

# Making Work “Work”: Adaptive Economic Engagement for People Facing Barriers to Employment

Report written in evaluation of Eastside Works and Low-Threshold Economic Opportunity provision following completion of British Columbia Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction Research & Innovation Grant awarded to Eastside Movement for Economic and Business Development Society

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## Land Acknowledgement

We graciously recognize that the research in this evaluation was conducted on the unceded, traditional, and continually occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations. It includes research data and information provided by Indigenous people from nations across Turtle Island, many of whom call Coast Salish territories home and who arrived on these territories both voluntarily and involuntarily. As this report explores economic engagement, it is imperative to recognize how xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, səliłwətał, other Indigenous Nations and Métis peoples have actively resisted the complex barriers to inclusion and participation introduced by settler colonialism while maintaining culturally-grounded economic activities.

We would also like to acknowledge the ongoing work of Indigenous-led community organizations in the present-day area of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, which have consistently been at the forefront of innovative economic engagement models. These organizations have recognized the positive and wide-ranging health outcomes that accompany activities centered on community engagement, connection, and culture. Through acknowledging the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual facets of wellness, Indigenous leadership and grass-roots activism have laid foundations for work in this area.

In light of article 20 and 21 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, British Columbia’s *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (“UNDRIP”) legislation, we recognize the provincial government’s commitment to consult and cooperate with Indigenous peoples to ensure the economic wellbeing of Indigenous peoples across the province, whether in pursuit of traditional and Indigenous-led economic activities or ones existing within settler colonial systems. Although this evaluation is focused on dimensions of the policy context under the jurisdiction of the British Columbia provincial government, we would also like to acknowledge the federal government’s commitment to the improvement of the economic well-being and health of Indigenous peoples through the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s* Calls to Action (i.e., 7, 18, 20), and the need for coordinated efforts between all levels of government, Indigenous nations, and economic opportunity providers.

This report has benefited from the input of members from the Assessing Economic Transitions Study Indigenous Advisory Circle comprised of community members, organizational representatives, and elders. We humbly and respectfully thank them for their time, insights and contributions.

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## ***Executive Summary***

When people face multiple, overlapping, and complex barriers to work, they have less access to the benefits that come from this key social determinant of health. For these individuals, economic engagement over time is dynamic, with opportunities that vary across a “Livelihoods Continuum” that involves income generation that ranges from informal unpaid or survival work to formal employment. Moreover, people facing barriers to labour market engagement often require different configurations of accommodation or support in order to initiate and maintain economic activity. Though the barriers that prevent people from accessing sustained employment – including but not limited to physical and mental health challenges, substance use-related harm and housing insecurity – are well researched, less attention has been paid to measures that keep multiply-barriered individuals economically engaged. This report is focused on how EMBERS Eastside Works and other low-barrier or low-threshold economic engagement organizations support individuals across the Livelihoods Continuum.

Low-barrier or low-threshold economic engagement involves initiatives to support barriered individuals to initiate and maintain economic activity. Opportunities under these models include: (1) pre-employment services; (2) employment services; and (3) supportive work. Importantly, distinctions between these categories, while often considered distinct by administrative units like government ministries, are blurred for participants and opportunity providers. For example, employment services may be delivered in ways (e.g. scheduled, paid) that closely resemble work. This report explores the experiences of barriered individuals engaging in low-threshold models in Vancouver, B.C. from their perspective to understand how opportunities for economic engagement can be strengthened and expanded following best practices.

Supported by a Research & Innovation grant from the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, this evaluation began as an examination of EMBERS Eastside Works, a unique economic engagement hub and leading low-threshold opportunity provider in Vancouver. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it has evolved into a more comprehensive exploration of low-threshold economic engagement models in Vancouver. Among opportunity providers, there is a strong emphasis on collaboration, and EMBERS Eastside Works is a core hub for individuals and providers within a broader, emergent and dynamic economic engagement ecosystem.

The evaluation is nested within the Assessing Economic Transitions (ASSET) Study, a mixed-methods, longitudinal cohort study that explores the financial, health, and social impacts of economic engagement for people who face barriers to employment. Data from quarterly surveys from 332 participants gathered between April 2019 and April 2023 were analyzed to describe economic engagement and its impacts across the Livelihoods Continuum. Survey data are supported by qualitative interview data from a subset of 41 participants, which capture experiences with low-threshold economic engagement. Thirty-seven percent of participants self-identified as Indigenous and 52% self-identified as white. Over 67% of participants have at least high school level education, 13% were unstably housed at enrolment and 18% had experienced incarceration during their lifetime.

Evaluation findings are organized around three main themes:

***Economic Engagement and Barriers to Economic Participation:*** A detailed sketch of the economic lives of participants across the Livelihoods Continuum identifies significant variation in the type of economic activities undertaken by participants as well as the level of (in)formality of



those activities. There were relatively low levels of formal employment (i.e., fixed, full-time employment with taxed wages) and high levels of engagement with informal work (i.e. stipend work or odd jobs commonly paid in cash). At their initial research visit, almost all participants reported involvement in informal work at some point in their lives (79%), and after receipt of income assistance (93%) this remained the most common income source reported during follow-up research visits (61%). Survey and interview data identified complex patterns of engagement, signaling individual, social, structural and systemic barriers to economic engagement and formal workplaces despite widespread desire for more and better work. These included mental and physical health-related barriers, the management of high-intensity substance use or engagement in substance use disorder treatment, barriers to educational attainment, incarceration, workplace discrimination, stigma and discrimination, and regulatory barriers, such as limited earnings exemptions for people receiving income assistance.

***Low-Threshold Economic Engagement: Strengths and Areas for Growth:*** The evaluation assessed multiple dimensions of participants’ economic engagement, describing the degree to which engagement included characteristics of formal labour market structures. In so doing the evaluation identified how many economic activities, despite being labelled “informal,” are an amalgam of formal and informal work structures, offering participants select aspects of formality, such as stability, while retaining key aspects of informality, such as daily cash payments. The blending of formality and informal structures is a leading best practice of low-threshold models. Additional characteristics of low-threshold economic engagement are also important. These include: involvement in meaningful work; supportive ancillary/wrap-around services that support initiating and maintaining economic engagement; skills development; supportive payment methods; flexible working conditions; long term opportunities; and individualized support. These widespread adaptations to conventional employment structures are what made work “work” for evaluation participants, facilitating the initiation and maintenance of economic engagement.

Despite being most participants’ ideal form of economic engagement, there were a number of growth areas identified that could improve overall levels of engagement and the quality of engagement. These included provisions around workplace safety and the ability to decline work perceived as dangerous; communication around changes to payment structures; transparent and equitable compensation and the need to avoid the so-called “peer penalty” where people are paid less for equivalent work; a need for more breadth of opportunity, and a need for additional resources to support the integration of workers into decision-making and planning processes. Importantly, participant-identified areas for growth reveal tensions between the key adaptations that support worker engagement in low-barrier economic opportunities and the employment entitlements and protections different legal and regulatory frameworks, such as the Employment Standards Act, for formal employees, which was not the classification of the vast majority of evaluation participants.

***Benefits to Health and Well-Being:*** Survey and interview data identify a range of social and health benefits linked to low-threshold economic engagement. Perhaps most important were the non-monetary benefits of economic engagement, including the social and psychological benefits resulting from structured time, regular activity, collective purpose, sense of worker identity and belonging, and expanded social interactions and relationships. Additional benefits were documented related to physical and mental well-being, such as being more physically active, being happier, being less depressed, decreased alcohol and drug use and improved mental health, among other benefits. Of particular note were participant narratives around the

importance of how economic opportunity providers accommodated health and functionality limitations, decreasing stigma and repairing previous adverse experiences in the labour market.

In sum, the findings in this report demonstrate the transformative impacts of low-threshold economic engagement opportunities on the socio-economic, social, and health outcomes of people facing multiple barriers to employment. Above all else, this report affirms that people facing multiple barriers to employment not only want to work, but they want increased economic engagement, economic security and quality of life. Given clear benefits for people engaged in these opportunities, there is considerable opportunity to expand the scope and scale of opportunities, improve the stability of supports for economic opportunity providers, decrease regulatory barriers, and build avenues for coordinated action to support economic engagement for multiply-barriered individuals. Meeting the economic engagement intentions of people facing multiple barriers has a ripple effect on other areas of their lives, their communities, and society more broadly, and warrants increased institutional support across relevant agencies.

## Evaluation Recommendations

The below are specific recommendations from evaluation findings, community engagement activities and input from community advisory groups.

### Recommendations for the Policy and Program Development

#### 1. Support the scale-up of low-threshold economic engagement opportunities

- 1.1. Provide expanded, ongoing and sustained funding dedicated to the creation and operation of innovative economic engagement models, recognizing the operational complexity and time and human-resource intensity of opportunity provision.
- 1.2. Expand Provincial Employment Services, currently administered by WorkBC, to include adaptive, equity-promoting and tailored interventions for barriered individuals seeking economic engagement and re-engagement in the workforce.
- 1.3. Fund ancillary supports commonly provided alongside opportunities that facilitate the initiation of and retention in economic engagement.
- 1.4. Monitor, evaluate and disseminate data on participant and organizational economic engagement outcomes through broad indicators of social, health and economic well-being, with specific focus on equity, diversity and inclusion.

#### 2. Expand access, equity and protections across the Livelihoods Continuum

- 2.1. Establish and disseminate best practices in low-threshold economic engagement to optimize access and beneficial outcomes for workers.
- 2.2. Explore how to better accommodate adaptive low-threshold economic engagement models through the use of existing legislation and regulations, or, potentially, through the creation of a new category of economic activity that enhances access, protections, safety standards and benefits for participants and opportunity providers.
- 2.3. Develop context-appropriate training, policies and programs to support equity-deserving populations and safe workplaces related to Indigenous cultural safety and humility, anti-racism, gender- and ability- inclusivity, stigma, de-escalation and respectful workplaces.

**Revise and annually review the structure of income assistance regulations**

- 2.4. Restructure income assistance regulations so that earnings exemptions for people receiving income assistance do not constrain their economic engagement, for example by minimizing or eliminating clawbacks.
- 2.5. Restructure income assistance regulations to preserve, wherever possible, ancillary health and social benefits (e.g. nutritional support, transportation, etc.).
- 2.6. Reassess earnings exemptions on an annual basis to better reflect variation in cost of living, inflation and other changes affecting the material security of recipients.

**3. Build avenues for coordinated action across government, organizational and community actors**

- 3.1. Increase collaboration across government ministries with mandates for education, pre-employment and employment services, and employment to streamline experiences of economic activity and the organizations that provide economic opportunities.
- 3.2. Formalize consistent collaboration forums between provincial ministries and municipal government representatives, opportunity providers, scholars and people with lived and living experience that feature third party facilitation, shared agenda setting, and proportionally meaningful membership across groups.
- 3.3. Affirm, strengthen and better utilize ongoing knowledge exchange networks to facilitate reciprocal learning, information sharing and the expansion of evidence-based best practice for low-threshold economic engagement support models across British Columbia.

**Recommendations for Practice**

4. Strengthen organizational systems that support worker input and experience
  - 4.1. Expand resources that support organizational consultation processes, improved channels of communication and feedback between workers and management, specifically around scheduling, workplace safety, wage transparency, and payment structures.
  - 4.2. Explore compensation and benefit standards that balance organizational capacity, resource limitations, and fair compensation that does not invoke a “peer penalty” where similar work is paid differently.
  - 4.3. Expand processes that meaningfully involve and represent workers in leadership and decision-making.
5. **Tailor employment practices to meet community needs**
  - 5.1. Expand efforts to support the development of long-term planning, growth trajectories and progressive economic engagement for workers that recognizes non-linear pathways, engagement across organizations and flexible time frames.
  - 5.2. Identify and implement appropriate supports for workers to minimize their exposure to workplace hazards and violence.
  - 5.3. Offer flexible payment approaches that center material needs, financial planning and economic security.

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## Introduction

Employment is a critical social determinant of health yet it is commonly inaccessible to people who face complex, overlapping structural and systemic barriers,<sup>1,2</sup> such as a lack of work experience and skills; disabilities and mental health challenges; poverty; housing insecurity; gender or racial discrimination; drug use-related harm; criminal justice system involvement; language barriers; and exposure to violence, among many other labour market barriers.<sup>3</sup>

Unemployment and underemployment are systemic issues commonly portrayed as individual shortcomings. Yet, employment trajectories are influenced by broader social and labour market forces such as globalization, technological advancement, and neoliberal policies that have changed the economic realities of Canadians since the 1970s, leading to a growth in the number of jobs characterized by inadequate wages, instability, and fewer protections for workers' rights and benefits.<sup>4-7</sup> Concurrently, health and social programs and policies have stagnated or weakened, widening gaps in social safety nets that previously protected employed people.<sup>8-10</sup> These broader structural barriers are compounded by historical and ongoing structures and policies – such as colonialism and the war on drugs – and systemic biases – such as racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia as well as entrenched negative views towards people who live in poverty or people who use drugs – which lead to exclusion and stigmatization that further encumber labour market engagement.

Labour market exclusion and employment instability commonly characterize experiences of socioeconomic marginalization for people with multiple barriers and result in challenges accessing, initiating and maintaining consistent formal employment.<sup>11-27</sup> What is less understood is how people who face multiple barriers can overcome employment insecurity to engage economically. This engagement occurs along a spectrum of supportive pre-employment services, employment services and supportive work opportunities. Also unexplored are their desires and capacities for economic engagement, the range and quality of formal and informal opportunities available, the effective characteristics of supportive economic engagement models, and the impact such activities have on their overall health and well-being.<sup>28,29</sup>

Against this backdrop, a growing number of organizations in Greater Vancouver and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside have recognized the importance of economic engagement to the well-being of individuals who face barriers to employment. They have developed an ecosystem of services and opportunities designed specifically to promote accessibility to economic activity. Notably, they have adapted conventional employment services and employment models to produce a wide-ranging set of work-related opportunities that seek to engage community members where they are at by: (1) offering customizable activities and trajectories; and, (2) accommodating characteristics and experiences that commonly preclude economic engagement, such as chronic or acute health challenges, social and health service utilization needs, active substance use, episodic absences, behavioural challenges, restrictions linked to income assistance earnings exemptions and housing insecurity, among others.

Alongside considerable innovation in economic engagement and program-specific successes, a recognized need for robust community coordination has coalesced from efforts of employment services, social enterprises, local community economic development, and the City of Vancouver. The result was the development of EMBERS Eastside Works (“Eastside Works”), a storefront-level economic development hub that has further advanced innovation in the local economic opportunity ecosystem as a networked provider offering pre-employment and

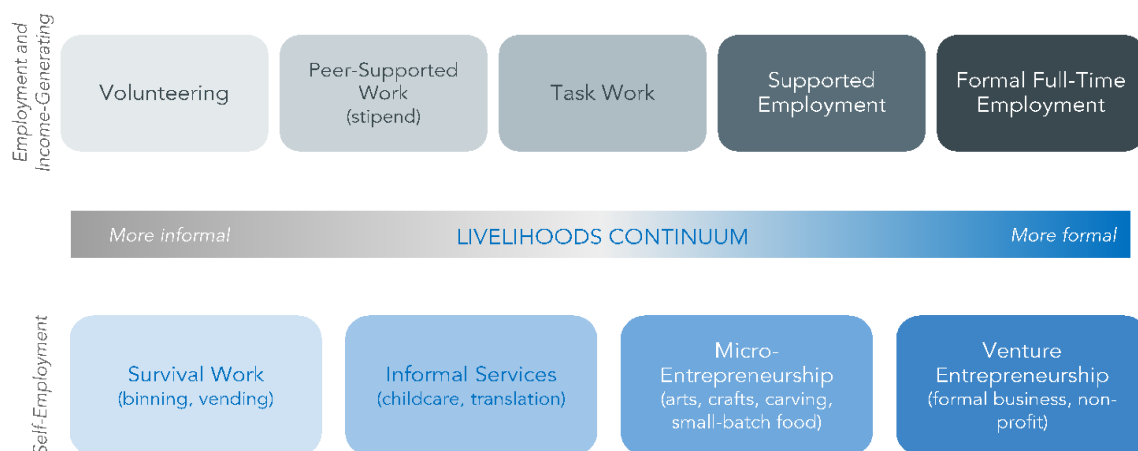
employment services, namely paid on-the-job training, workshops, skills development, employment-readiness training, and referrals in an accessible drop-in center.

