



# **EMPOWERING THE WORKFORCE**

FIRST WORK'S PIONEERING  
APPROACH TO ADDRESSING  
LABOUR SHORTAGES IN  
ONTARIO'S RURAL  
COMMUNITIES

**June 2025**

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# Background

Workforce development is a critical challenge confronting rural economies throughout Ontario. In 2024, an online survey was distributed to all Community Future Development Corporations and Workforce Planning Boards throughout Ontario to better understand rural workforce development trends. The results from the survey can be found in two reports: [Findings from Community Futures Development Corporations](#) and [Findings from Workforce Planning Boards](#). As part of the survey, participants identified innovative rural workforce development initiatives.

This report is a case study of one of the innovations identified. The case study identifies the innovative approaches, goals of the initiative, successes, and transferability to other rural communities. This report is part of a series of rural innovative workforce initiatives as part of the *Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction* initiative. Further case studies and additional information on the research initiatives can be found at <https://ruraldev.ca/lsna/>.

## Introduction

First Work is a non-profit Ontario Workforce Development Network membership organization and has established itself as a pioneering force in Ontario's employment landscape, particularly focusing on the nuanced needs of rural communities. For over 35 years, the organization has been at the forefront of connecting youth, jobseekers, employers, and governmental agencies, fostering a synchronized and effective workforce development ecosystem. Through innovative solutions and strategic partnerships, First Work addresses labour shortages by equipping the youth and marginalized communities with the necessary tools and opportunities for a thriving job market. Figure 1 displays where First Work is headquartered and actively operates, illustrating the central hub from which the program's innovative workforce development initiatives are coordinated and implemented across various regions.

## Innovative Approach to Addressing Labour Shortages

First Work adopts a holistic approach to mitigate labour shortages, characterized by:

- **Adaptive Regional Engagement:** Merging meetings into an amalgamated format to ensure focused discussions and strategic development in workforce initiatives.
- **Strategic Committee Formation:** Formalizing voluntary network engagement through committees to align activities with member insights, enhancing the impact and relevance of initiatives.

- **Sector Engagement and Collaboration:** Partnering with industry leaders, educational institutions, and government bodies to create integrated solutions for workforce challenges.

## Goals and Objectives

The core goals of First Work include:

- **Empowering Youth Employment:** Building a resilient youth employment network that offers accessible, timely, and culturally appropriate services.
- **Driving Sector Leadership:** Leveraging the strength of its membership community to serve as a conduit between job seekers and progressive policy development.
- **Promoting Equitable Access:** Ensuring that all community members, especially those in rural areas, have equitable access to employment services and opportunities.

## Success in Achieving Goals

### Achievements

Notable achievements of First Work include:

- **Strategic Industry Partnerships:** Collaborating with the Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA) to introduce the Pathways to ICI Program— a bridging program designed for recent graduates— demonstrating a proactive approach to bridging education and industry needs.
- **Community-Centric Initiatives:** Hosting the Build Green Career Fair in collaboration with Toronto Community Benefits Network, directly connecting job seekers with emerging opportunities in the industry.

## Challenges and Future Prospects

### Key Challenges

- **Navigating Market Dynamics:** Addressing the challenges posed by a tight labour market and the potential of an economic downturn, as reflected in the organization's submissions and recommendations to the Ontario government.

- **Adapting to Evolving Needs:** Ensuring services and programs are continuously adapted to meet the changing needs of job seekers and the labour market.

## Future Prospects and Advocacy

- **Expanding Partnership Networks:** Strengthening existing partnerships and forging new ones, like the collaboration with University of Toronto Scarborough Campus (UTSC), to foster solution-driven discussions and initiatives.
- **Direct Youth Engagement:** Ensuring that services remain relevant, timely, and impactful by incorporating direct feedback and participation from the youth.

## Uniqueness and Transferability

### Distinctive Elements

First Work's distinctive approach is evident in its collaboration with various organizations such as the Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN), Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE), Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators (CESBA), and Employment Services Centres (ESC). These partnerships enable First Work to effectively advocate on issues faced by members and engage in comprehensive discussions about shared best practices, sector concerns, and challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Factors Supporting Transferability

- **Adaptable Service Delivery Model:** The transferability is enhanced by the organization's ability to tailor its services to meet regional specifics and practitioner requirements, ensuring relevance and effectiveness.
- **Training and Development Focus:** The Frontline Training Series, based on direct feedback, illustrates the organization's commitment to addressing the evolving needs of the sector's practitioners.

### Potential for Broader Application:

The broader application of First Work's training and development initiatives, based on direct feedback, positions the organization's model as a scalable and adaptable solution for workforce challenges.

## Conclusion

First Work exemplifies a model of innovation, collaboration, and strategic foresight in workforce development. Through its comprehensive approach, commitment to community-centric solutions, and continuous advocacy, the organization has significantly contributed to shaping a responsive and sustainable employment services ecosystem, poised to meet the challenges and opportunities of today's dynamic job market.

## References

Ontario Association of Youth Employment Centres (OAYEC) 2022-2023 Annual Report. 2023.

## Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the [Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance](#), a collaboration between the Government of Ontario and the University of Guelph. The authors would like to acknowledge Elzbieta Mastej and Heather Douglas for their assistance in preparing the final report.