experienced higher employment rates and modest net-income gains after one year.^{xxxiv}

Research into **wraparound supports** indicates that integrating them into employment services improves employment outcomes for individuals facing multiple, complex barriers. Programs offering personalized, comprehensive assistance have demonstrated higher rates of sustained employment and workforce participation. Community-based, integrated service delivery models are particularly effective for those experiencing long-term unemployment or intersecting challenges.^{xxxv,xxxvi}



The pilot aims to expand labour force participation and generate insights into the kinds of services that can ensure all Canadians have the opportunity to reach their economic potential.

2.3. The opportunity

Pathways to Opportunity can provide meaningful learnings to support the evolution of employment services for social assistance recipients.

In 2019, Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD) launched a transformation of provincial employment services to improve efficiency, streamline operations, and focus on outcomes. The new Integrated Employment Services (IES) system consolidates employment supports for OW, the ODSP, and the broader public into a unified, one-stop model. OW caseworkers assess clients and refer them to Service System Managers (SSMs), who design and oversee services within regional catchments and connect clients to local agencies. MLITSD sets performance targets and holds SSMs accountable through outcome-based funding. Implementation has been phased regionally, with Toronto and Northern Ontario catchments among the last to transition in spring 2025.^{xxxvii,xxxviii}

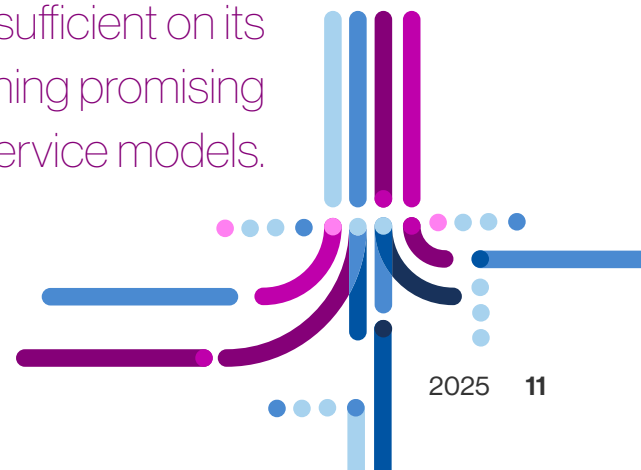
Pathways to Opportunity (PtO) builds on existing evidence of promising practices while aligning with and potentially enhancing the ongoing transformation of Ontario's IES system. The initiative tests a coordinated, user-centred model that brings

together multiple interventions—each showing promise but limited impact on its own—into an integrated package of supports. To our knowledge, no other service model combines these elements in the same way. PtO offers social assistance clients tailored services to address needs, build capacities, and support transitions to employment, with the ultimate goal of helping participants exit social assistance. Through the pilot, we will generate insights on implementation and outcomes with our delivery partners and contribute practical lessons that can guide service design and continuous improvement.

PtO also aligns with the Ontario government's goals for the employment services transformation—to identify innovative and efficient approaches to better connect individuals, including those in receipt of social assistance, to sustainable employment. Through real-world testing and evaluating innovative approaches and generating transferable findings, PtO contributes to the government's vision of a locally responsive and community-based, outcomes-focused, client-centred approach to finding sustainable employment for individuals, based on their needs.

The next section describes PtO's development, implementation phases, and model design.

No single intervention is likely to be sufficient on its own—lasting impact requires combining promising approaches into integrated service models.



3. The Pathways to Opportunity model

3.1. Design and development process

Delivery partner recruitment. Blueprint launched PtO with a multi-step recruitment process to enlist delivery partners who could co-design the model, implement it at their sites, and participate in data collection to support a rigorous evaluation.

After reviewing expressions of interest, conducting interviews, and consulting external reviewers, we selected **WoodGreen Community Services, The Neighbourhood Group, Bruce County (Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Service System Manager),** and **YMCA Owen Sound Grey Bruce.** Each partner has expertise in serving OW clients and delivering employment and training programming, and each has a willingness to be trained in new approaches. **Box 2** on p. 13 contains details on each delivery partner.

Model co-design. Through a series of co-design sessions with our partners, we:

- defined the target population;
- explored strengths, resources, and gaps in the current employment services landscape;
- identified and designed core model components;
- mapped client service pathways; and
- developed our evidence generation approach.

We also conducted targeted evidence scans to ground each component in relevant literature and lessons from past initiatives—identifying what works, what to avoid, and what to improve.