This evaluation is an initial assessment of the innovative contributions and impacts of Eastside Works alongside other economic opportunity providers’ programming on the broadly defined well-being of participants. This report aims to distill best practices and implementable recommendations from the experiences, perspectives, and outcomes of people engaged in low-barrier economic opportunities to ensure the continued success and strengthening of these opportunities. Further, this report endeavours to demonstrate how these best practices can be applied beyond the low-barrier ecosystem to create a more flexible and inclusive formal labour market, and to improve service provision across a range of domains. The long-term goal of this evaluation is to contribute to the growth, vitality and transferability of economic engagement models that serve an indispensable role in the well-being and financial security of individuals facing barriers to economic engagement.

## Equity and the Livelihoods Continuum

The research in this report is conducted through an equity-lens. As such, this report explicitly recognizes the complex ways that structures and systems create barriers to inclusion and aims to address these structural and social disadvantages through community-relevant and community-driven research and recommendations. It further recognizes that the work of organizations considered in this report is equity driven, with a focus on making economic activity accessible for people for whom traditional forms of employment are currently inaccessible.

The main conceptual framework for this report is the Livelihoods Continuum. This framework envisions economic engagement, work, and income generation opportunities as falling along an inclusive spectrum of traditional formal market employment as well as more flexible and informal forms of work, volunteering, education, skills development, and training (**Figure 1**). This framework was generated through dialogues and consultations with residents and community members of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES).<sup>30</sup> It represents many of the nuances of economic engagement, capturing activities that are paid and unpaid, formal and informal, supported and unsupported, and legal, prohibited and criminalized.



**Figure 1. Community-generated livelihoods continuum.**

This model acknowledges that community members navigate a continuum of opportunities in a non-linear way over time, entering and exiting different roles, holding multiple roles simultaneously, and having varying capacities to engage in activities at different points on the spectrum at different points in time. For people facing multiple, overlapping, and complex barriers to economic engagement, these non-linear trajectories may require different configurations of support over longer periods of time to initiate or maintain economic activity that create conditions for economic security and, in turn, quality of life.

Central to this report is the emergent and robust low-barrier economic engagement ecosystem providing different configurations of support in the DTES of Vancouver. This setting is uniquely well-suited to examining dynamics of diverse forms of economic engagement in relationship to the health and well-being of people who face multiple barriers as Vancouver is a city that is at once the national epicenter of the ongoing drug poisoning (i.e., overdose) public health and housing and affordability crisis while concurrently an emerging hub for innovative harm reduction advocacy and peer engagement.<sup>31,32</sup>

### **Low-Threshold Economic Engagement in Vancouver: Evaluation Context, Purpose, and Scope**

Employment has extensive individual and societal benefits. Employment structures time in meaningful ways, facilitates daily routines, and expands supportive socially inclusive networks.<sup>33</sup> Research on low-barrier, or low-threshold, economic engagement opportunities is limited but has noted significant benefits. Low-barrier economic engagement opportunities can improve income; reaffirm self-worth; and, provide a sense of purpose, belonging, and structure.<sup>3,8–10,34,35</sup> Low-barrier models in peer-led environments can create safe spaces for work and reduce biases towards lived experiences of substance use, chronic health conditions, histories of criminal justice system involvement, and informal and criminalized work experiences.<sup>3,8</sup> Reducing biases diminishes self-stigmatization and benefits society more broadly as non-discriminatory work environments can facilitate sustained economic engagement with a range of positive outcomes. Past research demonstrates how low-threshold economic engagement has been essential to overdose prevention by providing opportunities in harm-reduction environments and increasing awareness of drug safety.<sup>10</sup>

Low-barrier or low-threshold economic engagement initiatives have become integral to inner-city ecosystems that strengthen the security and connectedness of groups who are systemically disadvantaged.<sup>34,36</sup> While there is no agreed-upon definition for low-threshold opportunities, these models are designed to support economic engagement for individuals for whom standard employment is unsafe, undesirable, or infeasible. It draws on a range of opportunities across the Livelihoods Continuum, including: (1) pre-employment services (on- and off-site support services; life-skills development opportunities, etc.); (2) employment services (skills and employment-readiness training; workshops, etc.); and (3) supportive work opportunities (flexible opportunities for income generation, etc.; **Table 1**).<sup>37</sup>

The economic engagement infrastructure in the DTES and Greater Vancouver is expanding and responsive to changing contexts, community needs, and emerging challenges and crises. Therefore, **Table 1** is not an exhaustive list of the types of opportunities available, nor are (pre-) employment services and supportive work opportunities distinct offerings, particularly in the subjective experience of people engaged in these activities. A single organization may offer all three, particularly as they adapt to meet client needs. Further, offerings may be designed to

work in tandem with offerings at other organizations supporting the broader ecosystem, and a wide referral network exists in the community. Many opportunity providers, especially pre-employment and employment service providers, are focused on providing individuals with access to activities, customizing approaches. While a conventional overall focus is to transition people off impermanent services, organizations recognize that an approach of “meeting people where they are at” means that individual trajectories are non-linear, can take time, and may follow unconventional pathways.

Table 1. Examples of opportunities available through the supportive economic engagement ecosystem in the Greater Vancouver area	
<b>Pre-employment services</b>	
-Life-skills training -Provision of work materials (i.e., work boots; gloves) -Employment readiness and work skills building	-Connection to health and social services (i.e., housing; food services)
<b>Employment services</b>	
-Culturally-relevant employment support -On-the-job training <sup>a</sup> -Skills development (i.e., First Aid; WHMIS)	-Connection to supportive employers -Resume and cover letter support
<b>Supportive work opportunities</b>	
-Self-employment (i.e., supported vending of magazines/ at markets) -Culturally-relevant support work -Outreach (i.e., harm reduction; housing)	-Peer employment (i.e., peer support work) -Harm reduction workers -Community advocacy -Street Cleaning and supported binning

<sup>a</sup> It is important to note the similarities, yet emphasize the differences between on-the-job training and supportive work opportunities. While both are forms of paid economic engagement, on-the-job training is a bridge geared to give individuals' the experience necessary to transition from employment services to more sustainable work. Ergo, while on-the-job training can be longer-term, it does not have the potential permanency of supportive work opportunities.

The distinction between employment services and supportive work opportunities can at times be blurred in the eyes of clients, as many opportunity providers offer “on-the-job” learning experiences or programs that individuals are paid to complete as part of their training. At times, pre-employment and employment services may be perceived as employment by the people undertaking them. This is a strength of these services, as it supports participants’ perceived capacity for work. Further, these opportunities may bridge to more long-term, sustained economic activity. However, in many cases they do not, and providers rightly prioritize supporting clients across opportunities on the Livelihoods Continuum and, *optionally*, movement along it, at a pace appropriate for specific clients. Despite offering immersive training opportunities, many of these opportunity providers remain fundamentally *employment service providers*, and not *employers*, though they may play both roles through different segments of their programming.

Despite the blurring in participant perceptions, different categories of economic engagement, are often treated separately across government ministries (e.g., Social Development and Poverty Reduction; Health; Labour; Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills). But they are not separate for people engaging economically across the Livelihoods Continuum, who move between and across opportunities in non-linear ways and who often perceive all activities as employment, regardless of whether government officials would consider this to be the case. This has important implications for clients as it creates opportunity silos within organizations and can inhibit collaboration between organizations in the employment ecosystem. For example, opportunity providers who receive funding from government ministries must allocate funding supports for each activity they offer, each of which has distinct eligibility criteria. These webs of



criteria may put constraints on the length and type of supports organizations are allowed to offer a given individual, adding additional constraints, interruptions or barriers to accessing economic opportunities. Overcoming this would require inter-ministerial collaboration and agreement so that opportunity providers can offer wrap-around supports and the full breadth of their services to clients without additional administrative hurdles.

Amidst this growing, low-barrier economic engagement ecosystem is Eastside Works. Eastside Works is a comprehensive, community-informed economic engagement hub designed as a drop-in opportunity development center for people facing barriers to the formal labour market. Eastside Works represents the culmination of action from municipal government, social enterprise, and local community development coalitions, and builds on program-specific successes to create a hub that increases accessibility through person-centered approaches. Opened in 2018, Eastside Works offers an innovative range of employment services, including paid on-the-job training; employment referrals to a network of trusted low-barrier opportunity providers; expansive skills development programs that are aimed at assisting individuals as they initiate new economic activity or transition between roles; and individualized employment supports, including substance use-specific employment assistance (i.e., Substance Use Support and Employment Program or “SUSEP”). To date, Eastside Works has engaged individuals in opportunities at all points of the Livelihoods Continuum through their programs and services, reflecting their ongoing and meaningful collaboration with the community that they serve.

While Eastside Works and other organizations must navigate the administrative distinctions noted above, they seek to minimize administrative impacts on clients. For example, Eastside Works purposefully does not tell clients how to categorize their economic activity, nor do they convey how various supports are differentiated administratively by government. They find sharing this information to be counterproductive because it pressures clients to feel that they must adhere to conceptions, timelines or outcomes linked to narrow categories of what employment, and employment trajectories *should* look like. In other words, instead of demoralizing clients by deeming them not “employment ready” as per employment service definitions, Eastside Works affords their clients the flexibility to experience economic engagement on their own terms, which enhances the dignity of workers, increasing the likelihood of long-term economic engagement.

**Recommendation:** *Increase collaboration across government ministries with mandates for education, pre-employment and employment services and employment to streamline experiences of economic activity and the organizations that provide economic opportunities.*

This evaluation was initially aimed at examining the effectiveness and impacts of participation in Eastside Works as the recipient of the Research & Innovation grant on which this evaluation is based. As such, Eastside Works is a central focus of analyses. However, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly shifted the context, feasibility, scope and outcomes of interest of the original grant objectives, requiring a reframing of the original study evaluation. While this report will outline findings specific to Eastside Works, the project evaluation was broadened to capture participant engagement within the ecosystem of low-barrier economic engagement providers and will therefore provide insight into broader programmatic strengths and areas for growth.

Specifically, this report was motivated by the following questions:

1. *What does economic engagement look like for people who face multiple barriers to employment?*
2. *What does engagement in a low-barrier opportunity ecosystem mean to people who face multiple barriers to employment?*
3. *How does engagement in a low-barrier opportunity ecosystem shape the economic and social lives of people who face multiple barriers to employment? How does engagement shape their experiences of their physical and mental health?*
4. *What challenges do multiply-barriered people encounter within the low-barrier opportunity ecosystem? What opportunities exist to fill gaps in supporting the social and economic well-being and health for people with multiple barriers to employment?*

In focusing on the dynamics between low-barrier economic engagement and health, this report acknowledges the interplay between economic engagement and the ongoing drug poisoning crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic arrived during unprecedented overdose morbidity and mortality in Vancouver. Over the pandemic, non-fatal and fatal drug poisonings were exacerbated by heightened isolation and distress, disturbances to service provision and social support networks as well as change in the drug supply.<sup>38–41</sup> While reactive approaches, such as clinical and harm reduction interventions, have helped reduce drug poisoning fatalities, low-threshold economic engagement models have recognized the preventative potential of merging economic engagement and harm reduction initiatives to lessen the occurrence of drug poisoning and other drug-related harms as one aspect of broader, more preventative approaches that are urgently needed.<sup>42</sup> The preventative potential for low-threshold economic engagement to shift the social and environmental circumstances that underlie the risk of drug use and drug-related harms, including drug poisoning is an ongoing area of community and research interest.<sup>28</sup>

## Community Engagement

A priority of this evaluation and the Assessing Economic Transitions (ASSET) Study, is that they be community-initiated, policy-relevant, engaged, informed and reciprocal. This priority is based on the imperative that effective social science and health-based research can be more publicly relevant if it answers questions designed with and in service to key interested parties. Engagement tools, such as community advisory groups, contribute at all points of the research cycle to fulfill these priorities and ensure relevance to the community’s needs.<sup>43</sup>

An important aspect of the community engagement associated with this research and evaluation is that the data gathered by the study team will be shared with the community to support community understanding, programmatic decision making and organizational development. Community engagement to assess the data needs of community organizations has informed the development of a customizable live data dashboard capable of transforming real-time aggregated and de-identified ASSET study data into dynamic visuals and interactive reports of key metrics, shareable in multiple formats. This tool provides the capacity to monitor participant outcomes, improve organizational and programmatic agility, assess the impacts of changes to service provision or the broader environment (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) and promote collaboration across the opportunity ecosystem based on current data. This tool could also support the scale-up of key innovations of low-threshold employment beyond Vancouver’s low-threshold economic engagement ecosystem by providing data on their impacts to the broader conventional employment infrastructure. Increasingly, live data dashboards are being

**Recommendation:** *Monitor, evaluate and disseminate data on participant and organizational economic engagement outcomes through broad indicators of social, health and economic well-being, with specific focus on equity, diversity and inclusion.*

implemented as an essential tool for equitable data sharing.<sup>44</sup> Our platform is similarly aimed to support needs identified by community advisory groups for ongoing community-informed measurement and analysis as an important focal area.

To further support inclusive, community-engaged research, three advisory groups inform this research: an advisory group comprised of people with lived and living experience (PWLLE); an Indigenous advisory

circle; and an advisory board with members from DTES organizations focused on community economic development and economic engagement. Many key concerns identified by these groups are reflected in this report. The reviewed a draft of recommendations and key findings and their feedback has been incorporated into this final report.

Specifically, advisory groups provided important insight into potential ways to support economic engagement and quality of life for the community. The PWLLE group identified five core focal areas to improve economic engagement for barriered individuals.<sup>45</sup>

- (1) Advocacy for institutional and organizational reform
- (2) Scholarly outputs and collaboration
- (3) Programmatic best-practices for economic engagement organizations and opportunity providers.
- (4) Key focus areas for data analysis.
- (5) Education and dissemination of research.

While some of these foci are beyond the scope of this report, many are woven into relevant sections of the evaluation and all are centered in the ongoing work of the ASSET Study.

It is also important to acknowledge the multiple federal, provincial and municipal poverty strategies that have been introduced in recent years.<sup>i</sup> Many articulate a need for improvement in pre-employment services, employment services and supported inclusive employment as well as improvements to income assistance delivery as tools for poverty reduction and healthy communities. Relevant goals in these reports include measures to support: expanded access to education, training, and work opportunities; improved income supports, security and resilience; and investment in social inclusion through income supports, employment service offerings, and low-barrier employment opportunities and supported employment. Additionally, multiple reports, plans and strategies call for cohesive multi-

**Recommendation:** *Formalize consistent collaboration forums between provincial ministries and municipal government representatives, opportunity providers, scholars and people with lived and living experience that feature third party facilitation, shared agenda setting, and proportionally meaningful membership across groups.*

<sup>i</sup> These include, but are not limited to, the 2018 Government of Canada Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy, entitled “[Opportunity for All – Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy](#)”.<sup>46</sup> The 2019 Government of British Columbia’s Poverty Reduction plan entitled: “[Together BC: British Columbia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy; The 2023 British Columbia Ministry of Housing plan](#)”,<sup>47</sup> and the “[Supporting the Downtown Eastside Provincial Partnership Plan Working Document](#)”.<sup>48</sup>

government and community action, collaborative and inclusive decision-making and planning processes, and support to leverage existing community organizations for the betterment of community. These reports are consistent with the current evaluation in recognizing economic engagement as an essential social determinant of health with important impacts for disadvantaged populations and the need for multi-sectoral, community-informed collaboration.

