

Project Insights Report

Construct: Building Inclusive Pathways to Employment in the Skilled Trades



PARTNERS

Blue Door Support
Services (formerly Blue
Door Shelters)



LOCATIONS

Nova Scotia
Ontario



INVESTMENT

\$4,429,005



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Executive Summary

Canada faces two labour market and social challenges that are often treated separately, even though they intersect in the lives of many individuals and communities. The construction sector continues to face skilled labour shortages, while many people experiencing poverty, housing instability, discrimination, or limited access to formal training remain excluded from the kinds of jobs that could support longer-term economic and housing stability.

In Ontario, Blue Door Support Services developed Construct to respond to these intersecting issues through a rapid skilled trades training model. It combines hands-on learning, employment readiness, employer connections, and wraparound supports. The first Future Skills Centre (FSC)-supported phase expanded Construct into Durham Region, building on Blue Door's earlier launch in York Region. Between August 2021 and March 2023, the Durham expansion served 60 trainees across eight cohorts, achieving a 97% completion rate. The post-program employment rate was 74%, compared with 20% before the program. This phase also helped Blue Door refine its curriculum, partnership approach, and participant supports, including through FSC's Accelerator program.

The second phase tested whether Construct could be adopted by external organizations in different communities, moving beyond Blue Door's direct delivery model. Blue Door selected and supported two delivery partners: Employment Help Centre in Grimsby, Ontario, and YMCA Halifax in Nova Scotia. Together, these partners supported 28 participants in four cohorts. The program evaluation showed that 86% of participants completed training, and among graduates at three-month follow-up, 81% were employed.

Across both phases, the evidence points to a consistent conclusion: skilled trades training is more likely to support participants facing systemic barriers when it is paired with practical, individualized, and sustained supports. However, the expansion also shows that replication requires more than a strong curriculum. It requires local employer relationships, sufficient start-up time, flexible onboarding, partner coaching, and enough funding to cover both training and the supports that make training participation possible.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** In Phase 1, 97% of Construct participants in Durham, Ontario completed the program, and 74% were employed after the program, compared with 20% before the program.
- 2** In Phase 2, 86% of participants in Grimsby, Ontario and Halifax, Nova Scotia, completed training, and 81% of graduates who completed the three-month follow-up were employed.
- 3** Construct can be adopted by external partners, but successful replication depends on intensive early support, local partnerships, flexible implementation tools, and enough lead time to recruit participants and build employer pathways.

The Issue

Canada has struggled for many years to expand participation in the skilled trades, even as construction labour shortages continue to affect housing, infrastructure, and broader economic development. This challenge is not simply one of overall labour supply. It is also a question of who has access to skilled trades training, who is able to complete it, and who is connected to employers, unions, and apprenticeship pathways once training is complete.

At the same time, many individuals facing poverty, housing instability, discrimination, limited formal education, or weak access to professional networks encounter barriers to entering stable employment. These barriers are often mutually reinforcing. Without a stable income, housing stability can be difficult to maintain; without stable housing, it can be difficult to complete training or sustain employment. Without access to training, credentials, and employer networks, individuals may remain excluded from sectors that offer more durable career pathways.

Traditional training programs often focus primarily on technical skills and assume that participants have the stability, income, transportation, health supports, and time required to attend and complete training. For participants experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or for those facing other systemic barriers to labour market entry, these assumptions can limit access and completion. In this context, training alone may be insufficient if the conditions that allow people to participate are not also addressed.

Construct was designed to respond to this gap. The model combines rapid skilled trades training with wraparound supports that address practical and personal barriers to participation, including transportation, food, counselling, living allowances, housing-related support, and employment navigation. The project sits at the intersection of workforce development, housing stability, and inclusive economic participation.

The first FSC-supported phase tested and refined this approach in Durham Region, where Blue Door expanded the Construct model beyond its initial York Region base. The second phase then asked a different but related question: whether a model that had shown promise under Blue Door's direct delivery could be adopted by other organizations in different contexts, while retaining its core features and continuing to support participants facing significant barriers to training and employment.



What We Investigated

Phase 1: Durham expansion and program refinement, 2021–2023: In the first FSC-supported phase, Blue Door expanded Construct into Durham Region. Construct is an eight-week paid program with in-class training, hands-on work experience, employability skills, work-relevant credentials, and individualized wraparound supports. These supports are designed to reduce barriers to participation and include transportation, meals, mental health supports, childcare, and career counselling.

This phase tested whether Construct's social enterprise model could support equity-deserving participants in entering skilled trades employment while improving housing stability. It also explored how local partnerships, employer connections, and support could improve the transition from training to employment. In addition, Blue Door participated in FSC's Accelerator program, which supported further refinement of the participant experience, service blueprinting, curriculum, and partnership strategy.

Phase 2: Scaling through external delivery partners, 2025–2026: The second phase built on the results of the Durham expansion to test whether Construct could be replicated through an adoption model. Rather than Blue Door delivering the program directly in new communities, the project selected external partner organizations that already had relationships with equity-deserving communities and local service systems.