Consultation and model refinement. After developing an initial draft of the model, Blueprint engaged the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), MLITSD, Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS), and WCG Services. These consultations focused on understanding and aligning the model with system priorities, clarifying client referral pathways, and exploring opportunities to access administrative data for client tracking and pilot evaluation. Insights from these discussions informed several refinements. For example, TESS highlighted the importance of testing approaches to support OW clients nearing 18 months on assistance, noting their caseload data show that exit from assistance becomes much less likely after that point. MCCSS expressed a similar interest. WCG expressed interest in incorporating financial supports tied to key program activities or milestones.

Box 2 (on the next page) contains details on each partner organization.

Box 2 | Pathways to Opportunity partners

[WoodGreen Community Services](#) is a large social service agency in Toronto providing housing, health, financial counselling, employment, childcare, education, employment, and settlement services to 40,000 residents annually, including children, youth, adults, seniors, newcomers, and neurodiverse people. WoodGreen contributed to the development of PtO and will deliver PtO to Toronto-based participants. It will also deliver the Financial Empowerment component of PtO on behalf of The Neighbourhood Group (the other Toronto delivery site).

[The Neighbourhood Group \(TNG\) Community Services](#) is a social agency in Toronto providing services to address community issues such as poverty, homelessness, mental health, unemployment, social isolation, substance abuse, conflict resolution, violence, youth alienation, and the settlement of newcomers. TNG contributed to the development of PtO and will deliver PtO to Toronto-based participants.

[YMCA Owen Sound Grey Bruce](#) is a charity dedicated to building a caring, healthy community by creating opportunities for all people to achieve personal growth in spirit, mind, and body. It is an Employment Ontario service provider and provides services related to community justice, homelessness, youth in transition, childcare, settlement and language, health and fitness, and recreation. YMCA Owen Sound Grey Bruce contributed to the development of PtO and will deliver PtO to participants in the Grey-Bruce area.

[Bruce County \(Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Service System Manager\)](#) is the employment services system manager (SSM) for the consortium of the Counties of Bruce, Grey, Huron, and the City of Stratford. As an SSM, it is tasked with regional planning, designing and delivering all in-scope employment services, and overseeing a network of third-party service providers. It is held to a performance-based funding model and must achieve client employment outcomes by carrying out strategic planning, day-to-day service coordination, and data collection and monitoring activities. Bruce County contributed to the development of PtO and the pilot data collection approach. We will share updates and key learnings with Bruce County throughout pilot delivery.

[WCG Services](#) delivers employment and workforce development programs across several provinces. In Ontario, WCG acts as an SSM in multiple regions, including Toronto, coordinating local service providers under the IES system. Its role includes managing contracts, supporting service delivery, and aligning employment services with local labour market needs. It is held to a performance-based funding model and must achieve client employment outcomes by carrying out strategic planning, day-to-day service coordination, and data collection and monitoring activities. WCG provided input on the design of PtO. We will share updates and key learnings with WCG throughout pilot delivery.

[Toronto Employment and Social Services](#) is a City of Toronto division that provides financial and social supports to residents in need under the OW program. Since March 1, 2025, all employment services for OW recipients in Toronto are delivered through Employment Ontario rather than by TESS itself. TESS continues to assist clients in preparing to participate in employment programs by helping address barriers (e.g., housing, childcare, mental health) and managing case planning. TESS provided input on the design of PtO and the pilot data collection approach. TESS is also supporting PtO recruitment by distributing information and enrolment access to a subset of potentially eligible OW clients via its email broadcast system. We will share updates and key learnings with TESS throughout pilot delivery.

[Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services \(MCCSS\)](#) oversees Ontario's social assistance programs, including OW and ODSP. While direct delivery of employment services for OW and ODSP recipients is transitioning to the IES system, MCCSS continues to set policy direction and fund employment-related supports. It also retains responsibility for ODSP Employment Supports and for employment and community participation programs for people with developmental disabilities. MCCSS provided input on the design of PtO and the pilot data collection approach and will be sharing OW administrative data with Blueprint to support participant and outcomes analyses. We will share updates and key learnings with MCCSS throughout pilot delivery.

[Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development](#) leads Ontario's labour, training, immigration, and skills policy. It sets strategic direction, designs and funds programs (e.g., Employment Ontario), supports apprenticeship and skilled trades, and ensures that employment services align with labour market needs and employer demand. In partnership with MCCSS, MLITSD plays a stewardship role over the IES model, including setting performance expectations, selecting SSMS, and monitoring outcomes. MLITSD provided input on the design of PtO and the pilot data collection approach and will be sharing IES administrative data with Blueprint to support participant and outcomes analyses. We will share updates and key learnings with MLITSD throughout pilot delivery.

Implementation preparation. During model development, we coordinated resources needed to support each partner's implementation. This included staff training, tools for frontline data collection, and documentation outlining the program model and key design decisions.

Evidence generation planning. Blueprint led and designed an evidence generation approach to collect data about the implementation and outcomes of the pilot and how clients experience it. Our co-design partners contributed their expertise to what would be collected and how. This approach is described in **section 4**.

3.2. Delivery approach

Each partner implements PtO during a pilot period—September 2025 to September 2026—reaching at least 50 participants each. Partners are required to deliver the PtO model services, with some flexibility as appropriate, to meet the specific needs of individual clients.

3.3. Model design

3.3.1. Program objectives

PtO provides social assistance clients with a stacked set of tailored, evidence-informed supports and services to help them obtain employment. Together, they are designed to put clients on a viable and desirable career path and exit social assistance.

3.3.2. Target population

PtO is designed for social assistance recipients who are motivated to work but face barriers preventing them from securing employment. The program focuses on individuals who, with tailored services and supports, could reasonably transition into employment within the pilot delivery period.

We operationalized this target group into the following eligibility/suitability criteria.

- **In receipt of OW financial supports for the past 12 to 18 months.** Both TESS and MCCSS identified the 18-month mark as a “tipping point,” after which the likelihood of exiting assistance declines sharply. In order to intervene before this point, while also serving clients with more established and complex barriers than new applicants, PtO prioritizes participants who have been on assistance for at least 12 months and up to 18 months.³
- **Have an English language proficiency of at least Canadian Language Benchmark 5.** Focusing on clients with CLB 5 ensures participants have sufficient basic English language skills to fully engage in PtO activities and to follow routine workplace communication and entry-level training.

- **Motivated to work and engage in PtO.**

Participants must demonstrate that they are motivated to work and that they are willing and able to engage in all PtO activities, including research activities.

3.3.3. Core service components

PtO has six core components, described below. Delivery partners may also deploy additional services as needed.

The inclusion and design of the six core components reflect both our understanding of the needs of the target client group and the available evidence on promising practices for supporting employment outcomes (see **section 2.2**). **PtO is grounded in the hypothesis that single interventions, which have shown limited or short-term impacts, may generate stronger and more lasting results when strategically combined into a coordinated, multi-service model.**

1) Personalized coaching and navigation support

Participants will receive one-on-one coaching throughout their service journey—tailored guidance to address employment barriers, financial concerns, and career planning. Drawing from the promising MyGoals approach (which integrates Motivational Interviewing and trauma-informed practices), this client-directed process emphasizes goal setting, action planning, executive-function skills development (e.g., focusing attention, initiating tasks, planning, and prioritizing), personal empowerment, and

³ For the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula site, the time period on OW is slightly broader (six to 18 months) to accommodate their relatively smaller case load compared to the Toronto delivery sites.

employment retention, paired with practical tools, incentives, and connections to additional services. Employment coaching will offer a personalized, capacity-building approach that goes beyond traditional case management by helping clients set and pursue goals over time while fostering agency and accountability. It is especially well-suited for clients facing overlapping barriers, such as financial stress, limited work experience, or low confidence, by offering consistent motivation and guidance.

2) Financial navigation and empowerment

Many clients worry about how work will affect their benefits, if they can manage new expenses, and how to build longer-term financial security. Financial empowerment services can help individuals navigate the complex and uncertain period of moving from income assistance to employment. Evidence suggests integrating financial empowerment into employment services — financial coaching, budgeting tools, and benefits transition guidance — equips participants with the confidence and information they need to make informed, sustainable decisions.

PtO will provide participants with actionable information about the financial implications of transitioning from OW to employment — helping them make informed decisions about part-time, temporary, and full-time work. Once employed, participants also receive guidance on asset-building and long-term financial planning. By embedding financial empowerment in PtO, we aim to address the immediate risks and structural financial barriers that undermine sustained employment success, ensuring PtO remains holistic and person-centred.