## Methodology

This report features data collected from the ASSET Study, a mixed-methods, longitudinal study started in April 2019 that explores the impacts of work among people who face barriers to employment using both quantitative and qualitative data for a more comprehensive analysis.

The quantitative data are derived from 2317 surveys from 332 participants. The surveys were administered by trained professional interviewers between April 2019 and April 2023, with a brief interruption from April 2020-July 2020 as the study adapted to the physical distancing requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys were initially conducted in-person, by phone or video conference during physically restricted periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as of April 2022 either in-person or remotely. After an initial “baseline” interview of approximately two hours, participants were administered shorter “follow-up” interviews every three months.

Data from 41 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews, collected between February 2021 and November 2021 and ranging in length from 40 minutes to two hours, complement survey data. Audio recorded interviews covered similar topics to the survey, allowing interviewers to probe for nuance in participants’ experiences of and perspectives on economic engagement.

### Participants in the ASSET Study are:

- (1) 19 years of age or older;
- (2) Residents of Greater Vancouver;
- (3) Seeking or engaged in economic activity that falls along the Livelihoods Continuum<sup>30</sup> in the past three months;
- (4) Able to have this activity verified through referral, documentation or follow-up with an employer;
- (5) Able to identify a past or present barrier to being in full-time employment;
- (6) Able to provide written or verbal informed consent;
- (7) Willing to comply with study procedures;
- (8) Able to communicate in English.

The ASSET Study employs a strong community engagement ethic for recruitment, representation and relevance. The research team works closely with Eastside Works on participant recruitment, particularly during the pandemic, when the study exclusively recruited Eastside Works clients in support of the current evaluation. The research team continues to work closely with other organizations in the community and actively recruits from a range of opportunity providers. The study sample thereby provides sufficient data on experiences with Eastside works alongside a broad view of the opportunities in the community, staying abreast of the shifting and comprehensive community economic engagement landscape. Importantly, participants commonly worked with multiple organizations simultaneously and the evaluation tracked their involvement in each organization. Participants recruited for qualitative interviews were selected to maximize representation across the diverse social and demographic

backgrounds present in the DTES community including gender identity, race/ethnicity, and engagement in diverse economic activity.

Survey data collection focuses on gathering comprehensive economic engagement data that allows for deeper understandings of participants’ different configurations and characteristics of income generation and economic activity. These include the range of economic activity that participants are engaged in, access to social benefits and protections related to economic participation, and the relationship between barriers people contend with and their economic engagement. These data were assessed across various levels: groups of individuals, types of economic activities, and specific instances of reported economic activity.

Analysis of qualitative interviews included professional transcription of audio recordings and the scrutinizing of transcripts against recordings to ensure consistency and to capture initial salient themes. The research team adopted a flexible coding approach, drawing on broad thematic categories and then subdividing into smaller analytic areas.<sup>49</sup> Specific focus was placed on themes relevant to the project’s guiding research questions. Analyses narrowed in on participant experiences with Eastside Works and other providers to understand barriers and facilitators to economic engagement. The research team also focused on three themes identified in a report by Exchange Inner City on low-barrier models in the DTES: (1) skills training and employment readiness; (2) flexibility and adaptive economic models; and, (3) wrap-around supports.<sup>37</sup>

Summarized findings from the qualitative analysis were shared with a subset of participants to enhance the validity and relevance of analyses. The sampling for this process was designed to ensure that the experiences of participants who are Indigenous, Black, People of Colour (IBPOC), gender diverse and/or who have chronic health challenges, as well as the experiences of participants engaging with Eastside Works are centered in our findings. Participants were read the qualitative findings and their input was sought on whether the findings were consistent with their experience. Their reflections were analyzed and integrated into the qualitative findings. Special attention was paid to counterexamples voiced by these participants, which were incorporated throughout the qualitative findings to highlight the breadth of experiences.

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted iteratively to contextualize the results gleaned from each approach, identifying trends and the mechanisms that explained them.

This evaluation has limitations. It is important to note all data were obtained from participant self-report. To minimize potential biases resulting from self-report, interviewers on the research team are trained extensively on how to build strong rapport with participants, particularly people who use drugs, who engage in criminalized activities or who are unhoused. Interviewers repeatedly assure participants of the confidentiality of their responses, and the survey instrument and qualitative interview guide were designed with sensitive questions placed towards the end. Additionally, the study sample is limited to people with pre-existing involvement in legal economic activity and is therefore not statistically representative of all individuals’ economic engagement. Results are therefore not broadly generalizable. Nor is it appropriate to infer causality from the data given the nature of the evaluations’ analyses.

Nevertheless, extensive community engagement with community members and opportunity providers was also employed throughout the course of the evaluation to build relationships and trust as well as maintain a connection to the concerns and responses of the community. This provided another layer to the evaluation and ensured attentiveness to community concerns.



## Evaluation Overview

The results of this evaluation are organized into three parts, which are aligned with the core themes of interest identified by ASSET Study Community advisory group members:

- (1) Evaluation Participants, Economic Engagement, and Barriers to Economic Participation;
- (2) Low-Threshold Supported Economic Engagement: Strengths and Areas for Growth; and
- (3) Economic Engagement, Health and Well-Being.

This report concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings (“Summary and Discussion”) and ultimately, offers specific, data-supported and actionable recommendations to strengthen the programs and services of existing low-threshold opportunity providers (“Recommendations”), including recommendations to create a more supportive policy and regulatory context.

## Part 1: Evaluation Participants, Economic Engagement, and Barriers to Economic Participation

This section summarizes the economic activity undertaken by evaluation participants. It outlines the demographic profile of participants, the type of economic activity in which participants are involved, the formality of these activities, and specific barriers to participation and other disadvantages they face when navigating economic engagement.

The participants who provided data for this evaluation experience intersecting forms of individual, social and structural disadvantage, many of which are the product of past and present systemic inequities. These intersecting forms of disadvantage result in economic engagement patterns that reflect their unique multifaceted identities, and raise identity-specific challenges (“Social-Structural Disadvantage and Barriers to Economic Engagement” on p. 28). Despite external barriers, participants undertake economic activity at diverse points along the Livelihoods Continuum, and they receive many of the social, psychological, economic and health benefits of work, in part due to the unique strengths of low-barrier economic engagement models.

### Evaluation Participant Profile

At their initial research interview, participants were asked about various sociodemographic and other characteristics (**Table 2**). Thirty-seven percent of the sample self-identified as primarily Indigenous (Aboriginal, First Nations, Inuit, or Metis), and approximately half most-identified as white (European or of European descent). As in other studies of inner-city residents with multiple barriers,<sup>28,50,51</sup> Indigenous people, and People of Colour are overrepresented in this sample, reflecting historical and on-going processes of marginalization, including: urban displacement from Indigenous and racialized communities; discrimination or lack of access to culturally appropriate forms of employment; and systemic exclusion from adequate or high-quality education and economic opportunities.<sup>4,52,53</sup> Over 13 percent of individuals identified being without stable housing, living in a shelter on the street, or having no fixed address in the three months prior to their first interview; another four per cent identified living in jail or a treatment centre. Over 67% of participants reported at least high school level education.

**Table 2. Economic engagement evaluation participant characteristics at evaluation enrolment from the Assessing Economic Transitions (ASSET) Study (n=332 participants)<sup>a</sup>**

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Cisgender man	193	58.1%
Cisgender woman	123	37.0%
Two-Spirit/Trans/Non-Binary/Other	16	4.8%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (most identified)</b>		
Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Metis)	122	37.0%
Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Filipino)	17	5.2%
Latin American	8	2.4%
Black (African Ancestry)	7	2.1%
White (European or European Descent)	170	51.5%
Not captured by above categories	6	1.8%
<b>Born Outside of Canada</b>		
Yes	29	8.8%
No	302	91.2%
<b>Age at Enrolment</b>		
<45	105	31.6%
45-60	187	56.3%
>60	40	12.0%
<b>Relationship Status</b>		
Single or dating	226	68.7%
Regular partner	39	11.9%
Married/Common Law	41	12.5%
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	23	7.0%
<b>Residential History at Enrolment, Past 3 Months</b>		
No formal address, any residence on street or in shelter	43	13.0%
Jail or residential treatment centre <sup>b</sup>	12	3.6%
Apartment, room in hotel, or house	275	83.3%
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
Less than high school	103	32.3%
High school/GED	104	32.6%
University/College/Trade school	112	35.1%
<b>Ever Jailed or Institutionalized<sup>c</sup></b>		
No	274	82.5%
Yes	58	17.5%

<sup>a</sup> Some variables have missing baseline data, leading to slight variation in the total observations for each variable

<sup>b</sup> Exclusive of those who reported having no formal address

<sup>c</sup> Includes ever unemployed because in jail, unemployed because in jail past 3 months, current and previous residence in jail in the past 3 months, and interactions with city cells/holding/remand, sobering facility, Pre-Trial, BC Corrections, Forensic, Federal, Pacific, Work Camp in the past 3 months

At evaluation entry we additionally assessed various health-related variables, including a detailed assessment of substance use in the evaluation sample (**Table 3**). Participants had moderate overall satisfaction with their health (Median 7.1; Interquartile range [IQR] 6.0-9.0), moderate levels of ability impairments (WHO Disability Score median 0.9; IQR 0.3-1.6), and moderate mental health symptoms (Colorado Mental Health Symptoms Score median 1.2; IQR 0.6-1.6) suggesting mental health and functional limitations due to disability were concerns in this sample, with proportionally higher limitations than those commonly observed in the general population. Most participants (87%) had not seen a healthcare provider in the three months prior to enrolment. Additionally, substance use was highly prevalent in the sample. Just over 24 percent of the sample engaged in no or low intensity use (defined as two or fewer instances of use per week). Nearly one-third of participants were enrolled in substance use treatment of

some kind. Of particular note, participants were commonly engaged in both higher risk substance use practices (e.g., higher doses than usual or using alone) alongside lower-risk substance use practices (e.g., supervised consumption, switching to lower risk substances).

<b>Table 3. Substance use and health characteristics at study entry from the Assessing Economic Transitions (ASSET) Study (n=332 participants) <sup>a</sup></b>		
<b>Characteristic, Exposure or Activity</b>	<b>n or median</b>	<b>Percent or IQR<sup>b</sup></b>
<b>Satisfaction with health</b> (out of 10, higher = more satisfied)	7.1	(6.0, 9.0)
<b>WHO Disability Score</b> (out of 5, higher = worse) <sup>c</sup>	0.9	(0.3, 1.6)
<b>Colorado Mental Health Symptoms Score</b> (out of 5, higher = worse) <sup>c</sup>	1.2	(0.6, 2.0)
<b>Saw healthcare provider<sup>d,e</sup></b>		
No	43	87.0
Yes	289	13.0
<b>Substance use treatment<sup>d,f</sup></b>		
No	231	69.6
Yes	101	30.4
<b>Substance use frequency and type<sup>d,g</sup></b>		
No use	51	15.4
Low-intensity use	29	8.8
High intensity alcohol and cannabis poly-drug use	19	5.7
High intensity poly-drug use	121	36.6
Primarily high-intensity alcohol	18	5.4
Primarily high-intensity cannabis use	47	14.2
Primarily high-intensity opioid use	18	5.4
Primarily high-intensity stimulant use	28	8.5
<b>Higher-risk substance use practices<sup>d,h</sup></b>		
None	82	24.7
1	73	22.0
2	48	14.5
3	26	7.8
4 or more	52	15.7
<b>Reduced-risk substance use practices<sup>d,i</sup></b>		
None	66	19.9
1	44	13.3
2	74	22.3
3	68	20.5
4 or more	29	8.7

<sup>a</sup> Some variables have missing initial study visit data, resulting in slight variation in the total observations for each variable

<sup>b</sup> The IQR, or interquartile range, describes the range of the values from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile.

<sup>c</sup> Average of item scores taken

<sup>d</sup> Self-reported in the 3 months prior to initial study visit

<sup>e</sup> Includes primary care provider, addictions doctor, specialists, HIV doctor, HCV doctor, nurse practitioner, street nurse/outreach nurse, STOP team, psych nurse, psychiatrist, emergency department, Rapid Access Clinic, Hospital Ward, paramedics, EMS, community-based overdose prevention, dietician, physical therapist, dentist

<sup>f</sup> Includes methadone, suboxone, SR Kadian - oral, Dilaudid, iOAT, M-Eslon, Sustained-release Dexedrine, Concerta, Ritalin, Methylphenidate, Benzodiazepine, Fentanyl Patch, Oral Fentanyl, Sufentanil injections, Fentanyl powder, Smokable opioids, Oxycodone, Powder cocaine, Manage Alcohol Programs, Alcohol and Drug counselling, AA/NA/Smart Meetings, Detox, OnSite, Treatment Centre, Recovery, Daytox/day programs, Residential community programs, out-patient treatment, Drug-treatment court.

<sup>g</sup> Opioids include heroin, Dilaudid, morphine, fentanyl, and “down” (unspecified). Stimulants include cocaine, crack cocaine, and crystal meth.

<sup>h</sup> Includes higher doses than normal, bingeing, relapsing, using alone or with the door closed, buying drugs from or doing drugs obtained from an unknown source, sharing used gear, starting injecting, juggling, getting doctored by someone else, switching from store-bought alcohol to non-beverage alcohol, not getting drugs tested.

<sup>i</sup> Includes testing or “tasting” drugs before using, using with another person, informing neighbour or front desk of usage, leaving door ajar while using, using in a public place, using at a supervised injection facility or overdose prevention site, using digital supervised consumption, buying only from dealer, switching from injecting to inhaling or snorting, switching from non-beverage to store-bought alcohol, switching to a different drug to be safe (e.g., from heroin to cannabis, switching from illicit drugs to prescribed safe supply).

## Economic Engagement: Type and Formality of Economic Activity

Guided by the Livelihoods Continuum, we asked participants about the type of economic activities (**Table 4**) they undertook as well as the degree to which the characteristics of each of the activities undertaken resembled formal employment (see **Table 6** on p. 25 in order to produce a detailed sketch of evaluation participants’ economic lives.

Table 4. Defining involvement in economic activity along the Livelihoods Continuum	
Income Generation Type	Survey items used to derive variables
<b>Formal</b>	Regular job; temp work
<b>Self-employment <sup>a</sup></b>	Self-employment
<b>Informal work</b>	Stipend; odd jobs
<b>Street-based work</b>	Recycling/ binning; panhandling; vending found household items/ clothing; selling cigarettes
<b>Sex work</b>	Sex work (i.e., street-based work, escorting, internet work, sugar baby)
<b>Drug dealing</b>	Dealing; middling; steering
<b>Acquisitive crime</b>	Theft; other crime
<b>Income assistance</b>	Employable; Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB); Persons Living with a Disability (PWD) ; Employment Insurance; Old Age Security/ Public pension

<sup>a</sup> Self-employment was based on participants’ appraisals of their own entrepreneurship, and so less formalized work may have been included under self-employment. Interviewer probes sought consistency across participant responses.

Comparing lifetime and evaluation period economic activity patterns identified key differences: while income assistance receipt was the most common (98% vs. 93%, respectively), and informal work was relatively comparable (77% vs. 61%), there were significant contrasts in lifetime vs. evaluation prevalence of formal employment (96 vs. 38%), self-employment (53% vs. 15%), street-based work (70% vs. 27%), drug dealing (58% vs. 12%), sex work (37% vs. 4%), and acquisitive criminal activity (47% vs. 3%).

