



# **INNOVATIVE RURAL LABOR FORCE PLANNING**

A CASE STUDY OF THUNDER  
BAY'S NORTHERN  
IMMIGRATION PILOT PROGRAM

**July 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/lсна/>.

## Introduction

To alleviate labor market shortages in rural and northern communities, the Government of Canada in November 2019 launched the [Rural Northern Immigration Pilot Program \(RNIP\)](#), which encourages foreign workers to relocate to these areas (CEDC, 2023a). One of the communities taking part in the RNIP is the City of Thunder Bay, located in Northwestern Ontario (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2020). Situated on the shores of Lake Superior, Thunder Bay is renowned for its varied economic sectors, rich cultural legacy, and scenic surroundings. Thunder Bay provides immigrants looking for better prospects and a pleasant living environment with a warm welcome (Northern Ontario Business Staff, 2023). This case study examines the effects of the RNIP on Thunder Bay, emphasizing the advantages it has for immigrants and the community.

## Methodologies and Strategic Approach

The Canadian government launched the RNIP with the goal of fostering the economic growth of northern and rural areas by bringing in skilled foreign workers who can augment the local labor pool (IRCC, 2020). Under the pilot program, communities evaluate potential applicants, and make recommendations to the IRCC for permanent residence, whereupon the IRCC makes the final decision. Additionally, communities provide newcomers with settlement services and match them up with mentors who are already part of the community (IRCC, 2019). Through the facilitation of the immigration process for qualified candidates, the program seeks to address the labor market and demographic challenges that these communities face (IRCC, 2023).

Companies or organizations having trouble finding enough workers turn to hiring foreign workers to help meet their labor force requirements. Employers who meet [the eligibility requirements](#) (main operations are located and operative in the RNIP-set boundaries, operating a business for a minimum of three years or as a new business have invested a minimum of \$500,000 in capital, and demonstrate a need for Foreign Nationals) may utilize the RNIP Thunder Bay and Area to hire new workers for priority occupations or to keep on board existing foreign employees. A community recommendation cannot be made for a candidate who is not approved by the employer. Aside from fulfilling eligibility requirements, approved companies must pledge to maintain a workplace that is safe for all cultures and help newly hired staff members integrate and settle in (Thunder Bay CEDC, 2023).

A structured application process must be completed by potential immigrants who wish to settle in Thunder Bay through the RNIP. This process includes getting a job offer from a designated employer, getting a community recommendation, and [fulfilling immigration requirements](#) set by the Canadian government (IRCC, 2020a, Just For Canada, 2023).

## Goals and Objectives

In Canada, population decline, and labor shortages frequently affect rural and northern communities, making it difficult to maintain local businesses and services (Statistics Canada, 2022). The RNIP is intended to provide skilled foreign workers who wish to live and work in Thunder Bay and Area with a route to permanent residence, thereby distributing the advantages of economic immigration to smaller communities. To address these problems, the RNIP seeks to draw immigrants who can play critical roles in a range of industries, fostering the development and vitality of these areas (Singer, 2023).

### The RNIP's advantages for Thunder Bay

Thunder Bay benefits from the RNIP in many ways, such as a more varied pool of talent and increased economic activity. The RNIP enables qualified employers to offer skilled foreign workers who can assist in addressing identified labor shortages in the community full-time, permanent employment. Those with the qualifications and experience that employers in Thunder Bay and surrounding areas require are recommended for permanent residence by the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission. The final say over whether to grant applications for permanent residence goes to the Government of Canada (Northern Ontario Business Staff, 2023).

## Success in Achieving Goals

The RNIP in Thunder Bay has proven effective in attaining its objectives by drawing a varied group of skilled immigrants to the area. The initiative has helped immigrants

settle successfully through strategic partnerships with employers and community stakeholders, which has benefited both the newcomers and the local economy (Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, 2023).