3) Skills development

Participants will be referred to short-term skills development opportunities as needed to help them obtain high-quality, in-demand jobs in the local economy. Evidence shows that skills training has larger impacts on employment and earnings over the longer term relative to other interventions (such as job search assistance).^{xxxix, xl}

4) Labour market integration

Labour market integration services — such as internships, job trials, transitional and customized jobs — provide structured, real-world opportunities for participants to gain experience, build confidence, and strengthen job readiness. Labour market integration also benefits employers by offering a low-risk way to assess candidates. Evidence shows these supports improve employment outcomes, particularly when paired with coaching and wraparound services.^{xli} Placing participants in higher-quality jobs can lead to better pay, stability, and long-term career growth.^{xlii}

PtO will pair personalized coaching and retention services with work experience opportunities, job development, and placement supports to prepare participants for success in competitive employment. It will also incorporate employer engagement and coaching for long-term employee retention.

5) Financial incentives

Research shows modest financial incentives and wage subsidies can improve program uptake, engagement, and short-term employment outcomes, particularly for individuals with limited work histories or employment barriers.^{xliii, xliv} Pairing incentives

with services like coaching or targeting subsidies toward higher-quality jobs can lead to more lasting earnings gains.^{xlv, xlvii}

PtO will provide financial supports to participants while in the program and once they start working to motivate participation and reduce financial risks and hardship during employment transitions. Participants can receive up to \$200 per month while participating—the maximum amount of income OW clients can earn without being subjected to a clawback.

Once participants achieve employment, they can receive up to \$400 per month in grocery gift cards to cover costs. Because the gift cards do not count as income, they can also help offset the financial clawbacks that participants will encounter as they move into work. Participants who achieve part-time employment receive \$200 in gift cards, while those who achieve full-time employment receive \$400 in gift cards. The higher amount for full-time employment offsets the greater benefit clawbacks faced by individuals earning higher incomes and serves as an added incentive to support the transition into

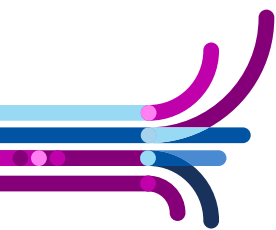
full-time work, which offers greater stability and income security.

PtO will also deploy employer wage subsidies as needed to incentivize employer participation and cover workplace accommodation costs.

6) Wraparound supports

Addressing holistic, non-employment barriers—such as housing, childcare, mental health, and transportation—is critical for sustained workforce attachment. PtO offers both in-program financial supports and referrals to community-based services to meet these needs.

Research indicates that integrating wraparound supports into employment services improves outcomes for individuals facing multiple, complex barriers. Programs offering personalized, comprehensive assistance have demonstrated higher rates of sustained employment and workforce participation. Community-based, integrated service delivery models are particularly effective for those experiencing long-term unemployment or intersecting challenges.^{xlvii, xlviii}



PtO is grounded in the hypothesis that single interventions may generate stronger results when strategically combined.

3.4. Theory of change

The following theory of change presents a visual representation of how PtO is expected to generate improved outcomes for participants in both the short and longer term.