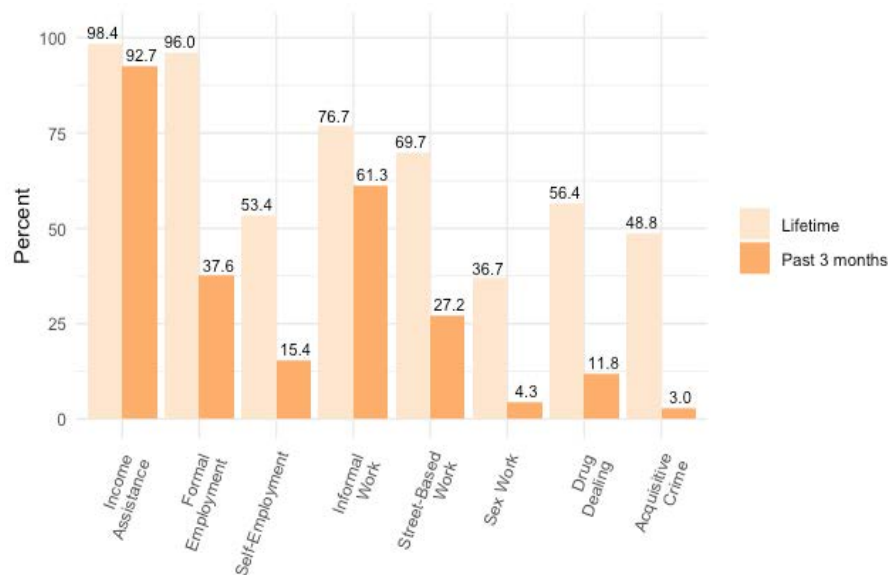


Figure 2. Lifetime and evaluation period (April 2019 - April 2023) economic activity by type

### ***Type of Economic Activity: Formal Employment***

We defined formal employment as being characterized by fixed schedules, reported and taxed income paid by cheque on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, and little to no adaptation from a conventional employment model or individualized support. Almost all participants (97%) had been formally employed at one point in their lives. Despite high rates of lifetime involvement in formal employment at baseline, across the entire study period, formal employment was reported in 38% of all follow-up research visits (871/2371; **Figure 2**).

Importantly, for participants engaged in formal employment, these activities were generally stable, which the evaluation defined as reporting a given income generating activity for at least 8 weeks during a given three-month evaluation follow-up period. In this case, 78% of participants who reported being formally employed in the past three months also reported that they undertook this activity for more than 8 weeks of that period (535/736 instances; **Table 5**; note discrepancy from 871 above is due to missing data). The median weekly-pay for formal employment across the study period was \$275 CAD (IQR: \$150-600).

Evaluation data show that participants have an interest in increasing their economic engagement. Across almost the entire study period, the percentage of participants who wanted more or better work (between 43% and 63%) was higher than the percentage that had formal employment (between 28% and 52%; **Figure 3**) Relatively low rates of formal employment across the study period do not represent a lack of interest in work but instead highlight barriers to economic engagement when considered in relation to people’s interest in additional work.

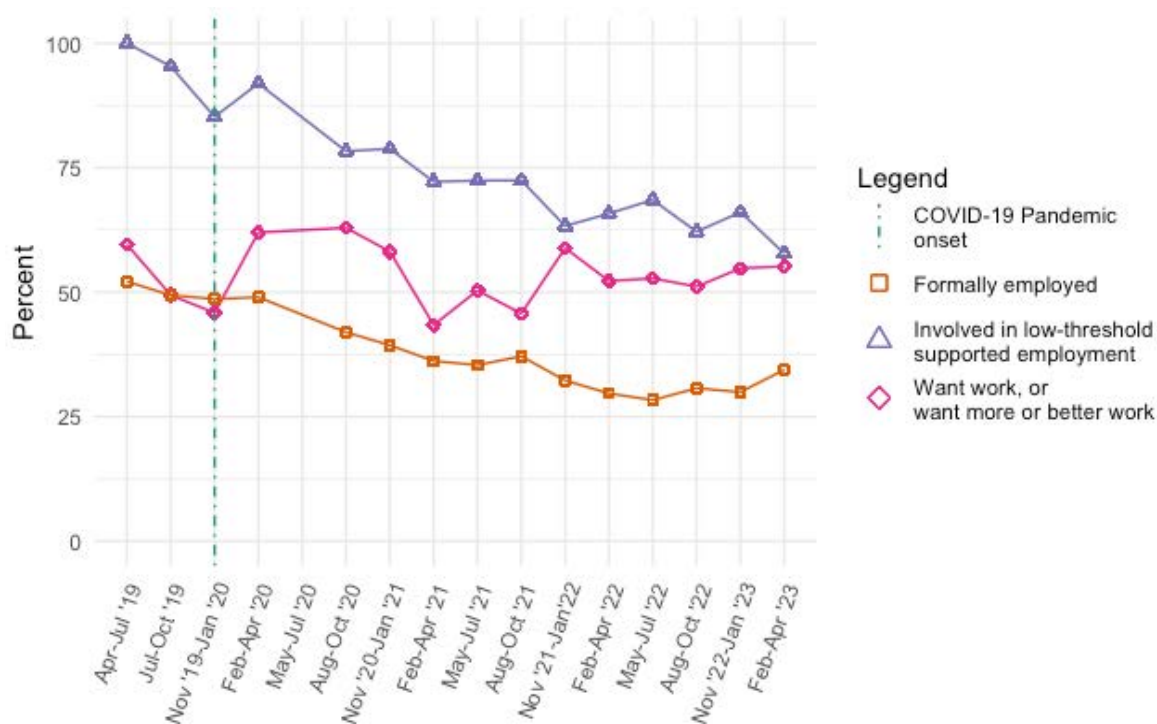
This willingness to work contradicts portrayals of multiply-barriered people, particularly people who use drugs, that imply disinterest or unwillingness to work.<sup>13,54,55</sup> For example, various theories of drug use – such as strain,<sup>56</sup> control,<sup>57–59</sup> and differential association theory<sup>59,60</sup> – assume that both drug use and non-participation in the labour force stem from a tendency to defy cultural norms and expectations pertaining to work and routine, social controls, or conventional institutions. However, these findings and the broader evaluation contradict stigmatizing, inaccurate, and incomplete portrayals of people with multiple barriers to economic engagement. The majority of participants either wanted employment if they did not have it, or wanted more or better work if they had employment. The community advisory group clearly corroborated this finding and reinforced that community members wanted work, but wanted accessible work that supported improved quality of life with accommodations regarding scheduling, drug use, payment methods and other barriers such as income assistance restrictions. This represents an important gap, and is the potential result of insufficient, inflexible or inadequate opportunities, or opportunities ill equipped to work with or around barriers to economic engagement.

While many participants identified wanting more work, it is important to emphasize that these participants did not necessarily want *full-time* work. For health and other reasons, participants in qualitative interviews often identified wanting more hours than they currently receive, yet many were interested in a gradual increase in work hours.

*“I’d rather be working full-time. Well, actually, part-time to start and maybe going to full-time, but that would take me some time to get used to.” (White man)*

As this quote illustrates, some participants do want full-time hours eventually, but they recognize their own need for a long runway to get there, something low-barrier providers can offer.





**Figure 3. Comparing formal employment, informal work and work intentions, April 2019 - April 2023**

### ***Types of Economic Activity: Income Assistance and Informal Economic Engagement***

Receipt of income assistance (i.e., those classified as Employable, Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers, Persons living with a Disability, Employment Insurance, and Old Age Security or public pension payments) and participation in informal work (i.e., stipend-paid work or odd jobs) were the two most frequently reported sources of income.

At baseline, almost all participants (98%, 325/332 participants) reported ever having received income assistance, and over three-quarters of participants reported being involved in informal work during their lifetime (79%, 262/332 participants). Recent receipt of income assistance was reported in 93% of follow-ups (2147/2317 observations) and recent informal work was reported in 61% of follow-ups (1420/2317 observations), comprising the top two types of economic activity taken up by participants (**Figure 2**). Given that individuals in conventional employment are ineligible to receive most kinds of income assistance, a number of potential scenarios explain the simultaneous reporting of income assistance and formal employment. People may perceive their work to be formal when it is not, they may work part time or intermittent shifts that keep income below thresholds of income assistance earnings exemptions (i.e., the amount of money that individuals are permitted to earn without incurring deductions from their payments or having their assistance reviewed), or they may have arrangements in their formal employment to avoid reporting earning above allowable levels (e.g. paid in gift cards or cash, employer equalizes reported income over multiple pay periods, etc.).

The majority of instances of informal work were consistent but low-paid (**Table 5**): almost three-quarters of all instances of informal work were found to last 8 weeks or more with a median weekly pay of \$80 CAD, almost \$200 CAD less per week than average weekly income of those reporting formal employment. Nevertheless, informal work was the type of work most

compatible with income assistance receipt as it did not involve reported income, was almost always paid in cash, and was commonly done on a schedule determined by participants.

<b>Table 5. Recent involvement, intensity, and income (past three months) associated with economic engagement Across Income Generation types, April 2019 - April 2023 (n=332)</b>										
	Total Obs	Duration						Weekly pay		
		<2 weeks		2-8 weeks		>8 weeks		25th %ile	Median	75th %ile
		n	%	n	%	n	%			
Income Assistance	2317							\$ 287.50	\$ 339.62	\$ 425.00
Formal Employment	736	24	3.3	575	78.1	137	18.6	\$ 150.00	\$ 275.00	\$ 600.00
Self-employment	1191	108	9.1	882	74.1	201	16.9	\$ 50.00	\$ 100.00	\$ 300.00
Informal Work	1202	109	9.1	890	74.0	203	16.9	\$ 36.38	\$ 80.00	\$ 240.00
Street-Based Work	530	51	9.6	382	72.1	97	18.3	\$ 20.00	\$ 50.00	\$ 200.00
Sex Work	99	15	15.2	61	61.6	23	23.2	\$ 60.00	\$ 100.00	\$ 400.00
Drug Dealing	272	15	5.5	216	79.4	41	15.1	\$ 97.50	\$ 200.00	\$ 800.00
Acquisitive Crime	63	9	14.3	35	55.6	19	30.2	\$ 45.00	\$ 200.00	\$ 510.00
All sources <sup>a</sup>								\$ 438.02	\$ 717.90	\$1,475.56

<sup>a</sup> All sources including formal employment, acquisitive crime, drug dealing, income assistance, informal work, self-employment, and street-based work.

### **Type of Economic Activity: Other forms of Income Generation**

Other forms of economic engagement were also important sources of income for participants, including street-based work, acquisitive crime, drug dealing, and sex work (**Table 5**). Almost three-quarters of participants had engaged in street-based work in their lifetimes at evaluation enrolment. Of these, the most common activity was recycling or binning, which involves salvaging recyclable materials in exchange for payment through municipal recycling programs. Over half of the sample had been involved in drug dealing and acquisitive crime including theft and other criminalized activity in their lifetimes. However, rates of recent involvement in drug dealing and acquisitive crime in follow-ups were low (11% and 3%, respectively) (**Figure 2**). Similarly, over a third of the sample had been involved in sex work in their lifetimes, but recent involvement in sex work was observed in only 4% of follow-ups. For some participants, informal, street-based work was an accessible form of economic engagement that could be pursued when formal opportunities would end. For example, two participants in qualitative interviews described returning to vending – a form of informal economic engagement involving selling goods on the street without a permit – after their formal employment was interrupted due to COVID-19 or employment termination. While neither participant saw vending as sustainable, it was a valuable temporary income source. Similarly, one participant noted how stealing functioned to supplement his income during times of worklessness:

*“I would work a little bit in between, all during my 35 years shoplifting. I would take the odd job... couple of weeks painting here, maybe a job in a warehouse for a month or something till I got tired of it and quit or whatever. But I had, you know, sporadic work in between. When I couldn’t find work as a labourer or...if I couldn’t find work, I would go stealing. I’d fall back on the stealing and then if I got a job, I would take a break from the stealing. Right. And that was my life.” (White man)*

Participant involvement in acquisitive crime and sex work tended to be slightly lower intensity than other forms of informal income generation. For example, consistent involvement lasting more than 8 weeks within a three-month period was comparable for drug dealing (79%), informal work (74%) and street-based work (72%), whereas it was lower by comparison for acquisitive crime (56%) and sex work (62%) (**Table 5**). Comparing income across these sources suggests that despite attendant risks, acquisitive crime can represent a more profitable alternative to informal work. For individuals for whom higher income is a primary motivation for engagement, they could be diverted away from criminalized activities were there more lucrative and accessible legal economic activities available, or for those on income assistance, if there were higher payments or increased earnings exemptions.

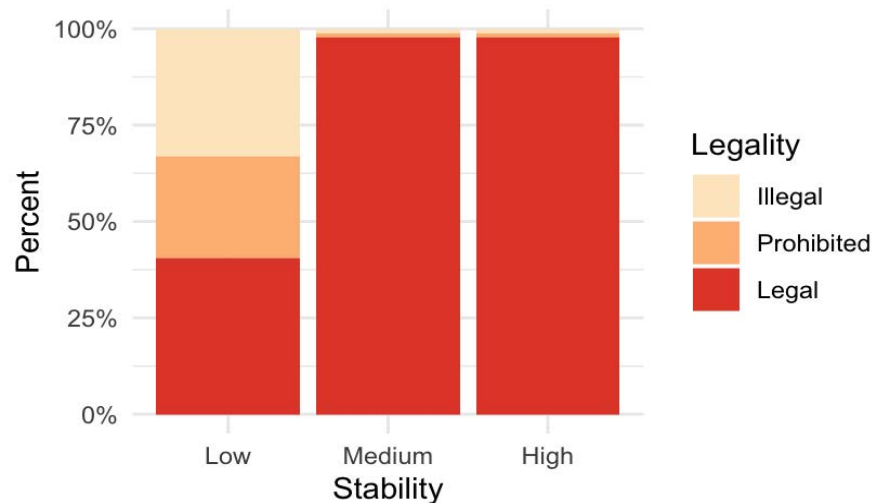
### (In)formality of Economic Activities

In addition to looking at the types of economic activity in which participants engage, we also explored the formality of these activities (**Table 6**). We use the term “(in)formality” to draw attention to and capture how economic engagement activities often blend aspects of formality and informality (i.e., taxed income paid weekly, instead of bi-weekly or monthly), and therefore cannot simply be labelled as one or the other.

Table 6. Dimensions of (in)formality of economic activities	
Dimension	Definition
<b>Reported</b>	Reported or unreported income
<b>Legality</b>	Legal; Prohibited; Illegal/ criminalized
<b>Stability</b>	High: Scheduled and ongoing, permanent Medium: Unscheduled, fished/casual, seasonal, intermittent Low: Informal, temporary, cash corner, one day only
<b>Payment method</b>	Cheque/ direct deposit; cash; product (i.e. material good or gift card in lieu)
<b>Pay period</b>	Weekly; bi-weekly; monthly; daily
<b>Contract</b>	Long-term; short-term; none

Each dimension of (in)formality describes aspects of economic engagement that may or may not be connected to formal labour market structures, and thus included in regulated and mandatory policies and processes that protect their rights as workers through the *Employment Standards Act*, WorkSafe BC requirements, or other legal or regulatory protections.

Dimensions of (in)formality often co-occur within the same activity. For example, **Figure 4** cross references the percentage of income generation activity across different legal statuses with the level of stability associated with each activity. It demonstrates that high stability work is often legal, and low stability work is often illegal or prohibited. Co-occurring dimensions of informality may interact to heighten vulnerability, exposure to violence or other unsafe work-related experiences, and may compound individuals’ long-term barriers to employment and economic security. Conversely, an appropriate blend of formal and informal characteristics may render economic activities more accessible for both initiating and maintaining that activity type.