## **Achievements**

The increased cultural diversity, economic vibrancy, and community involvement that follow the successful integration of skilled immigrants are clear indicators of the success of the RNIP in Thunder Bay. [Records showed 200 candidates](#) expressed interest in the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission during the most recent intake for the 2023 Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot program. These accomplishments have strengthened the labor market in the area and made Thunder Bay a desirable location for immigrants looking for a high standard of living (De et al., 2023, Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, 2023).

From November 2019 to February 2024, nearly 500 applicants have been recommended by Thunder Bay CEDC for permanent residence under the RNIP, resulting in more than 700 newcomers to the region with the accompanying family members (CEDC, 2023a). Thunder Bay can close skills gaps in the workforce, encourage innovation, and strengthen its cultural ties by embracing skilled immigrants (Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, 2023). The suggested candidates come from various fields and areas, with the food service, retail, and healthcare sectors having the highest number of people employed (CEDC, 2023).

## **Challenges and Future Prospects**

### **Key Challenges**

Notwithstanding its achievements, the RNIP in Thunder Bay has encountered difficulties with newcomer integration, job matching, and service delivery support. These difficulties have highlighted the necessity of continual cooperation and creativity to meet the changing requirements of immigrants as well as the local community. The CEDC's recent intake showed that there is a high demand for the program, but there are only 115 spots available for 2023 and 2024. It was announced that the portal would close to new applications if the program reached its maximum number of applicants with scores greater than 60%. This is exactly what happened, disappointing employers and job candidates alike (Thunder Bay CEDC, 2023). However, assessing the effectiveness of RNIP, which was introduced in 2019 just before the pandemic, has been challenging (Singer, 2023a).

## **Future Prospects and Advocacy**

In the future, the Thunder Bay RNIP is well-positioned to use its experiences and knowledge to promote improved support networks, streamlined procedures, and focused interventions that will maximize the program's effectiveness. The Northwest Region's and Thunder Bay's economic development has been largely dependent on the RNIP. With this final intake, the CEDC will have used up all 475 of the recommendations it has been given by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for 2023 and all 100 recommendations it has been given for 2024.

The CEDC is currently waiting for further information and guidance from the IRCC about the potential future of RNIP. According to Jamie Taylor, CEO of Thunder Bay CEDC, "Although no official announcements have been made yet, the IRCC has hinted that the RNIP is likely to become a permanent pathway." The CEDC eagerly looks forward to learning more about the IRCC's intentions and the potential implications for the RNIP in Thunder Bay and the surrounding area. The program aims to address major obstacles and create a more welcoming and encouraging environment for immigrants. (Thunder Bay CEDC, 2023).

## **Uniqueness and Transferability**

### **Distinctive Elements**

Thunder Bay's RNIP is notable for its community involvement, cooperative methodology, and strategies designed to address the unique requirements of the area. According to Jamie Taylor, "the response to this final draw shows that there is a great appetite for economic immigration in our region—both from the candidate and the employer side." These unique features have helped the program stand out as a model for other rural and northern communities by helping to draw in and keep skilled immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2022).

### **Factors Affecting Transferability**

The RNIP model's transferability to different regions can be influenced by various factors, including industry dynamics, community capacity, and local economic conditions. Comprehending these variables is essential for evaluating the program's possible suitability in various settings and customizing its execution to fit the distinct needs of every community (De et al., 2023).

### **Potential for Broader Application**

The RNIP's success in Thunder Bay highlights the possibility of its wider implementation in comparable rural and northern environments across Canada. (Singer, 2023a)

Through the exchange of best practices, the resolution of transferability issues, and the promotion of stakeholder collaboration, the program can function as a model for improving immigration strategies in multicultural communities (Singer, 2023a).

## Conclusion

Thunder Bay has benefited from the RNIP Program, which has drawn in skilled immigrants and improved the social and economic fabric of the city. Thunder Bay contributes to the general prosperity of the community by embracing diversity, promoting growth, and making a homely place for newcomers through the RNIP.

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## 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.