Table 1 | Pathways to Opportunity theory of change

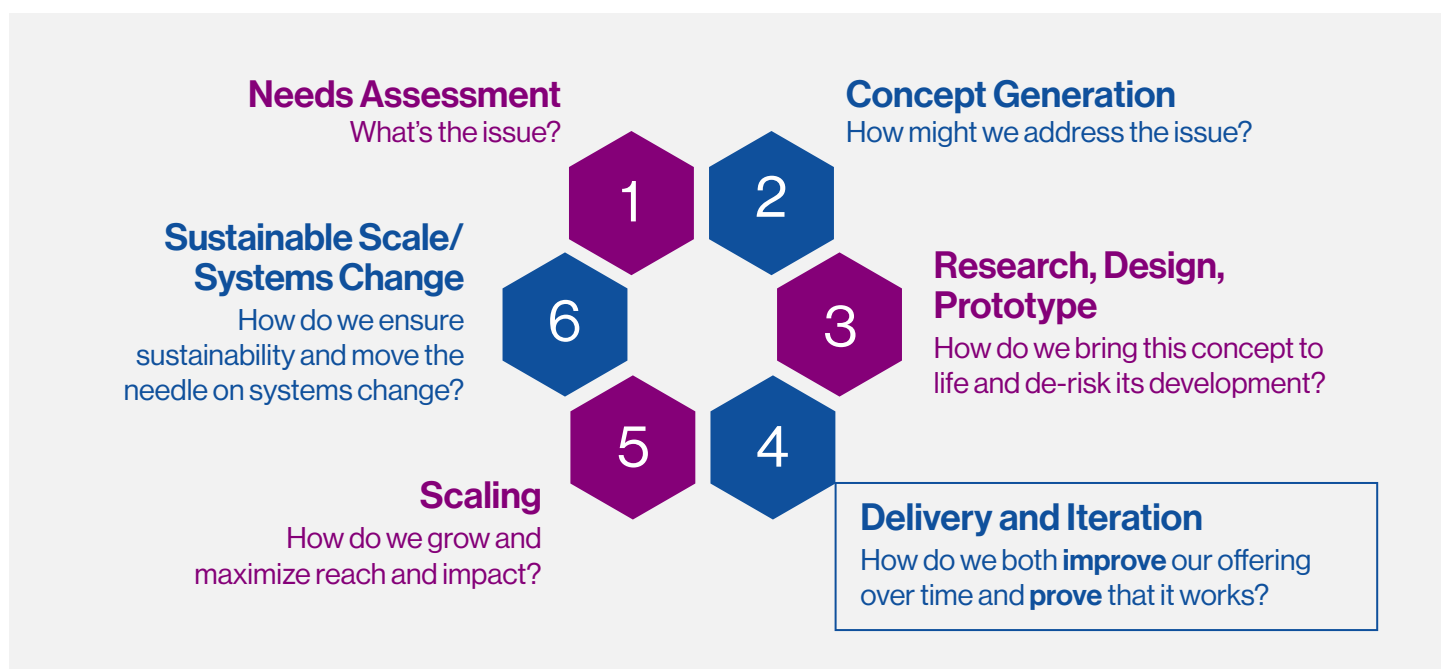
Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and other resources (FSC, MLITSD, MCCSS). • Human resources and capabilities. • Employer networks and relationships. • Endorsement from key system actors (MLITSD, MCCSS, WCG, Bruce County, TESS). • Evidence generation support and expertise (Blueprint). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client assessment and suitability screening. • Personalized coaching and navigation support. • Financial navigation and empowerment. • Labour market integration. • Financial incentives. • Wraparound supports. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients complete programming and services and receive needed supports. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants' employment service needs are met. • Participants gain employment hope. • Participants progress towards employment goals.
			<p>Longer-term outcomes</p>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants obtain and retain competitive employment. • Participants obtain higher incomes. • Participants exit OW.
<p>Mediating and moderating factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery staff capacity to deliver. • Service implementation quality. • Changes to policy or program design (e.g., changes in SSM directives, government policy, and available resources regarding employment services or social assistance). • Local labour market conditions. • Cost of living. 			

4. Evidence generation approach

To develop an evidence generation approach, we place the PtO model within a six-stage innovation cycle (see **Figure 1**). Many of the model's components have been tested in in relative isolation and in other settings, but their combined

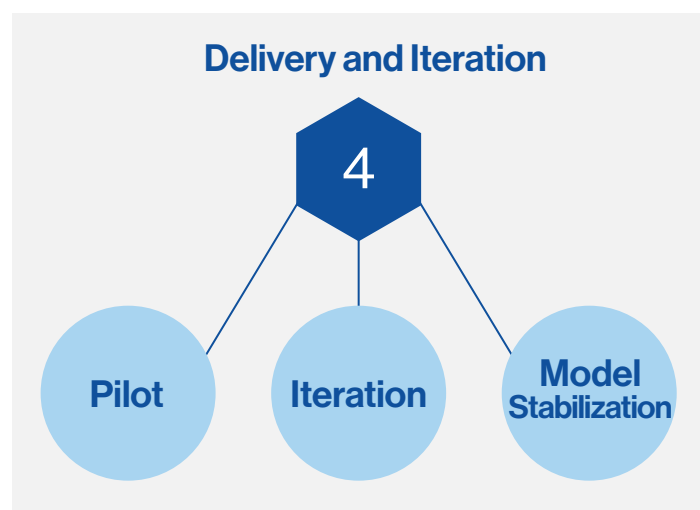
implementation is new. Having completed a needs assessment, concept generation phase, and period of research, design, and development, the initiative is now entering Stage 4: Delivery and Iteration.