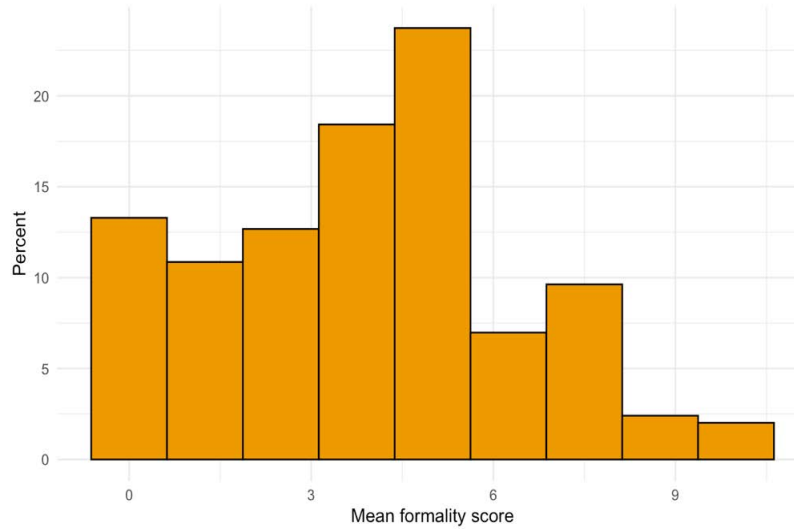


**Figure 4. The distribution of job legality within low, medium, and high stability jobs**

### How (In)formality Represents Adaptations in Economic Engagement

While the co-occurrence of *informal* conditions may introduce challenges, the co-occurrence of informal *and* formal conditions can create flexible economic engagement opportunities that satisfy many of the needs of participants. Some aspects of informality such as flexible payment methods and shorter pay periods may strengthen the inclusivity of economic opportunities, empowering participants to meet their economic and health needs, particularly when paired with aspects of formality. One example of an inclusive balance of (in)formality is Eastside Works’ payment method, as they pay people via a cheque that is taxed and includes contributions (and supports eligibility for) Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) and Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. Yet cheques are dispensed weekly instead of every two weeks, which better supports the financial needs of their clients. By using a payment method that accommodates the economic realities of clients, while simultaneously conferring institutional supports associated with formal employment, Eastside works combines beneficial features of informal and formal work to support client outcomes.

As **Figure 5** demonstrates, many economic activities undertaken by participants fall somewhere in the middle of informal and formal and involve unique combinations of (in)formality. This variability in (in)formality surfaced consistently in our findings. For example, comparing economic activities in the lowest 25% of formality scores with those in higher formality scores, our findings show that even as the proportion of legal activities increased, the proportion of activities in which income was reported did not (**Table 7**). For activities in the third quartile (i.e., activities with scores falling in the quarter of activities with the 2nd highest scores), almost all were legal (99%) but only 1 in 10 involved reporting income. Similarly, not all work that was legal was highly stable, defined as scheduled and ongoing or permanent work. In the third quartile of economic activities, only a little more than half were considered highly stable, with the remainder being characterized as unscheduled, casual, fished (i.e., informal work not connected to an employment or employment services organization), seasonal, intermittent, informal, temporary, cash corner (i.e., day labour for “under-the-table” work), or work for one day only.



**Figure 5. Formality level of reported economic activities, April 2019-April 2023 (0=least formal, 10=most formal; n=4,369 activities)**

These data reflect the high degree of variation in the context of economic engagement, as some activities arise from the low-barrier opportunity landscape (e.g., stipend-based programs) and others from the informal economy (e.g., street-based work). Importantly, many aspects of (in)formality are expressly adopted by opportunity providers to match the economic realities of clients and support engagement in different categories of activity. For example, contracts were exceedingly rare, even amongst activities in the highest quartile of formality. Though the absence of a contract is commonly a marker of insecurity within the conventional labour market, the absence of one in the low-threshold economic ecosystem can reflect a purposeful choice to increase accessibility and accommodate fluctuations in availability, active drug use or periodic and unpredictable absence. Similarly, payment by cash or product (e.g., gift cards) rather than cheque, and daily payment rather than weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly were highly prevalent. Even in activities in the highest category of the formality spectrum, 16% of participants reported being paid in cash and/or product. Overall, variation in formality speaks to the complexity of the low-barrier ecosystem, and how the diversity of the system is one of its strengths, as there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach when barriers are identity-specific, divergent, and evolving.

<b>Table 7. Distribution of economic engagement (in)formality characteristics in each Formality Score quartile, April 2019 - April 2023</b>				
<b>(In)Formality Characteristic</b>	<b>Formality Score Quartile</b>			
	<b>Lowest n (%)</b>	<b>2nd quartile n (%)</b>	<b>3rd quartile n (%)</b>	<b>Highest n (%)</b>
Mean Formality Score	0.5	2.5	3.9	6.7
Reported income	2 (0.2)	5 (0.5)	101 (9.9)	734 (72.2)
Legal	30 (2.9)	977 (96.0)	1011 (99.3)	1016 (99.9)
High Stability	2 (0.2)	23 (2.3)	581 (57.1)	783 (77.0)
Has Contract	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (2.1)	134 (27.2)
Cash or Product Payment	1011 (99.3)	998 (98.0)	899 (88.3)	172 (16.9)
Paid Daily	1015 (99.7)	987 (97.0)	768 (75.4)	40 (3.9)
Total activities per quartile	<b>1018</b>	<b>1018</b>	<b>1018</b>	<b>1017</b>



**Recommendation:**  
*Establish and disseminate best practices in low-threshold economic engagement to optimize access and beneficial outcomes for workers.*

The strategic blending of formality and informality is a leading best practice of low-barrier opportunity providers like Eastside Works, who understand that (pre-) employment services and work opportunities need to be tailored to the diverse needs of their client-base and adaptive to changing contexts. These were benefits and dynamics acknowledged frequently in community advisory meetings and are unique, inclusivity-focused characteristics of these opportunities.

## **Social-Structural Disadvantage and Barriers to Economic Engagement**

In support of an equity-based evaluation, analyses begin by describing subgroup differences in economic engagement. We examined whether participants face barriers to economic engagement specific to their sociodemographic identity or exposure to health or other challenges that produce labour market disadvantage. Each dimension examined corresponds to individual-level data with experiences of disadvantage that have origins in historic and ongoing systems of bias, discrimination and marginalization. While these characteristics and exposures are analyzed as discrete categories, individuals face complex disadvantage that is the product of intersecting characteristics, circumstances and contexts, and face unique amalgams of identity-based and situational barriers that also include dimensions specific to the dynamics of economic engagement in the Downtown Eastside. Data describe how such barriers may impact involvement in and intensity of economic engagement across the Livelihoods Continuum. Specifically, analyses looked at subgroup differences in the proportion of reported involvement across multiple types of economic activity along the Livelihoods Continuum (**Table 8, Table 10**). Analyses also examined the rate of high intensity involvement (i.e., more than 8 weeks within a 3-month period compared with 8 weeks or less) for those individuals reporting a given activity (**Table 9, Table 11**). Overall, we identified disparities that warrant training and programming that expressly focuses on equity-deserving workers.

### **Gender**

Gender-based patterns of economic participation were complex and reflected previously documented labour market disadvantages and institutional disengagement for gender diverse and non-conforming individuals.<sup>61,62</sup> Cis-gender women reported fewer instances of formal employment than cis-gender men. Cis-gender men and women reported similar levels of involvement in acquisitive crime, though cis-gender men reported a higher involvement in drug dealing and cis-gender women reported proportionally more instances of high-intensity involvement in acquisitive crime. Across the evaluation, cis-gender women, trans, two-spirit, and gender non-binary participants reported involvement in sex work in almost 10% of observations. Gender non-binary and trans participants reported a higher proportion of involvement in self-employment (e.g., micro- or venture-entrepreneurship with structured/formal selling of goods and services) and informal work, with a lower proportion of involvement in street-based work (e.g., vending, informal recycling) compared with cis-gender men and women.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

Data on economic engagement among participants who self-identify as Indigenous or non-Indigenous People of Colour (POC) reflected long standing systemic disadvantages from ongoing colonial structures and institutionalized racism that produce and reinforce

socioeconomic marginalization. Across the study period, Indigenous participants reported fewer instances of formal employment than both non-Indigenous POC and white participants. Non-Indigenous POC in the sample reported proportionally more instances of involvement in informal work, acquisitive crime, and drug dealing, and fewer instances of income assistance receipt than both Indigenous and white participants.

**Table 8. Involvement in income generating activity in the three months prior to follow up by population subgroup (n=332), April 2019 - April 2023**

		Income Assist.	Formal Empl.	Self-empl.	Inf. Work	Street-based	Sex Work	Drug Dealing	Acq. Crime
	n	% Involved, last 3 months							
Gender									
Trans/2S/Non-Binary/Other	113	94.7	45.1	23.0	84.1	7.1	9.7	5.3	*
Man	1281	90.2	41.5	16.2	55.8	27.2	*	14.0	3.2
Woman	923	95.8	31.2	13.4	66.1	29.6	9.0	9.5	2.7
Race/Ethnicity									
Indigenous	978	96.2	29.6	15.8	70.1	34.2	6.4	9.5	2.4
Non-Indigenous POC	268	76.5	47.4	23.9	60.8	23.1	*	17.9	5.6
Non-Indigenous White	1071	93.5	42.5	12.9	53.3	21.8	3.4	12.3	2.9
Age									
Under 45	598	90.3	37.8	19.7	58.5	28.4	5.9	19.9	6.5
45-55	718	95.1	35.2	15.6	63.8	33.1	6.4	11.4	2.5
Over 55	985	92.2	38.9	12.7	60.9	21.8	1.9	7.1	1.0
Education									
< High School	786	94.0	31.0	17.9	57.0	30.4	7.0	12.8	2.8
High School/GED	766	95.6	34.7	15.7	65.0	21.9	3.5	11.0	3.0
University/College/Trade School	711	87.8	49.8	12.8	60.6	27.8	2.4	11.0	2.8
Interactions with Police									
0 times	2089	92.7	37.1	15.2	61.6	26.5	4.3	11.2	2.6
1 time	149	91.3	43.0	16.8	56.4	32.9	5.4	16.8	7.4
3-5 times	35	94.3	40.0	17.1	68.6	37.1	*	17.1	*
>5 times	45	95.6	42.2	22.2	60.0	33.3	*	15.6	*
Jailed/Institutionalized									
No	2238	92.8	37.4	15.4	61.3	26.4	4.2	11.2	2.6
Yes	80	90.0	41.2	17.5	61.2	50.0	6.2	27.5	12.5
Income Assistance Quartiles									
Least assistance	671	NA	41.4	16.7	62.1	30.7	5.8	14.3	4.0
2nd quartile	560	NA	32.5	15.4	62.9	30.7	4.8	10.9	3.8
3rd quartile	482	NA	28.0	13.9	63.9	25.7	3.3	12.7	2.3
Most assistance	415	NA	35.4	15.4	63.1	25.5	4.3	11.8	1.4

Note: POC = Person of Colour, Empl. = Employment, Inf. = Informal, Acq. Crime = Acquisitive Crime, Income Assist. = Income assistance \* = Suppressed due to small counts

## Age

Compared with participants age 45 and older, participants under the age of 45 reported more instances of involvement with self-employment; more instances of drug dealing, though with lower intensity compared with older participants; and, more instances of acquisitive crime, with higher intensity. Age-based discrepancies in economic engagement are complex, and associated with a number of factors, particularly participant health status. Another consideration raised by Community Advisory Group members is that there may be fewer economic engagement opportunities that specifically target youth (i.e., ages 18-30), resulting in younger

individuals supplementing their income in other ways. Additionally, they acknowledged that regulations around retirement pensions and age-related health challenges make it more difficult for elderly people living in poverty to find and retain economic opportunities.

**Table 9. Level of high intensity involvement in income generating activities by population subgroup (n=332), April 2019 - April 2023**

	Formal Empl.	Self-empl.	Inf. Work	Street-based	Sex Work	Drug Dealing	Acq. Crime
% High intensity involvement <sup>a</sup> (> 8 weeks in past 3 months)							
<b>Gender</b>							
Trans/2S/Non-Binary/Other	84.4	69.5	69.5	40	72.7	50	*
Man	76.3	75.4	75.3	73.5	*	79.2	54.1
Woman	79.9	72.8	72.9	71	61	81.8	62.5
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>							
Indigenous	76.2	76.8	76.9	69.1	64.5	67.4	60
Non-Indigenous POC	77.2	71.6	71.7	75.9	58.3	89.4	42.9
Non-Indigenous White	86	71.7	71.1	72.7	*	75	73.3
<b>Age</b>							
Under 45	83.2	72.2	72.0	68.5	61.8	76.5	68.4
45-55	70.5	74.5	74.6	73.8	67.4	80.2	47.1
Over 55	80.4	74.6	74.6	73.4	47.4	84.3	16.7
<b>Education</b>							
< High School	83.7	71.3	70.7	67.2	61.1	78.2	81.0
High School/GED	81.0	72.7	73.2	73.4	59.3	83.3	47.6
University/College/Trade School	72.3	78.7	78.7	76.2	64.7	79.2	36.8
<b>Interactions with Police</b>							
0 times	78.3	74.2	74.3	72.9	63.6	79.1	53.1
1 time	74.1	75.3	73.5	63.4	*	92.0	63.6
3-5 times	76.9	62.5	62.5	66.7	*	*	*
>5 times	83.3	71.4	71.4	75.0	*	*	*
<b>Jailed/Institutionalized</b>							
No	78.6	74.0	74.0	71.3	61.7	79.7	56.6
Yes	58.8	75.5	76.0	84.4	*	76.2	50.0
<b>Income Assistance Quartiles</b>							
Least assistance	78.5	75.9	76.5	68.5	57.9	78.9	48.0
2nd quartile	78.3	74.8	75.0	72.3	74.1	77.0	65.0
3rd quartile	73.8	72.6	72.4	73.5	68.8	80.3	*
Most assistance	73.4	73.6	72.9	72.5	44.4	79.6	*

Note: POC = Person of Colour, Empl. = Employment, Inf. = Informal, Acq. Crime = Acquisitive Crime,

\* = Suppressed due to small counts

<sup>a</sup> Of all reported events of involvement of each type

## Education

Participants with university, college, or trade school level education reported being involved in formal employment with greater frequency than less educated participants. Additionally, participants with no formal credentials or only elementary school education reported being involved in sex work with greater frequency than more educated participants. While certain formal positions require specific hard-skills and education, these disparities may reflect the fact that participation in education and formal employment present similar barriers, so that individuals who face barriers to educational attainment face similar barriers in engaging in formal employment. Another potential factor underlying this disparity is that education programs can function as a stabilizing force, with the long-term benefits of intellectual development and

knowledge acquisition supporting individuals as they pursue opportunities such as formal employment. As one participant in a qualitative interview noted:

*“[The work I do] all just kind of fell together once I started going to school and started building a foundation there. Yeah, school was where it all started for me, I guess, building that foundation for the good side of myself, anyway.”* (Indigenous man)

As this participant makes clear, the structure and “foundation” of school can support individuals as they take on new activities, set goals and build routines. Educational opportunities and skill building are a cornerstone in the flexible and supportive programming of Eastside Works and other opportunity providers. Often, employment services such as job readiness programs are incorporated into existing supportive employment opportunities and pathways. For example, harm reduction skill building certifications specific to the community such as Street Degree or Overdose Prevention Peer Research Assistant (OPPRA) project develop community-oriented and -valued skills that advance economic participation.<sup>ii</sup> Community Advisory Group members identified the need for the value of these skills to be acknowledged inside and outside the DTES as well as the transferability of these skills to other contexts.

