

Project Insights Report

# Integrating Employment into Substance Use Recovery



## PARTNERS

Pacifica Treatment  
Centre Society



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British Columbia



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## Executive Summary

Employment plays a critical role in supporting individuals in substance use recovery. It provides structure, purpose, financial stability, and social connection—factors that help rebuild confidence, identity, and a sense of belonging after treatment. Despite these benefits, employment is not consistently recognized or prioritized within recovery settings in British Columbia. Recovery is often approached primarily through a clinical lens, while employment is considered a later-stage outcome rather than an active support to sustain recovery. As a result, many individuals complete treatment without adequate preparation or support to re-enter the labour market. This may increase their vulnerability during transition periods and elevate the risk of relapse.

This project examined how recovery and employment intersect in British Columbia and identified opportunities to strengthen recovery-to-employment pathways. Using a three-stage research design—an environmental scan, a province-wide focus group, and an anonymous survey—the study explored current practices, coordination challenges, and system gaps affecting individuals in substance use recovery. The research focused on how employment needs are addressed in recovery services, how service coordination influences long-term outcomes, and the resources required to support economic independence and quality of life.

Findings show that although both recovery and employment service providers value employment as a contributor to long-term stability, services are often delivered in parallel rather than in an integrated manner. Employment is frequently delayed until after sobriety milestones are achieved. Providers may lack the training or tools to incorporate employability into recovery planning. Other factors constraining workforce integration include stigma, employer concerns, low confidence among clients, and limited outcome measurement. Peer mentorship and cross-sector collaboration emerged as promising practices, yet these approaches remain localized and inconsistently applied.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of treating employment as a core component of recovery rather than a secondary goal. Advancing recovery-informed, inclusive employment pathways may improve individual outcomes, reduce repeat treatment cycles, and support broader workforce participation. Aligning recovery and employment systems more effectively represents an opportunity to strengthen public health, economic inclusion, and long-term recovery outcomes in British Columbia.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Only 10% of substance-use recovery service providers track employment outcomes, while 70% report no employment-related measurement at all, limiting accountability and evidence-based program design.
- 2** Employment is widely recognized by service providers as a stabilizing force in recovery, yet it is routinely treated as a secondary or delayed goal. Siloed funding, limited staff training, and weak coordination between recovery and employment systems are some of the causes.
- 3** About half of recovery and employment service providers report lacking the specialized skills and training needed to integrate employability support into recovery planning.

## The Issue

British Columbia is facing a persistent public health emergency related to the toxic drug crisis, with profound social, health, and economic consequences. Despite sustained investments in treatment and recovery services, outcomes remain uneven, and many individuals leaving substance use treatment continue to face barriers to long-term stability. One critical and under-addressed challenge is the limited integration of employment and career development supports into substance-use recovery pathways.

In British Columbia, employability services for individuals with substance use disorders are often embedded as supplementary components within broader health or treatment contracts. However, staff delivering these services frequently lack formal training in career development and have limited capacity to provide holistic, employment-focused support. As a result, individuals in recovery often receive minimal guidance on preparing for, accessing, or sustaining employment during and after treatment. In many settings, service providers advise clients to delay labour market participation during early recovery, due to concerns that work may distract from treatment progress. While well-intentioned, this practice can reinforce stigma and bias, positioning work as a risk rather than a resource in recovery.

The de-prioritization of employment has tangible consequences. Employment can be a protective factor in recovery, offering income as well as structure, purpose, social connection, and a sense of identity. Evidence shows that meaningful work can support self-efficacy, accountability, and community reintegration — factors that contribute to sustained recovery and reduced risk of relapse. However, employment is often treated as an outcome to be pursued after recovery is complete, rather than as a tool that can actively support the recovery process itself.

This gap is compounded by funding constraints. Declining investment in specialized employment programming for people in substance use recovery has limited the availability of tailored supports, leaving many individuals financially vulnerable after treatment. Without employment-focused preparation, transition planning, and aftercare, individuals may exit treatment with significant employment gaps, low confidence, and limited work experience. These challenges, combined with ongoing stigma in the labour market, can undermine reintegration efforts and increase the risk of relapse.

Together, these factors point to a systemic disconnect between substance use treatment and workforce development systems in British Columbia. By treating employment as a secondary or optional consideration, current approaches may be leaving people in recovery more vulnerable after treatment than if employability had been meaningfully integrated into care. Addressing this gap could improve recovery outcomes, strengthen economic participation, and respond more effectively to the ongoing drug crisis.