Figure 1 | The six-stage innovation cycle



Within this phase, we classify PtO as a **pilot** (see **Figure 2**), wherein valuable insights come from understanding how the model is implemented, how it is experienced by participants and partners, and what early outcomes are emerging. Evidence of positive experience and outcomes would lead to more rigorous testing; lack of evidence would lead to further targeted learning and improvement activities.

Figure 2 | Delivery and iteration sub-phases



4.1. Learning agenda

Below are the key questions guiding data collection and analysis.

- **Implementation.** What services were delivered as part of PtO? Was it implemented as intended? What modifications were made and why? What did we learn about the conditions needed to implement the model effectively?
- **Clients reached.** Who participated in PtO? What were their socio-demographic characteristics, needs, challenges, and goals? How did the participant profile compare to the broader social assistance caseload? What segment of that caseload did PtO reach?
- **User experience.** How satisfied were clients and employers with the experience and service

approach? Did it align with their needs? According to clients, staff, site leads, and employers: what worked well, what could be improved, and what factors supported successful client outcomes and employer hiring experiences?

- **Effectiveness.** To what extent did clients experience improvements in employment hope,⁴ progress toward job attainment and retention, and social assistance exits? How did outcomes for PtO clients compare to outcomes for clients receiving standard employment services?

Pending data quantity and quality, we will also explore differences in user experience and outcomes across sites and participant subgroups.



Employment coaching offers a personalized, capacity-building approach that goes beyond traditional case management.

4 According to social work researchers, “employment hope is a necessary and key condition for achieving economic success for low-income jobseekers ... Particularly for low-income jobseekers, employment hope has been found to be a positive psychological motivator, noncognitive internal strength, and psychological empowerment tool that helps one sustain the uphill battle of job search, employment, and retention.” See:

Hong, P. Y. P., & Choi, S. (2013). The employment hope scale: Measuring an empowerment pathway to employment success. *International Journal of Psychology Research*, 8(3). https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=socialwork_facpubs