**Table 10. Involvement in income generating activity in the three months prior to follow up by health status and substance use pattern (n=332), April 2019 - April 2023**

		Income Assist.	Formal Empl.	Self-empl.	Inf. Work	Street-based	Sex Work	Drug Dealing	Acq. Crime
	n	% Involved							
Mental Health Symptom Score									
Fewest symptoms	538	90.1	46.7	15.8	55.0	18.0	1.1	6.3	*
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile <sup>a</sup>	538	90.3	40.7	18.6	57.1	24.2	4.3	10.2	*
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile	537	93.5	35.6	15.1	62.4	32.6	6.0	13.2	3.9
Most symptoms	537	96.3	30.7	12.8	64.6	33.5	5.8	18.1	6.1
Functional Limitations Score									
Fewest limitations	548	88.0	50.0	18.1	48.9	20.3	2.0	9.7	1.6
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile	548	89.4	42.9	17.0	60.9	24.5	2.9	13.7	3.1
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile	547	96.0	32.2	16.5	66.5	29.4	6.0	12.2	3.1
Most limitations	547	97.1	29.1	11.5	66.9	33.3	6.2	11.7	4.2
Substance Use Patterns									
No use	395	92.7	44.6	11.6	57.2	13.7	1.8	*	*
Low-intensity use	195	89.2	44.1	22.6	55.9	13.8	3.6	2.6	*
Primarily alcohol	128	94.5	37.5	10.9	63.3	21.9	*	*	*
Primarily cannabis use	330	87.9	44.2	15.5	51.2	20.6	4.2	6.1	*
Primarily opioid use	104	97.1	19.2	8.7	77.9	27.9	10.6	11.5	5.8
Primarily stimulant use	172	89	36	9.9	66.9	29.7	5.2	17.4	4.1
High intensity alcohol/ cannabis poly-drug use	160	83.8	50	24.4	41.9	24.4	*	3.1	*
High intensity poly-drug	825	97.2	29.9	16.4	68.7	40.4	5.8	23.5	5.9

<sup>a</sup> The data were divided into four equal quartiles. The “lowest” quartile represents the 25% of data with the smallest values, and the “highest” quartile represents the 25% of data with the largest values. Note: POC = Person of Colour, Empl. = Employment, Acq. Crime = Acquisitive Crime, Income Assist. = Income assistance

\* = Suppressed due to small counts

<sup>ii</sup> See <https://dtesresearchaccess.ubc.ca/projects/196> and <https://filtermag.org/innovative-canadian-street-degree-empowers-peer-harm-reduction-workers/>

**Table 11. Level of high intensity involvement in income generating activities by health status and substance use pattern (n=332), April 2019 - April 2023**

	Formal Empl.	Self- empl.	Inf. Empl.	Street- based	Sex Work	Drug Dealing	Acq. Crime
% High intensity Involvement <sup>a</sup> (> 8 weeks in past 3 months)							
<b>Mental Health Symptom Score</b>							
Fewest symptoms	83.8	74.2	74.5	63.9	66.7	88.2	*
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile <sup>a</sup>	79.1	75.0	75.3	74.1	56.5	76.4	*
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile	75.0	76.6	76.5	76.2	64.5	78.9	70.6
Most symptoms	74.0	70.4	69.9	71.3	58.1	76.3	59.4
<b>Functional Limitations Score</b>							
Fewest limitations	82.2	76.3	77.1	69.8	63.6	88.7	87.5
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile	80.7	75.8	75.6	77.8	62.5	84.0	40.0
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile	75.5	74.2	73.7	71.6	72.7	74.6	60.0
Most limitations	74.0	70.8	70.8	69.6	45.5	70.3	54.5
<b>Substance Use Patterns</b>							
No use	78.9	73.4	72.9	70.0	*	*	*
Low-intensity use	81.5	67.4	67.8	65.0	57.1	*	*
Primarily alcohol	82.6	80.0	81.4	66.7	*	*	*
Primarily cannabis use	75.6	66.4	67.4	63.3	64.3	*	NA
Primarily opioid use	*	80.7	80.7	60.0	*	*	*
Primarily stimulant use	86.2	77.1	77.1	76.1	*	80.0	*
High intensity alcohol/ cannabis poly-drug use	78.2	69.2	67.6	64.5	*	*	*
High intensity poly-drug	73.8	75.7	75.6	76.3	60.4	79.8	60.9

Note: Empl. = Employment, Acq. Crime = Acquisitive Crime, Income Assist. = Income assistance

\* = Suppressed due to small counts

<sup>a</sup> Of all reported events of involvement of each type

### ***Income Assistance and Regulatory Barriers***

As described, income assistance receipt was the most commonly reported form of income, reported in 93% (2147/2317) of evaluation observations. Participants relied on various types of assistance, including Employable and Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB) income supports, Employment Insurance (EI), Canada Pension Plan (CPP), and Old-Age Security (OAS). Person with Disabilities (PWD) assistance was the most common support participants had received over their lifetime (80%) followed closely by Employable (78%; **Table 12**).

**Table 12. Lifetime receipt of income assistance receipt by type**

	n	%
Employable / Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers	258	77.7%
Persons with Disability	264	79.5%
Employment Insurance	142	42.8%
Canada Pension Plan / Old Age Security	33	9.9%

Analysis of the relationship between income assistance levels and economic engagement patterns indicates that individuals with lower levels of income assistance had higher levels of involvement in formal and self-employment as well as street-based work. People with higher levels of assistance had proportionally lower intensity engagement in formal and self-employment and informal work, with higher-intensity involvement in street-based income generation. Despite recent increases in income support rates, total support income across all



sources keeps individuals well below the Official Poverty Line, with a Vancouver-based single person in 2021 receiving Employable or PWD benefits having income that is 47% and 69% of the official Market Basket Measure threshold, respectively.<sup>63</sup> Patterns in the data suggest and community consultations confirmed that income assistance is necessarily supplemented due to low rates of support.

Importantly, income assistance regulations and most notably, rules around earnings exemptions were cited as a key impediment to economic engagement. Earnings exemptions vary depending on the type of income assistance and the size of the family unit. For example, individuals without children considered Employable can earn up to \$500 per month without incurring deductions (i.e., \$6000/year), but if they earn over this amount in one month, their following cheque will be reduced dollar-for-dollar of what they over-earned, known informally as a “clawback.” Individuals on PWD can earn up to \$15,000 per year with no monthly ceiling. In other words, an individual on PWD can earn \$15,000 in one month without having their monthly cheque clawed back. While categories of assistance differ in a number of ways, earnings exemptions act to disincentivize individuals from expanding their economic engagement: allowing individuals to keep earned income could act as motivation for involvement, whereas clawbacks discourage economic engagement as individuals net the same income regardless of whether they work. The evaluation’s Community Advisory Groups noted the extreme burden of navigating earnings exemptions and other institutional “hoops” that had significant material impacts on their access to income supports and associated benefits (e.g., nutritional or transportation supplements). Opportunity providers noted the need to design the quantity and pay rate of opportunities with income assistance regulations and their impacts on individuals in mind. The evaluation expands upon important dynamics related to income assistance below.

### ***Mental Health and Disabilities***

Participants with more mental health symptoms and greater functional impairments reported fewer instances of formal employment with lower intensity of involvement across the study period, and more instances of involvement in informal work, drug dealing, and sex work. These relationships likely reflect both processes of health selection – in which poor health and greater impairments to functionality make individuals more vulnerable to challenges in the labour market– as well as causation – in which involvement in higher-risk and less formal forms of employment affect an individual’s health. Illustrating the process of health selection is a non-Indigenous woman of colour who, in a qualitative interview, explained how her health issue limited her economic engagement:

*“[My health affects my work] physically because there are jobs that I can’t do, and unfortunately again, people do discriminate. I was given a job at [my last work], and as soon as I told them I had this disability, they said no.”*

In other words, the limited types of jobs available to this participant due to her functional impairments were additionally constrained by discriminatory employment practices.

### ***Substance use***

Evaluation participants who did not use drugs, who used at low-intensity or only used cannabis were more likely to be formally employed. By contrast, those engaged in poly-substance or primary opioid use reported the fewest instances of formal employment. Importantly, poly-substance and opioid use commonly involve the management of drug procurement as well as

the mitigation of withdrawal symptoms that previous research has identified as creating impediments to economic engagement.<sup>64</sup> In a qualitative interview, one participant describes how withdrawal-related insomnia resulted in dismissal.

*“I actually just got let go from one of my companies because they said that I seemed unfit for duty, or work. I guess they might have just noticed that I was like nodding off or something, or I don’t know.”* (Indigenous man)

Additionally, recent research points to how individuals commonly organize economic engagement activities around their substance use patterns and vice versa (e.g., using stimulants to have higher energy for street-based income generation).<sup>29</sup> Dynamics related to substance use, withdrawal management, drug procurement and drug-related harm may produce barriers to formal employment in particular.

In addition to the material impacts of substance use on economic engagement, participants described encountering stigma and discrimination that was substance-use specific: prevalent were exclusionary social narratives about how the stereotype of a “good worker” was perceived to be incompatible with substance use. As evidenced by one woman describing how social stigma and internalized shame about substance use produced reluctance to seek better economic opportunities, such ideas were internalized by participants. She described how:

*“we’re all fucking set off looking for more work somewhere else now, which is very discouraging considering, um, say you’re an IV...used to be an IV drug user every day, and now you only use part-time, but you still have tracks on your arms, so you’re too embarrassed to go look for better employment.”* (Indigenous woman)

Participants also described exclusionary policies and practices around substance use (e.g., requiring individuals to enrol in substance use disorder treatment programs). Importantly, as discussed below, making accommodations for active drug use was a key area of adaptation by opportunity providers that facilitated economic engagement.

### ***Criminalization***

Criminalization has long been documented as a significant barrier to labour market engagement both in the general population and people who use drugs.<sup>27,65</sup> The evaluation’s examination of the relationship between dimensions of criminalization and economic engagement found that people with higher levels of interactions with police were proportionally more likely to be engaged in street-based income generation, self-employment, informal work and drug dealing. There were also mixed patterns of the intensity of their economic engagement relating to contact with police. Those with no police interactions and those with the highest rates of police interactions reported the highest intensity involvement in formal employment and street-based income generation as well as notably higher intensity involvement in drug dealing and acquisitive crime. Those that reported being jailed or institutionalized in the past three months were considerably more likely to report involvement in street-based income generation, drug dealing and acquisitive crime and slightly more likely to report formal employment, self-employment and sex-work. These individuals were also less likely to report high-intensity involvement in formal employment and more likely to report high intensity involvement in street-based income generation.

Qualitative data reinforced the social and material barriers to economic engagement produced by criminalization. Participants described the impact that different aspects of criminalization including police harassment as well as routine surveillance, and criminal background checks had on their access to economic opportunities.

*“He apologized because he kind of felt bad because I had to go through a little bit more of a thing because I had to get an offering letter from one of the employees at [my previous job] because I didn’t have a spotless criminal record. They basically had to give a letter saying that no, we still trust that everything is going to be fine and we’re totally good with her being here and we don’t have any issues and have no reason to think otherwise.” (White woman)*

These patterns reflect complex dynamics between criminalization and economic engagement: the criminalization of some forms of income generation implicates the consequences of labour market disengagement for and as a result of criminal justice system involvement, the instability that may be produced by this disengagement and the disruption of being incarcerated, all of which may produce associated adaptations in income generation patterns.

In sum, economic engagement among participants in the evaluation reflected inequities and disadvantages commonly observed in the general population and influenced by a range of social, systemic and structural barriers rooted in historical and continuing processes of exclusion of socio-demographic groups. Additional dynamics related to the specific situational context of evaluation participants linked to institutional barriers, mental health, substance use and criminalization make clear the complex configurations of labour market barriers. Notably, low rates of involvement in formal employment signal the workings of challenges embedded in the core of the conventional labour market, such as fixed, forty-hour work weeks and biweekly cheque payment, that conflict with individuals’ circumstance, such as their receipt of income assistance. As we will demonstrate, low-barrier economic engagement and employment service providers function as key brokers in assisting individuals overcome these barriers and gain access to the array of health and social benefits that accompany economic engagement.

## Part 2: Low-Threshold Economic Engagement: Strengths and Areas for Growth

This section explores how programs and services impact the social lives and economic livelihoods of people who face barriers to employment, noting programmatic strengths and challenges individuals experience when engaging with opportunity providers, as well as opportunities for growth. We suggest potential avenues for institutional and organizational change, including sustained resources for organizations, policy and regulations that support broadly-defined flexibility and accommodations, and supportive income assistance regulations.

Our findings suggest that low-barrier supported initiatives act as a crucial tool for supporting opportunity seekers who face barriers. Over 67% of all income-generating activities undertaken by participants were activities offered through low-threshold opportunity providers. Thanks to the complexity of the ecosystem, individuals are at liberty to pursue customizable employment trajectories that align with their motivations, and that support them whether or not they wish to (re)enter or transition into the formal labour market. Critically, the strength of the relationships between opportunity providers facilitated referrals, awareness of opportunities, the sharing of best practice, the ability to be better attuned to community needs and collaborative innovation. This was affirmed throughout community consultations and by Community Advisory Groups, and identifies an opportunity to further strengthen the opportunity provider ecosystem.

**Recommendation:** *Affirm, strengthen and better utilize ongoing knowledge exchange networks to facilitate reciprocal learning, information sharing and the expansion of evidence-based best practice for low-threshold economic engagement support models across British Columbia.*

In what follows, quantitative and qualitative findings assess the ways that low-barrier economic opportunity providers such as Eastside Works engage with participants to offer meaningful work; supportive services and skills development opportunities on- and off-site; payment methods that account for individual financial needs and income assistance regulations; flexible conditions that accommodate absenteeism, substance use, health conditions, service utilization and professional growth; sustained work opportunities that promote retention; and individualized supports. These characteristics enabled participants to engage with these initiatives in a way that accommodated their unique needs, and equipped participants with the skills, resources, and confidence necessary to realize personal goals around economic participation.

In addition to the strengths, participants also identified challenges associated with their engagement within low-barrier environments, including low pay and pay inequities, potentially unsafe work environments, and a lack of opportunity for upward mobility. It should be noted, however, that for the majority of participants, the programmatic strengths of opportunity providers, as well as the material, social, and health benefits accrued through economic engagement, created a strong case for the strengthening and expansion of low-threshold models insofar as the programmatic limitations did not preclude sustained and fulfilling engagement. The following participant illustrates the internal balancing act individuals engaging with low-barrier opportunities undertake, weighing health consequences, payment, and caring connections.

*“Yeah. I mean the amount of money might not be the same, but that’s okay. It’s not minimum wage, that’s for sure, so it will still be, I think \$18 or more, but my other place is \$25 an hour. If it wasn’t on my legs. [But] I wouldn’t mind because I’d be with... I really*

*adore one person that works there. She’s just a really good soul. And she’s a very caring person. She knows I don’t want to quit where I started but she says, you know, you could always try something else. But I have to think about it, right?”* (White woman)

Examining both the positive and negative aspects of participants’ involvement in their own words points to potential areas for program or policy development to support workers across the Livelihoods Continuum. As this participant and others emphasized, decisions regarding economic activities spur deeply personal considerations, such as health, substance use histories, and so on, yet this evaluation demonstrates how supported employers seek to and effectively accommodate these individual needs.

**Recommendation:** *Provide expanded, ongoing and sustained funding dedicated to the creation and operation of innovative economic engagement models, recognizing the operational complexity and time and human-resource intensity of opportunity provision.*

Finally, what follows should be read in light of two considerations. Firstly, this evaluation explicitly recognizes that many gaps felt by participants are linked to resource constraints and other structural barriers that are obstacles for low-barrier opportunity providers to adequately fulfilling the need for opportunities represented in the evaluation data and affirmed by community consultation. This also acknowledges poverty reduction commitments by the federal and provincial governments for inclusive pre-employment and wrap-around services, employment services and supportive employment opportunities.

Secondly, as discussed, clients often treat all their economic activities as employment, regardless of whether it is in fact part of an employment service program. Because opportunity providers insulate clients from the pressures of these administrative differences, many of the quotes that follow include reference to “work” or “employment” despite the offerings being part of on-the-job training programs or other employment service offerings. Therefore, quotes mentioning work should be read broadly so as to capture the full spectrum of available opportunities.