This project examined the employability challenges faced by individuals in substance use recovery in British Columbia. The objective was to understand whether current practices in the recovery sector facilitate or hinder access to meaningful employment. The study focused on how recovery and employment services are coordinated, the organizational strategies used to support recovery-to-employment pathways, and gaps that may limit clients' economic independence, long-term recovery, and quality of life.

The research was guided by three core questions:

1. What current approaches does the substance use recovery sector take to address clients' employment needs?
2. How do these approaches support, facilitate or hinder clients' long-term recovery and quality of life?
3. What resources or professional development opportunities would enable career practitioners and substance use counsellors to support clients' economic independence, long-term recovery, and quality of life more effectively?

An exploratory research design was adopted to capture system-level practices and frontline perspectives across the substance use recovery and employment services sectors. The study considered how employment support is positioned along the employment continuum, including pre-employment readiness, career decision-making, job search, and employment maintenance. While future research will explore how readiness stages in recovery and employability overlap, this project focused on mapping current approaches and identifying opportunities for improvement.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. Stage 1 involved an environmental scan of academic and grey literature, including policy documents and program reports, to identify prevailing approaches, challenges, and gaps related to employment support for individuals in recovery. Three researchers independently conducted the scan to enhance rigour and reduce bias.

Stage 2 consisted of focus group discussions with representatives from substance use recovery organizations and employment and career development providers across British Columbia. A total of 138 organizations were invited, 88 expressed interest, and 47 participants attended the sessions, which were offered in a hybrid format. Participants engaged in structured discussions on barriers to employment, service coordination gaps, and strategies to strengthen transitions from recovery to employment.

Stage 3 involved an anonymous, open-ended survey distributed to organizations unable to attend the focus groups. Of the organizations contacted, 20 respondents completed the survey with consent, providing additional qualitative insight.

## **What We're Learning**

### **Employment remains inconsistently integrated into recovery services**

Across all data sources, employment emerged not only as an economic outcome but as a stabilizing force that supports structure, purpose, self-efficacy, and social reintegration. Despite this, many recovery programs continue to frame employment as a downstream goal rather than an active component of recovery planning. Evidence from the environmental scan and focus groups suggests that delaying labour market engagement can increase social isolation and financial instability, which are known risk factors for relapse. These findings reinforce growing evidence that employment should be treated as a recovery-supporting intervention rather than a post-recovery reward.

### **Recovery and employment services operate in parallel rather than as an integrated system, creating fragmentation and service gaps**

The study revealed limited coordination between substance use recovery providers and employment service providers across British Columbia. Focus group participants consistently described siloed funding models, misaligned eligibility criteria, and weak referral pathways that place the burden of system navigation on clients. While some localized partnerships show promise, such as co-location with WorkBC or informal case management networks, these practices are not standardized or widely scaled. The absence of a province-wide recovery-to-employment framework results in inconsistent access to support.

### **Significant capacity gaps exist among recovery service providers in delivering employment-related support**

Survey results highlighted a stark contrast in staff preparedness across sectors. While approximately 60% of employment service organizations surveyed had staff trained to support individuals in recovery, only 40% of recovery and treatment centres surveyed provided employment or life-skills assistance along with clinical services. Moreover, roughly half of recovery service providers reported lacking the specialized skills needed to effectively integrate employability into recovery planning. These gaps limit providers' ability to translate the recognized value of employment into consistent practice.

### **Employment outcomes are rarely tracked or evaluated, limiting evidence-based decision-making and accountability**

Only 10% of recovery service providers surveyed tracked employment-related outcomes, while 70% had no such tracking. This lack of measurement makes it difficult to assess which approaches support successful transitions into work or to show impact to funders. The environmental scan further revealed that the existing literature largely diagnoses barriers, without evaluating the effectiveness of interventions. Strengthening outcome measurement emerged as a foundational requirement for improving program design, securing sustainable funding, and scaling effective models.

### **Multiple systems undermine workforce reintegration for individuals in recovery**

Findings consistently showed that individuals in recovery face layered challenges, including low confidence, long employment gaps, mental health concerns, and fear of judgment. These individual-level barriers are compounded by external factors such as employer stigma, rigid workplace policies, benefit clawbacks, transportation barriers, and childcare constraints. Focus group participants emphasized that repeated employment setbacks can erode motivation and recovery capital. Addressing employability, therefore requires holistic approaches that account for personal readiness, workplace conditions, and policy-level disincentives, such as benefit clawbacks, simultaneously.