Blue Door used a feasibility assessment to select two pilot delivery partners: Employment Help Centre in West Niagara, Ontario, and YMCA Halifax in Nova Scotia. Each partner was expected to deliver two cohorts, with Blue Door providing seed funding, onboarding, coaching, implementation tools, curriculum materials, and access to program infrastructure. The intended target was 32 participants across four cohorts, although ultimately 28 participants were supported because of recruitment challenges and compressed timelines.

The evaluation examined participant outcomes, partner implementation experiences, and the feasibility of scaling the model across diverse community contexts. It explored four questions: what barriers participants continued to face in completing skilled trades training; how effective wraparound supports were in addressing those barriers; how partner organizations perceived the feasibility and scalability of adopting Construct; and which aspects of the model were most replicable and valuable for other organizations.

The evaluators used a mixed-methods evaluation approach, drawing on participant surveys at intake, graduation, and three-month follow-up; administrative data on completion and employment; photovoice reflections; and an end-of-project partner workshop. This approach allowed for not only assessing participant outcomes, but also whether the model could be transferred to new organizations and adapted across different local labour markets.

What We're Learning

Phase 1 showed that a social enterprise training model can improve employment outcomes when paired with strong supports

Between August 2021 and March 2023, Construct served 60 trainees across eight cohorts in Durham Region. The program achieved a 97% completion rate, exceeding the original target of 80%. Post-program employment increased substantially, from 20% before the program to 74% afterwards. Of those employed after the program, 72% were working in a construction-related trade, while another 7% were pursuing further education. These results suggest that, for participants facing barriers to employment, an integrated model that combines technical training, employability skills, hands-on experience, and support services can create a more viable pathway into skilled trades employment than training alone.

Wraparound supports were central to participation and completion in both phases

In both the Blue Door and the partner-delivered expansions, participants' barriers included income insecurity, housing instability, transportation needs, mental and physical health challenges, and limited work experience or professional networks, as well as skills gaps. In Phase 1, individualized support helped participants remain in training and transition into employment. In Phase 2, participants from both sites indicated that living allowances, transportation, emergency supports, and access to therapy were essential to maintain their participation and motivation. This finding reinforces that wraparound supports should not be treated as peripheral to skills training for equity-deserving participants. In this model, they are part of the intervention itself.

The hands-on nature of the training helped participants build confidence and re-engage with learning

Both phases showed that experiential learning was a key benefit of Construct. Participants valued the opportunity to connect theory to practice, earn certifications, and see themselves as capable of working in the trades. In Phase 2, participants described the hands-on components and certifications, such as Working at Heights and other job-relevant credentials, as opening doors to employment or apprenticeship pathways. This matters because many participants had previous experiences with education or employment systems that had not worked well for them. A practical, non-judgmental, and applied learning environment helped some participants regain confidence and develop a clearer sense of direction.

Local partnerships strongly shaped employment outcomes

Phase 1 showed the importance of building relationships with local unions, employers, community organizations, and referral partners. These relationships supported recruitment, provided pathways to credentials, and helped connect participants to jobs after graduation. Phase 2 reinforced the same lesson, but also showed how difficult it can be to reproduce these conditions in a new site. Employment Help Centre's partnership with LiUNA Local 837 created a more direct pathway into apprenticeships and skilled trades employment. YMCA Halifax participants had positive training experiences and relatively strong employment outcomes, but none of the employed respondents were in skilled trades employment at three-month follow-up. The difference reflects a combination of factors, including the nature of the training partner, local labour market conditions, participant demographics, and the timing of follow-up.

Phase 2 produced promising but uneven early employment outcomes

Phase two had an 86% completion rate, with 24 of 28 participants finishing training. At three-month follow-up, 81% of respondents (17 of 21) were employed. Employment outcomes differed by site. Among West Niagara's Employment Help Centre graduates, 86% were employed, and 43% were in skilled trades employment, apprenticeships, or contracts. Among YMCA Halifax graduates, 71% were employed, but all were in non-skilled or casual employment. These results should be interpreted cautiously because of the small sample size, the short follow-up window, and the absence of a counterfactual comparison group. However, they suggest that Construct can support employment transitions across sites, while also showing that direct transition into skilled trades may depend heavily on local employer and union pathways.

Construct can be adopted by external organizations, but replication requires more than a curriculum

The second phase tested whether Construct could move beyond Blue Door's own delivery. The answer appears to be yes, but with important conditions. Delivery partners valued the plug-and-play curriculum, technological infrastructure, implementation guides, coaching, and regular check-ins. These tools reduced the start-up burden and allowed partners to focus on adapting the program to their local context. At the same time, partners needed intensive support at the beginning, particularly around recruitment, employer engagement, staff onboarding, and outcome tracking. In other words, the model is transferable, but transferability depends on active relationship-building and implementation support.

Compressed timelines limited recruitment, partnership development, and staff readiness

Phase 2 was affected by a tight implementation schedule, including delays associated with the research ethics process and the limited time between partner onboarding and cohort launch. Both delivery partners initially ran smaller first cohorts than planned, with six participants instead of eight, and later increased recruitment in second cohorts. The project also showed that building cross-sector partnerships in new communities takes time, especially when a partner organization is entering trades training spaces where relationships, trust, and employer familiarity are already established. Future replication will likely require longer start-up periods, phased onboarding, and clearer milestones before cohort delivery begins.