### ***A Note on COVID-19 and Its Impact***

As noted, the quantitative data in this report was collected between April 2019 and April 2023, and the qualitative data in this report collected between February 2021 and November 2021. Throughout the data collection periods, and specifically the first year of the pandemic, COVID-19 regulations and restrictions were in flux, as were the economic circumstances of most participants. Due to program and service closures, many participants experienced job loss or temporary but indeterminate job separation. Findings in both quantitative and qualitative interviews spoke to the financial, social, and emotional ramifications of work changes and job separations, and captured emerging and persistent barriers to sustained labor market engagement. In these ways, both the quantitative and qualitative data provide insights into the importance of low-threshold economic engagement in protecting participants against economic shock, job loss, and social isolation during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and as adaptations for current and overlapping crises such as the drug poisoning, housing and climate crises.

## **Low-Threshold Economic Engagement: Importance and Programmatic Strengths**

### ***Involvement in Meaningful Work***

Low-barrier economic models provide opportunities for participants not only to be involved in economic activity, but to be involved in activities that were personally meaningful and that



contributed to the community more broadly. Community advisory boards acknowledged this as a critical dimension of economic engagement and highlighted the need to emphasize its centrality to a broader audience. Some elements of this work that participants identified as meaningful include: supporting disadvantaged populations or those with shared experience; cleaning, maintaining and “bettering” the community; combating the drug poisoning crisis; facilitating harm reduction; and advocating for change.

As one participant noted, *“I feel like not only am I making money but I’m also hopefully making some change or helping out in the community as well, you know? Making connections.”* (Indigenous woman). Similarly, participants engaging with Eastside Works noted how they derived personal satisfaction from the work with which they were involved. *“Yeah, that’s very fulfilling for me, to sit there and actually, you know, all of a sudden look back at the end of the day and say, “You know what? I made a difference.”* (White man)

Participants’ personal ties to their work amplified its meaning. Service provision around shared experience, and community engagement connected people emotionally to their work. When participants’ work was grounded in their first-hand experiences, they translated these experiences and skills to their motivations to engage economically.

*“I wanted to give back to the community. Wanted to help people that were in the same situation I had been in before I got into the housing I’m in now. Because I know what it’s like to live on the street. There’s nothing, and being wet and cold and just wandering around for hours with nowhere to go. So yeah, I guess that’s what really motivated me to go back to school, so I could come back down here and help other people that needed it. Or trying to help other people to get back into school the way I did.”* (Indigenous man)

Recognition of community contribution both on and off the job, and an overall ethos of caring magnified the meaning and personal satisfaction derived from participants’ work, and was commonly a primary motivation for economic engagement.

Additionally, engaging in peer work functioned as a barometer for participants to reflect on past experiences and to gauge personal progress. Often, peer work helped participants to begin seeing their experiences as specialized knowledge or a skill, and to begin valuing their personal histories.

*“Well, [my work has] made me more outgoing and I feel like I’m more comfortable talking about my lived experiences and using my experiences in ways that I can help people to open up about theirs. I’m just glad that even though my life hasn’t always been great, that I can use those experiences in a good way.”* (Indigenous woman)

As the above reflection highlights, participants’ work could assist them in reframing self-stigmatizing attitudes about their lived and/or living experiences, and could empower them to see complex and challenging past and present circumstances as assets. In this way, meaningful economic activity channelled previous experiences into productive avenues that could benefit themselves as well as the community. Community Advisory Group members noted their diverse collective expertise alongside the meaning provided by their work and that this critical dimension should support action for equitable employment policies and practices.

By contrast, a few participants saw some of the economic opportunities available through low-threshold economic opportunity providers as demeaning, rather than meaningful. For example,

one participant described their job in waste management and street cleaning as “dirty work,” a term that highlighted their feeling of being relegated to undesirable work with constrained upward mobility where their skills were undervalued.

*“That is what we all are good for, just the dirty work, to clean up. We don’t have access to good training and like always, been screaming and say[ing] “look, we have the fucking experience.””* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

It is important to note that whether a participant considers economic engagement to be meaningful is highly subjective: what is meaningful for one person could be considered dirty work by another. Assessing subjective meaningfulness is therefore a key component of determining and developing appropriate opportunities.

### **Supportive Services and Skills Development Opportunities**

Involvement with low-threshold initiatives was a point of entry for training, economic engagement and services supportive of economic engagement and participants recognized this as a strength of these organizations.

*“I started off and I grew with them and they see how you grow and they offer you this course, that course. They offered a training course, which I took last summer and passed.”* (White man)

Additionally, opportunity providers operated as a bridge to pre-employment and employment services that may not have otherwise been pursued, such as life-skills or other training and access to employment support workers. As one woman with Eastside Works put it:

*“How did it impact my life? Well, I got to do some workshops through [Eastside Works] and get paid through them and get my First Aid through them. Just some tickets I got through them. It helped me get more employment.”* (White woman)

Those engaged in legal unsupported work (e.g., formal or temporary employment), supported economic engagement, and illegal or prohibited unsupported income generation were in or planning to be in training in 22%, 19% and 13% of observations in which these activities were reported, respectively (**Table 13**). These data point to how economic engagement can be linked to a desire for and engagement in skills enhancement.

<b>Table 13. Participation in Training by Supported Economic Engagement in the past 3 months, April 2019 - April 2023 (n=332)</b>		
<b>Economic Activity Type</b>	<b>In training or planning to be n (%)<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Not in or planning to be in training n (%)<sup>a</sup></b>
Any supported economic engagement	302 (19.3)	1262 (80.7)
All unsupported, legal	57 (22.2)	200 (77.8)
All unsupported, illegal/prohibited	31 (13.3)	202 (86.7)
<sup>a</sup> Out of a total of 2054 observations		

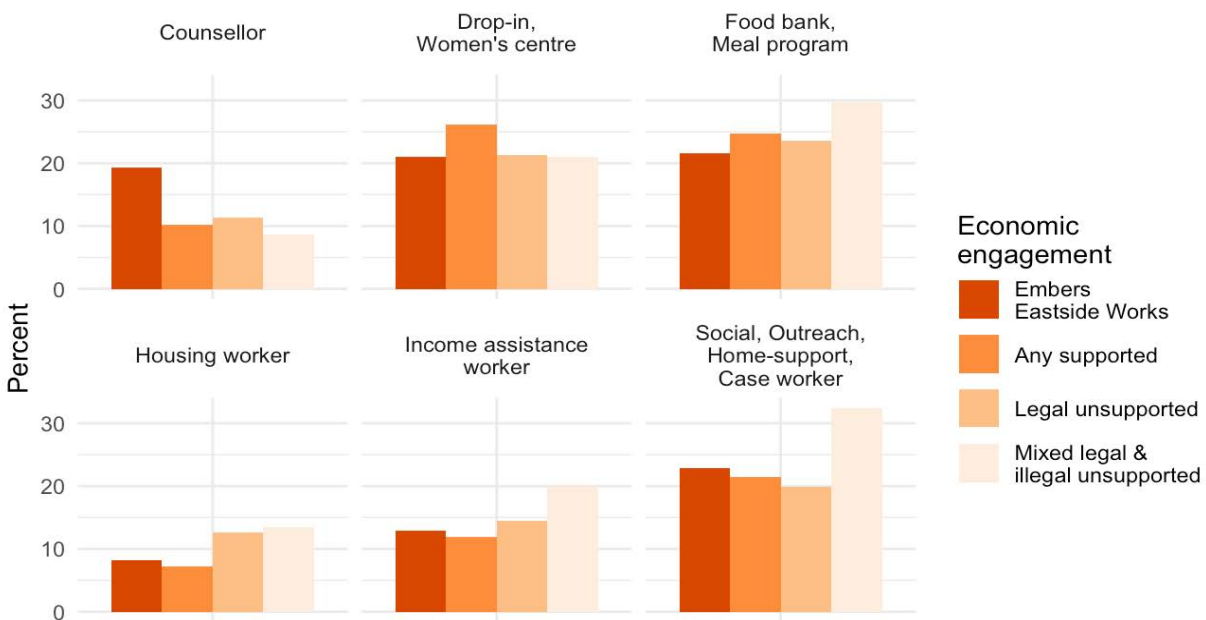
Supportive employment services offered alongside economic opportunities were seen as a crucial component of opportunity providers’ programming. Support workers and other staff members helped participants navigate systems, complete paperwork, and secure funding

opportunities. The support from these staff members was felt by participants through continuous opportunities that facilitated access to future employment opportunities.

In addition to training and employment services, participants accessed a broad range of support services through economic opportunity providers onsite and via referrals (**Figure 6, Figure 7**). These services supported material security, overall well-being, bolstered participant trajectories, fostered belonging and supported personal development. Participants frequently referred to the impact of wrap-around services onsite and the role they played in initiating and maintaining economic engagement. Whether or not there were abilities for job mobility or advancement, trainings and/or skills development programming offered participants the capacity to progress within an organization, regardless of whether their job title changed.

*“When you sign up for their training, they provide the meal for you and not only that but they will pay you a stipend too and the bus tickets, so they kind of spoil you. It has been a blast because I’ve taken so many courses through them.”* (Indigenous man)

As this quote describes, participants were able to support their ongoing economic engagement through the receipt of ancillary supports as a part of their involvement, such as meals, referrals, connection to counsellors, service access or housing supports.



**Figure 6. Social services accessed by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023**

Some participants mentioned that they would appreciate more consistent access to certain goods or services while on the job, such as having a snack provided with each shift. Others

noted how critical it was to have their broader needs recognized and addressed within their economic engagement context, praising providers who adopted this kind of holistic approach to economic engagement that recognized the need for broader service access in order to support the initiation and maintenance of economic engagement. These services that low-barrier economic opportunity providers offered alongside the opportunities themselves were directly identified as contributing to and encouraging sustained and fulfilling involvement in economic engagement.

**Recommendation:**  
*Fund ancillary supports commonly provided alongside opportunities that facilitate the initiation of and retention in economic engagement.*

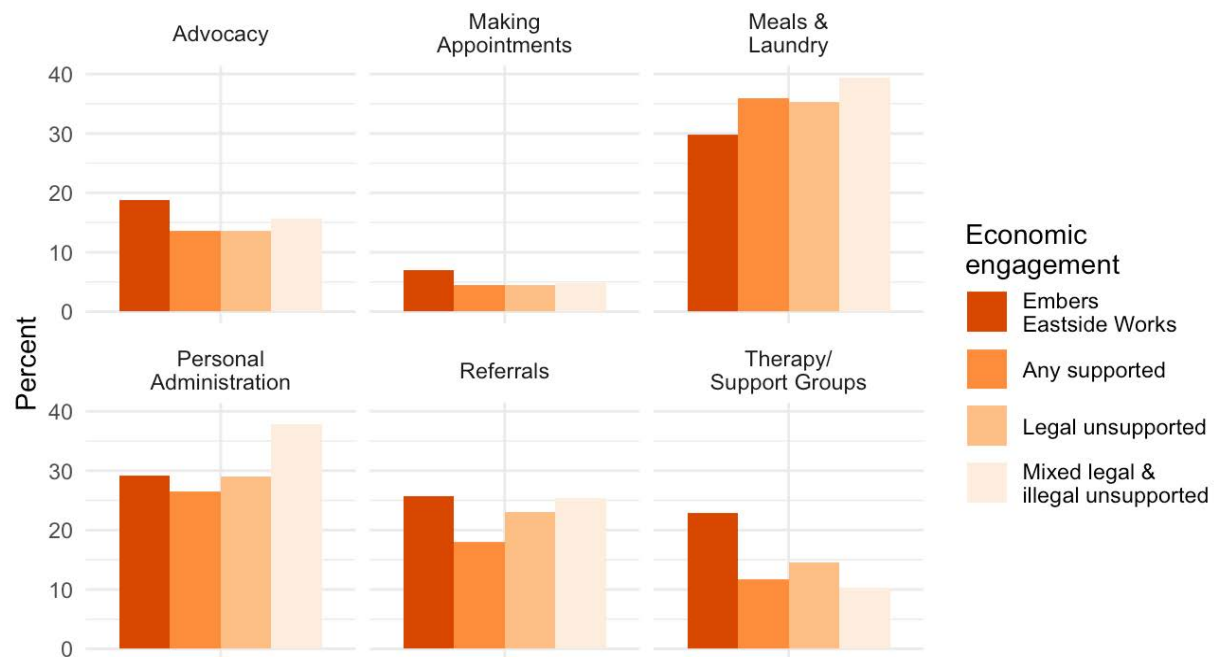


Figure 7. Social services accessed by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023

## Economic Engagement and Material Security

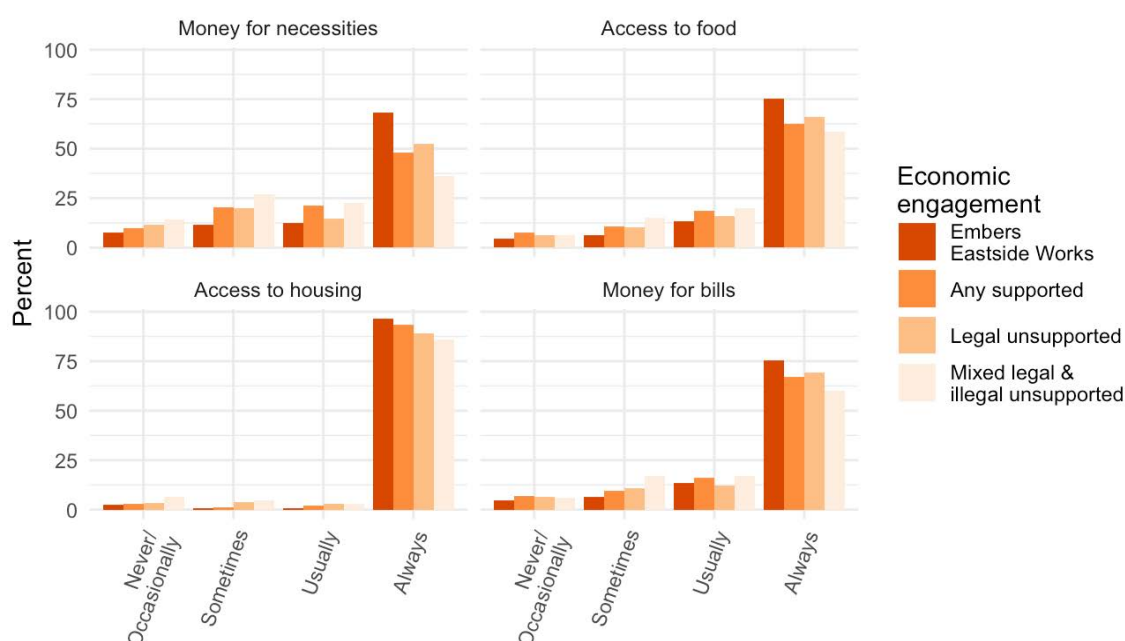
When participants were involved in supported economic engagement opportunities, their material security – related to having money for basic needs, food, access to housing, and money for bills – three months following engagement was comparable or slightly better than when they were involved in legal unsupported forms of economic engagement (Figure 8). This was particularly true for those involved with Eastside Works where a range of wrap-around services supported material security. Participants in supported environments reported higher levels of material security across all dimensions compared to those undertaking a mixture of legal and illegal unsupported activities. As one participant involved with a low-barrier provider noted:

*“Well, [my job] gives me the luxury of like eating anything I want. Like literally anything, which is amazing, because I wasn’t able to do that before. Even though I was like doing all sorts of jobs that I did before, I wasn’t able to do that. But now it seems to be able to*

*do that. I’m not really sure [why]. I think it’s just the choices that I actually make nowadays, is kind of like playing a part of it, a role in it.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

As the above quote illustrates, involvement with low-threshold models impacts material security directly (through increased income) and indirectly (through participants’ decision-making), facilitating food security, food sovereignty, and, potentially, healthier decision-making.