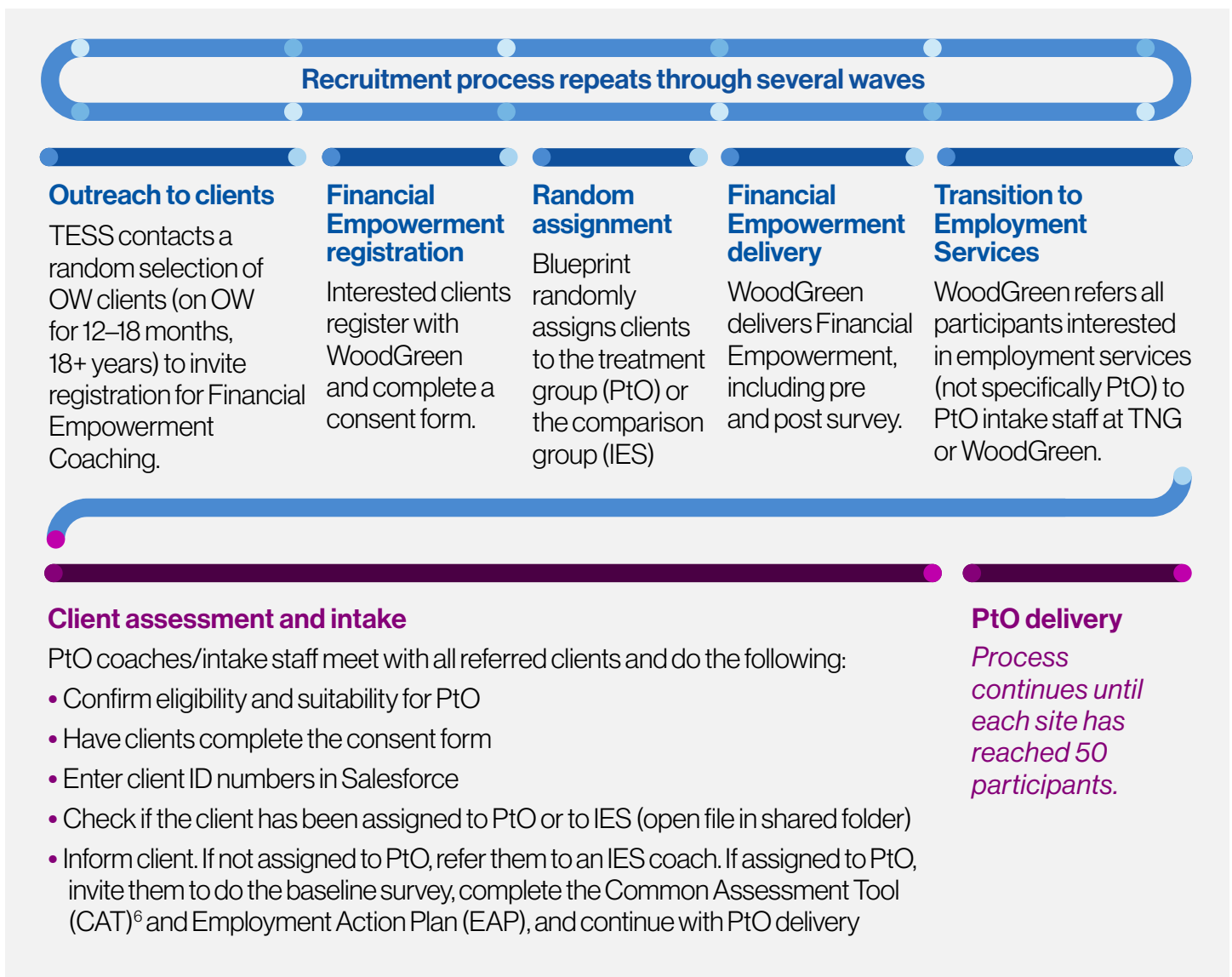
4.2. Methodology

4.2.1. Research design

We use a mixed-methods approach to answer our questions. To test PtO’s effectiveness in improving employment outcomes and economic independence, we will assess outcomes before and after PtO to see how they changed over time and whether PtO

contributed to those changes. We are preparing for future impact analysis by establishing randomized enrolment at Toronto sites (see **Figure 3**).⁵ This will create credible comparison groups, improving our ability to attribute outcome differences to PtO rather than external factors.

Figure 3 | PtO randomization process for Toronto sites



⁵ Randomization was not feasible for the YMCA delivery site in the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula region due to the much smaller volume of clients.

- **Administrative data.** Routine data collected by service providers, Employment Ontario, and MCCSS will provide information on participant socio-demographics, needs, goals, services received, client type (new or legacy), duration on social assistance, and frequency of service use. Data will help assess who was reached and whether outcomes varied across these dimensions. Data will also track social assistance exits, employment attainment, and retention after the pilot to assess effectiveness.
- **Project activity tracking.** We will monitor client participation in program activities to understand their experience, identify barriers to engagement, and contextualize outcomes—assessing the extent to which different program components contributed to client outcomes.
- **Client surveys.** Four types of surveys will be administered during the pilot. A baseline survey will capture initial scores on the Employment Hope Scale when clients join PtO.⁶ Pulse surveys will be administered every two weeks in collaboration with service providers to support evidence-informed practice and regularly gather client feedback. Exit surveys will include repeat Employment Hope Scale questions and ask about client satisfaction and service recommendations. A follow-up survey several months after program participation will gather feedback on employment retention supports.
- **Client interviews.** At the end of the pilot, in-depth interviews with clients will explore their experiences, satisfaction, outcomes, and how well services aligned with their needs.
- **Employer interviews.** Short interviews will be conducted with employers who hired clients to learn about their experiences with service providers and PtO participants and gather feedback on opportunities for service and employer engagement improvements.
- **Delivery staff engagement.** As a new initiative, PtO will require ongoing engagement with staff and site leads to address implementation challenges, track adaptations, and identify operational needs. Regular check-ins, site visits, and feedback sessions will be held to support effective delivery and continuous improvement.

6 As per Hong and Choi (2013), the Employment Hope Scale is a “client-centered measure [that] captures the state of one’s psychological empowerment, futuristic motivation, skills and resources, and goal-orientation as a developmental process.” Through the scale, “development of and changes in employment hope can be monitored, with assessment on how each factor plays a part in incremental stages of psychological transformation.”

5. Next steps

PtO implementation, led by delivery partners across participating sites, began in September 2025. Blueprint will work alongside our partners to generate evidence, focusing on implementation, participant experiences, and outcomes. We will share insights regularly with delivery partners to support real-time learning and continuous improvement during implementation.

Following the pilot period, we will conduct a detailed analysis and prepare a report synthesizing key findings. This report will describe

what was delivered, how it was experienced by participants, and outcomes achieved. It will also offer recommendations to support continuous improvement of the model and inform decisions about potential scaling. Insights will be geared toward enhancing service delivery and strengthening system learning across the broader pan-Canadian employment services landscape.



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