## **Peer support and cross-sector collaboration are powerful enablers of recovery-informed employment pathways**

Peer mentorship was consistently endorsed across focus groups and surveys. Peers with lived experience help build trust, normalize setbacks, and support accountability in ways that traditional service models cannot. Similarly, collaborative networks, which bring together recovery providers, employment services, employers, and community organizations, were considered essential to bridge service gaps. These approaches offer practical, scalable mechanisms to support sustained recovery while strengthening labour market participation.

## **★ Why It Matters**

The findings of this study have important implications for substance use treatment, employment services, and broader public systems in British Columbia and beyond. At a system level, the results highlight how limited integration between recovery and employability support may contribute to repeated treatment cycles, avoidable public costs, and missed opportunities for long-term recovery and workforce participation. Treatment and recovery services in BC are often not funded to provide post-treatment continuing care, resulting in high rates of repeat admissions. Sector stakeholders estimate that individuals require multiple treatment episodes before achieving sustained recovery, with some citing as many as seven treatment attempts.

The financial implications of this model are substantial. The estimated cost of a publicly funded treatment bed in BC ranges from \$300 to \$400 per day. Even under conservative assumptions, repeated treatment episodes can result in public expenditures approaching \$125,000 per individual, excluding the additional costs associated with detoxification, emergency healthcare, policing, and justice system involvement. With average treatment wait times of three to four months, repeated cycling through treatment programs places strain on public systems and limits access for others in need. In contrast, outpatient post-care and employment services have significantly lower operating costs. Integrating employment supports into recovery pathways has the potential to reduce repeat treatment demand, improve outcomes, and generate economic returns through increased labour market participation and tax contributions.



### **State of Skills: Evaluation and Learning in the Skills and Training Ecosystem**

The Future Skills Centre's approach to evaluation and learning has evolved over time, reflecting the challenges of measuring social impact. It has shifted from a focus on common outcomes to a broader approach that embraces multiple methods for understanding impacts on individuals, institutions and systems.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Beyond cost considerations, the findings matter for how recovery is conceptualized and supported in practice. Employment is frequently viewed as a later-stage goal or potential distraction from recovery, particularly within a polarized policy context shaped by debates between harm reduction and abstinence-based approaches. Despite widespread acknowledgment among service providers that employment has positive effects for individuals in recovery, uncertainty persists regarding appropriate timing and readiness for labour market engagement. Some prevailing narratives continue to suggest lengthy delays before employment should be considered, even as emerging evidence demonstrates that employment can function as a driver of recovery rather than merely an outcome of it. Without evidence-informed guidance on readiness, timing, and appropriate levels of support, the sector risks continuing to invest in models of care that lack evaluation and long-term outcome measurement.

The study also has implications for equity and inclusion. Individuals in substance use recovery are not consistently recognized within standard equity-deserving frameworks in employment policy and practice, contributing to ongoing marginalization and limited access to opportunity. The environmental scan revealed a gap in both academic and grey literature addressing employability from the perspective of recovery systems. Most existing research focused on employer challenges rather than systemic barriers or enabling conditions. This lack of evidence has limited the development of targeted policies, funding models, and professional development opportunities that could better support this population.

The findings point to broader implications for policy, funding, and service design. Integrating recovery-informed employment supports can improve client outcomes, strengthen service coordination, and increase system efficiency. Evidence generated through this study can inform funding models that prioritize wraparound supports, professional development for service providers, and cross-sector collaboration between healthcare, employment services, and community organizations. More broadly, advancing inclusive recovery-to-employment pathways supports economic resilience by expanding labour force participation and reducing long-term public expenditures associated with untreated or recurring substance use.

## ► **What's Next**

Building on this project's findings, future work from [Pacifica Treatment Centre](#) will integrate employability-focused content into community service and recovery program curricula. Strengthening knowledge among service providers and individuals in recovery about the role of employment in long-term recovery outcomes can help reposition work as a supportive intervention rather than a secondary or delayed goal. This includes developing practical tools and training resources that enable recovery and employment practitioners to collaborate more effectively in recovery planning and aftercare.

Future initiatives will also explore targeted strategies to support multiple stakeholder groups. For employers, this includes developing guidelines and tools to support the accommodation, retention, and supervision of individuals in recovery. For individuals in substance use recovery, programming will focus on building job readiness, confidence, and sustained labour market engagement. For community and employment service providers, efforts will emphasize strengthening partnerships with employers and enhancing staff training to support integrated, recovery-informed employment pathways.

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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