A standardized model still needs local adaptation

A major learning from Phase 2 is that consistency and flexibility must be held together. Partners valued the structured tools, templates, and curriculum materials, but also needed room to adapt to local labour markets, participant demographics, community resources, and organizational capacity. For example, both pilot partners chose to deliver the program entirely in person, even though the model had been designed with hybrid elements. This made sense given their cohort size and implementation context, but it also raises questions about how delivery should evolve as more partners, larger cohorts, or more geographically dispersed participants are involved. The lesson is not that standardization is inappropriate, but that replication tools need to be designed for guided adaptation.

★ Why It Matters

The Construct project matters because it provides evidence on a practical question facing both the skills ecosystem and the social services sector: how can training programs support people who are outside or at the margins of the labour market, when the barriers they face are not only skills-related? Across both phases, the answer that emerges is that effective training for participants facing housing instability, poverty, discrimination, or limited work experience requires an integrated model. Technical training, employability skills, credentials, employer relationships, income supports, transportation, mental health supports, and post-program navigation all work together.



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This has implications for how skills training is funded. Many training programs are funded as though curriculum delivery is the main cost. Construct shows that, for some participants, the supports around the training may be the difference between access and exclusion, or between starting and completing. Living allowances, transportation, counselling, emergency support, and individualized coaching are not simply add-ons. They create the conditions under which learning and employment transition can happen. However, this also means that the Construct model is relatively resource-intensive. If governments, funders, or employers want programs that reach people facing complex barriers, they need to recognize the full cost of participation, not only the cost of instruction.

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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The project also matters for skilled trades policy. Canada's construction workforce challenges cannot be addressed only by recruiting people who are already close to apprenticeship or employment. If the sector needs a larger and more diverse labour force, then training pathways must be accessible to people who have been historically excluded from the trades. Construct provides one example of how this can be done by combining low-barrier entry, applied learning, employer connections, and supports that respond to participants' lived realities. However, the uneven site-level outcomes in Phase 2 also show that inclusive training alone is not enough. Participants need access to local employers, unions, apprenticeships, and hiring pathways that are ready to receive them.

For community organizations, Construct offers a promising adoption model, but also a caution. The success of the model in Durham did not automatically guarantee identical results in West Niagara or Halifax. Local labour market conditions, partner readiness, staff capacity, recruitment pipelines, and employer relationships shaped implementation and outcomes. This means that replication should not be understood as copying a program from one place to another. Rather, it should be understood as a structured adaptation process, where core elements are protected while local conditions are taken seriously.

For funders and policymakers, the project offers a useful lesson about scaling. Scaling a social innovation is not only about reaching more participants. It is also about determining which parts of the model must remain consistent, which parts can be adapted, what support partners require, and what conditions need to be in place before delivery begins. The second phase shows that a strong curriculum and digital infrastructure can reduce the burden on new partners, but they cannot replace trust-building, coaching, and community-specific partnership development.

The findings also contribute evidence on smoothing job transitions for people out of the labour market or in precarious employment, equipping new labour market entrants with in-demand skills, and designing skills-based programs with communities and participants in mind. Construct's broader contribution is showing that job transitions are shaped by the interaction between individual readiness, program design, employer demand, and support systems. When those pieces align, participants can move toward skilled trades employment and greater stability. When some of those pieces are weaker, outcomes may still be positive, but the pathway into skilled trades may be slower or less direct.

Finally, Construct links workforce development to housing stability without reducing participants to their barriers. The program recognizes that many participants bring motivation, resilience, and interest in trades work, but need a training environment and support structure that does not assume they already have stability. This strengths-based approach is particularly important in a policy environment where discussions of labour shortages and homelessness are often separated. Construct shows that, under the right conditions, workforce development can be part of a broader strategy for economic inclusion, housing stability, and community resilience.

► What's Next

Blue Door is continuing to build on the Construct model through a next phase focused on replication. This phase is intended to strengthen the national adoption model by refining implementation tools, onboarding and coaching processes, and partner supports. Planned next steps include the development of a national replication toolkit, updated implementation guidelines, curriculum and intake tools, recruitment strategies, and an updated online training portal aligned with national standards.

The next phase is also expected to test Construct's fidelity and adaptability in a broader range of community contexts, including rural, urban, and northern environments. Blue Door is working with new delivery partners, including the [Trellis Society](#) in Calgary and [Ottawa Community Housing Foundation](#).

Future evaluation will also need to address limitations from the Phase 2 evaluation. In particular, longer-term follow-up will be important to understand whether early employment gains are sustained, whether participants move into skilled trades over time, and whether housing stability improves. As the model expands, there may also be opportunities to introduce stronger comparison designs, including data from waitlisted participants, to better understand what changes can be attributed to Construct rather than to changes that may have occurred without the program.

The next stage of Construct's work will move towards understanding the kinds of partners, supports, timelines, and local conditions needed for replication to work across Canada.

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

How to Cite This Report

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