

# Mennonite New Life Centre HOPES Program

## Summary of Evaluation Findings (2015-2018)

The Mennonite New Life Centre received funding from the Local Poverty Reduction Fund to run the HOPES program from 2015 to 2018. The evaluation of the HOPES program sought to answer the following questions:

1. Program Implementation:
  - Was the program implemented as planned? If not, what changes were made and why?
  - What were the outputs of the program?
  - How was the program perceived by participants, stakeholders and staff?
  
2. Program Outcomes:
  - What were the mental health outcomes for participants?
  - What were the job readiness outcomes for participants?
  - Were participants able to secure and retain meaningful employment or to achieve their education or training goals?
  - What is the association between mental health counselling and the ability to engage in this type of program?

The results of the 2015-2018 evaluation of the HOPES program are extensive and demonstrate clearly the success of the HOPES program model and its implementation over the three years. Program participants, staff and stakeholders were all in agreement – the HOPES model is unique and provides a holistic approach to help newcomers. The program assists newcomers to work towards meaningful career goals that help them move out of their survival jobs, increase their financial potential, and ultimately find a more fulfilling life.

### PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The HOPES program was implemented as planned with continuous improvement and tweaking of the model as participants provided program feedback and staff observed limitations and barriers faced by participants. Through 8 cohorts, 121 people participated in the three-phase program. The staff formed connections with other organizations; and, after the second phase, participants were referred to other agencies for supports and resources in finding employment, having their degrees credentialed, and exploring education and training options. During this time, staff continued to support the participants, keeping in touch for a year or more.

Most HOPES participants were very happy with their participation in the program. All participants reported that they would recommend the program to others. They found the information, tools and resources they received to be very useful. Many had skills in employment seeking from their home countries and noted that the process was very different in Canada. The workshops and staff support helped them build a relevant resume, use the most current search engines and approaches for job search, and develop interview skills relevant to the Canadian context. Participants found the one-on-one individualized approach and support to be very helpful. They also liked the supportive environment and the extensive coaching and support provided by staff that continued after the workshops. Many participants reported on the importance of the support

because not only is job search and career planning a very stressful process, it is compounded by the stress of being a newcomer and the ongoing challenges associated with that.

HOPES participants also rated the individual components of the program very positively. They provided a somewhat lower (although still very high) rating for the support provided after the workshop. One reason why this rating was slightly lower may be because responses included those from earlier cohorts, before changes were made to improve this part of the program. Another potential reason is that while the staff provide ongoing support and referrals, participants experience varied degrees of barriers and different levels of needs. The staff did report that they provided as much support as they could, but resource limitations (budget, staffing, and barriers in other sectors) does not allow them to do everything that is needed for some participants.

Stakeholders were very happy to play a role in the HOPES program. They reported that the counselling and individual attention that participants receive fills a gap; in other employment programs, participants receive a more generalized approach. They also see strengths in that the program helps internationally trained professionals, connects participants to other resources, helps them build job search skills, and opens up opportunities that would not otherwise be available to many newcomers.

*“Success in HOPES program is when they make their action plan, clarify goals and connected to other agencies, learn how to control their anxiety and have confidence – all those things coming together - clients finding meaningful jobs, setting priority goals that are realistic.” (Program staff)*

Staff were also very pleased with how the HOPES program implementation went over the three years and were pleased with the success of the program’s holistic approach. They saw the evidence through ongoing results from the data collection that the program was working and observed many success stories. They surpassed what they set out to do because of the continual evaluation, reflection, and program adjustments. For example, they introduced a job fair to help participants make connections with employers.

All programs have limitations and challenges, but the HOPES program staff used these as an opportunity to reflect and problem solve. Some of the limitations outlined in the evaluation results by participants, stakeholders and staff, have either been already addressed or are being addressed in the second phase of the HOPES program that started in September 2018. For example, staff is now making recordings of the workshops available for participants who have difficulties getting to the Scarborough location. They have also started a networking group, more connections to employers (e.g., job fair) and increased language supports for potential participants who need more language training before they can successfully embark on their career planning. The staff also continues to work closely with employment agencies and advocate for HOPES participants.

## PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The results of the evaluation – both quantitative and qualitative – show clearly that the HOPES program is meeting its outcome goals. Participants experienced improvements in their mental health as a result of the program – statistically significant improvements in reducing stress (a 36% reduction overall) and feeling hopeful about the future (16% increase overall). The majority of participants showed at least some improvement in both these areas: 83% for stress reduction and 76% for feeling hopeful about the future. The

majority of respondents to the follow-up online survey also reported that the program had helped them feel hopeful about achieving their goals.

Job-readiness ratings at pre and post-test also showed that HOPES participants gained skills and knowledge to help them prepare for successful employment outcomes. Participants experienced a statistically significant change – an improvement of 62% – and all participants showed an increase on this scale. Post-workshop surveys also demonstrated that participants developed job-readiness skills. Over 92% of participants reported that the program had helped them in increasing their employment planning and goal setting skills.

These mental health and job-readiness outcomes translated into concrete employment and future goals outcomes. Results indicated that for the first 6 cohorts 73% to 98% of participants had met their short term goals, 58% to 64% had met their mid-term goals and 27% to 53% had met their long term goals. Further, as of May 2018 56% of HOPES participants from all 8 cohorts were employed, self-employed, or continuing their education.

While we do not have data to draw clear associations between the mental health outcomes with the job-readiness or employment outcomes, the qualitative data does indicate that it is the holistic nature of the HOPES program that helps participants move forward. Dealing with the stress, and learning coping mechanisms, facilitates participants’ ability to put together their action plan and move forward. The ongoing support and check-ins ensure that the stress is managed and barriers addressed whenever possible.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

THE HOPES program model is holistic and unique and a much needed comprehensive model to help newcomers move forward in Canada and avoid long-term poverty. The mental health and emotional support prepares and helps newcomers to get to a place where they can look at their past, and future, and plan effectively for realistic career and employment goals. Other employment programs do not provide the one-on-one support and the mental health component, and isolate the job experience from other settlement and life experiences. Without this support to overcome mental health barriers and to feel emotionally ready to go outside their comfort zone, to know how to plan and what all their options are, newcomers might continue in their survival jobs or to be unemployed.

While this evaluation has demonstrated the positive outcomes of the HOPES program, more research needs to be done to see the longer term outcomes of the project and its poverty reduction and positive settlement outcomes. The follow-up time was not sufficient to document the full potential of the program.

***“I think that the main accomplishment is that we are now in the new HOPES. The model works.... The first HOPES was just to prove the idea. And now, the new HOPES is ... putting this idea to work and making it better. I think that the main accomplishment is that we are still here. Many programs, especially with local poverty reduction, they are just saying goodbye, and we are here.”***

(Program staff)