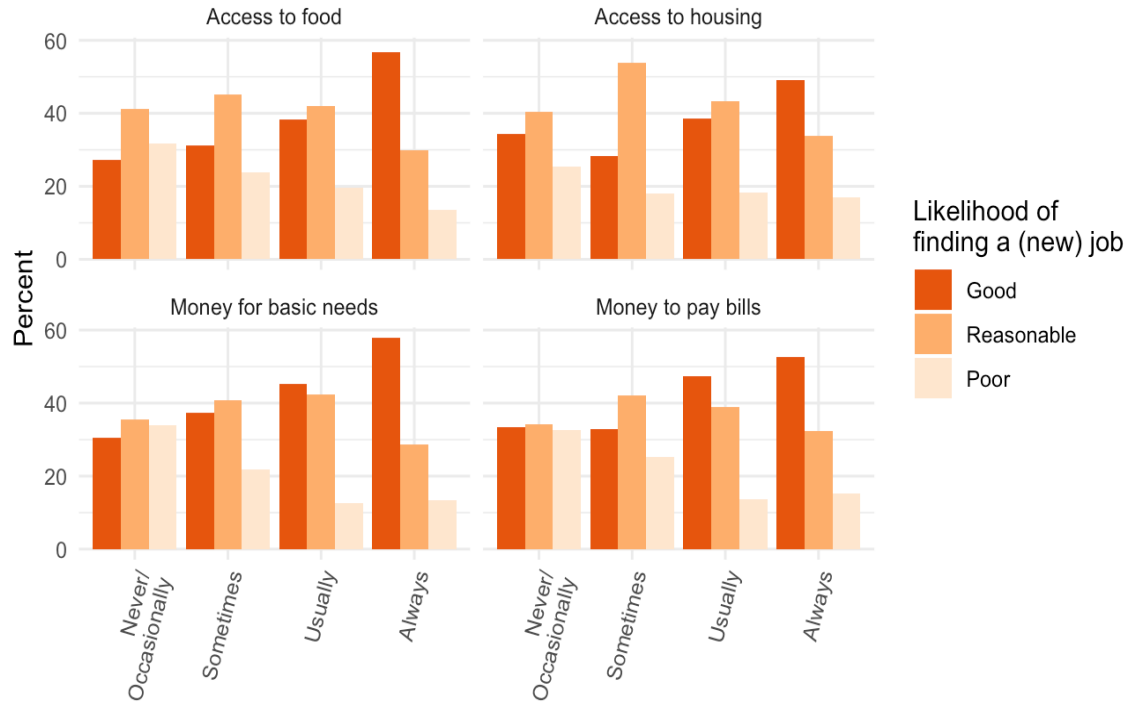
Data from the evaluation provides preliminary evidence of the material value of low-threshold economic engagement models. When viewed in light of multiple municipal, provincial and national calls to reduce poverty, these are important indicators of the ability of supported economic engagement opportunities on the Livelihoods Continuum to support the material security and quality of life through innovative action on economic engagement as a central social determinant of health.



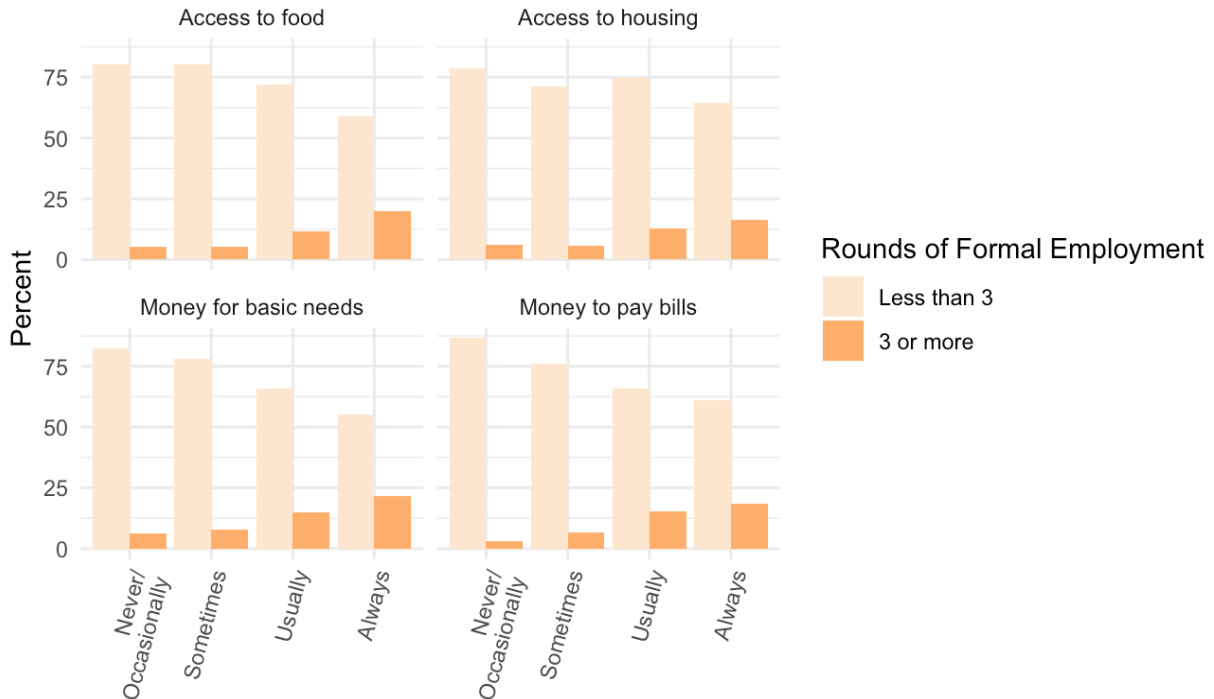
**Figure 8. Material security 3 months after economic engagement by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023**

The importance of material security to economic engagement was also reinforced in evaluation analyses where two important trends emerged. First, participants’ perceived likelihood of finding a (new) job generally increased as access to food, housing, money for basic needs, and money to pay bills increased (**Figure 9**). Second, material security was supported by continuous economic engagement (**Figure 10**). Specifically, formal employment over time was linked to demonstrated improvements in material security over time, suggesting that efforts to support the maintenance of economic engagement are therefore paramount to individual, and thereby community, well-being.





**Figure 9. Food security, material security, housing security, and perceived likelihood of starting a new job or employment program 3 months later, April 2019 - April 2023**



**Figure 10. Material security outcomes following contiguous reports of formal employment, April 2019 - April 2023**

### **Supportive Payment Models: Balancing Individual Financial Needs and Income Assistance Regulations**

Payment characteristics – how and when workers are paid – were a dimension of low-threshold opportunities that distinguished them from other economic activities. Key considerations include: (1) pay period; (2) payment method; and (3) income assistance regulations.

#### *Pay Period*

Properly compensating workers that are financially insecure and on income assistance requires payment structures that accommodate workers’ circumstances. Low-threshold opportunity providers often pay individuals at more frequent intervals than conventional employers, such as daily or weekly, to better support financial management.

Evaluation data show that the majority of evaluation participants received daily payments (56%). Participants highlighted how daily payment schedules motivated them to come to work and satisfied their immediate basic financial needs. Other participants identified how weekly payments alleviated financial stress in the wait between paydays. Weekly pay schedules were complementary to the monthly income assistance payment schedule, providing regular income on top of monthly assistance payments as a supplement to what are widely considered insufficient supports. Additionally, participants involved with Eastside Works, which paid participants with weekly cheques, often underscored how weekly payment was superior to conventional biweekly payment schedules in supporting material security:

*“[I’m] totally satisfied... here’s the best part: They pay us once a week. You do not have to wait two goddamn weeks to get your money. So, you ain’t got that four or five days where you’re broke. It’s just fantastic that we get paid every Friday.”* (White man)

The effect that different pay periods (i.e., weekly, daily, etc.) have on labour market-barriered individuals will depend largely on the overall financial security and money management practices of the individual. While a shorter pay period was widely recognized by evaluation participants and opportunity providers as better supporting material stability, considering pay period flexibility, where appropriate, allows for participants to be paid in ways that meet their financial needs and avoids exacerbating episodic income scarcity.

#### *Payment Method*

Similar to pay period, payment method – whether cash, cheque or direct deposit – were often structured by opportunity providers to accommodate workers’ circumstances, and participant preferences reflected individual financial practices.

Many participants highlighted the advantages of cash as a way to increase their gross income. Specifically, participants valued cash as they often did not declare it in their taxes, despite undertaking work that would require reporting income. Therefore, cash payments were commonly viewed by participants as untaxed income, and sometimes enabled income assistance recipients to earn more than earning exemptions thresholds.

*“Yeah, I get paid biweekly through direct deposit. I wish it were honorarium and I wish it were cash, because then I could maybe get away with not reporting it. But now that it’s on record, I have to report it. Before, I made more money and didn’t have to report it [because] it was cash. I like [cash] better, for sure.”* (Indigenous woman)

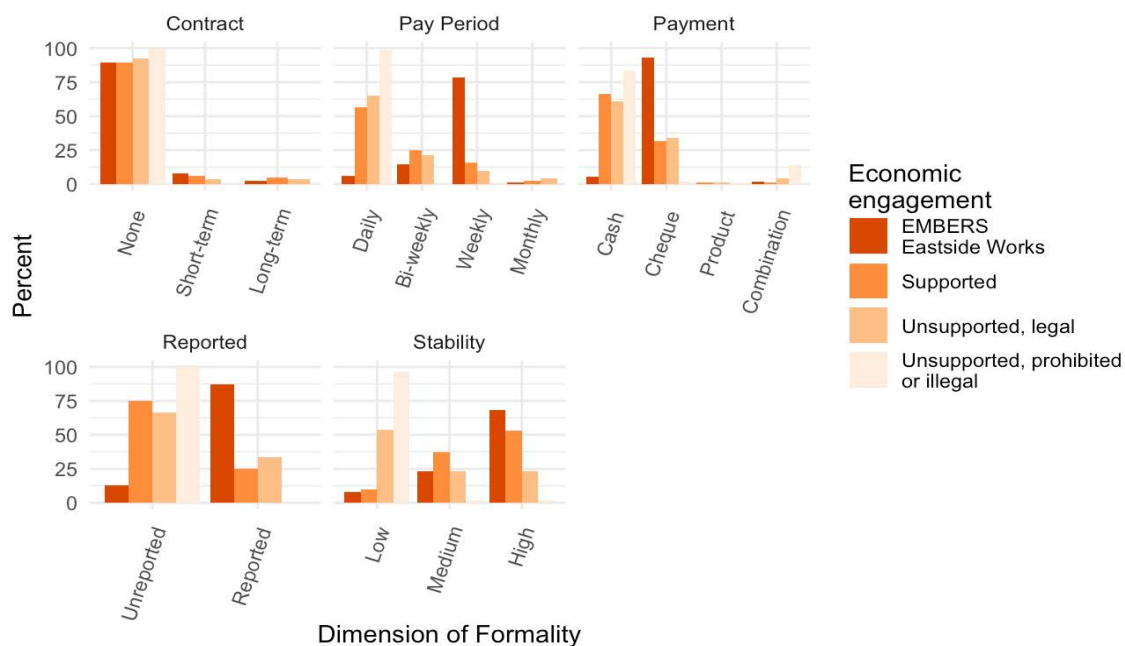
Those who were involved with Eastside Works spoke positively of the weekly cheque payment method, emphasizing how it supported them with budgeting for larger purchases and saving.

*“I feel great [about the way I’m paid]. If you get paid by cash every day, you’re more than likely going to spend that cash every single day. Whereas if you accumulate money over the week then you’ll have a lump sum at the end of the week. So yeah, I like the way I get paid.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

As discussed, certain aspects of formality can offer individuals greater long-term security and protection, such as benefits conferred through payment deductions for EI, CPP and Workers’ Compensation. **Figure 11** assesses different dimensions of formality that typify regular employment. It demonstrates how supported or low-barrier economic engagement models provide participants with key aspects of formality, and at higher rates than unsupported legal work (i.e., temp work, formal employment outside ecosystem, etc.) or prohibited/illegal work (i.e., binning, vending, dealing, etc.). The offerings of Eastside Works are of particular note, as they were more likely to include high stability, weekly cheque payment, and reported income than supported legal and unsupported legal or illegal work.

The balance between the benefits of financial planning and benefit contributions, compared to those of daily cash payment and their ability to assist individuals with immediate financial needs and to earn above earnings exemptions thresholds (**Figure 11**) is a key consideration with which opportunity providers must grapple. Notably, each provider within this ecosystem seeks to operate with a payment structure that is supportive, protective, and viable. Importantly, given limitations imposed by income assistance regulations and rates of income assistance support, no opportunity provider is able to offer financial security at a level that is considered adequate.<sup>66</sup>

**Recommendation:**  
*Offer flexible payment approaches that center material needs, financial planning and economic security.*



**Figure 11. Dimensions of formality by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023**

### Income Assistance

Despite income assistance regulations being an established barrier to economic engagement, managing these regulations, and specifically dynamics around earnings exemptions, were leading considerations for opportunity providers due to the importance of this source of income to their clients. Evaluation participants’ median income assistance monthly income was \$1344 (**Table 14**), placing them well below the 2022 federal poverty line of a monthly income of \$2322. Participants’ median monthly income of a little over \$2000 from all income generation sources, indicates that despite supplementing their income assistance, most have incomes that still place them below the official poverty line. Maximizing the amount of potential income over and above income assistance rates is a therefore a key motivation for participants, and concerns around whether wages would interfere with income assistance were frequently raised by participants in qualitative interviews.<sup>63</sup>

**Table 14. Participation in Training by Supported Economic Engagement in the past 3 months, April 2019 - April 2023 (n=332)**

Economic Activity Type	Median (IQR <sup>a</sup> , \$CAD)
Median monthly earned income (any work)	800 (328, 1860)
Median income assistance monthly income	1344 (1100, 1500)
Median total income	2122 (1627, 3000)
<sup>a</sup> IQR = interquartile range	

Opportunity providers widely acknowledge the need for detailed understandings of the income assistance system in order to maximize the contributions of economic engagement to the overall income of their clients while avoiding clawbacks and any contravention of other regulations. This was considered central to supporting the material, economic engagement and income stability of clients. When viewed alongside the call for an expanded and diversified employment landscape in the [Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy](#),<sup>47</sup> income assistance regulations and policies become a key consideration for how to better support economic engagement among multiply-barriered individuals. Members of the Community Advisory Groups reinforced the need for income assistance requirements to align with quality of life needs beyond basic survival needs. There is significant opportunity to simplify the co-occurrence of income supports and income generation to produce a social support environment characterized by less administrative burden and better incentives for economic engagement.

**Recommendation:**  
*Restructure income assistance regulations so that earnings exemptions for people receiving income assistance do not constrain their economic engagement, for example by minimizing, or eliminating clawbacks.*

The implications of income assistance regulations for the economic potential of recipients warrants detailed consideration: regulations can impact how much people work, the pay rate of the work they undertake, their housing stability, and access to ancillary benefits. Ensuring that earned income does not exceed earnings exemptions was therefore a central consideration on whether to undertake paid economic opportunities and what type of opportunity to undertake.

Opportunity providers were central to supporting the balance of economic activity and earnings exemptions, and participants appreciated their service providers’ planning around this:

*“I only get 20 hours every two weeks because [my employer] knows anything over \$1000 I got to declare it on disability, but if it’s under \$1000 you don’t have to bother. So right now, I make \$479.00 every two weeks.” (White man)*

Interestingly, participants on income assistance commonly expected to receive low wages from their jobs due to the earnings exemptions, as they internalized the idea that they were not entitled to much income beyond their monthly cheque. Although many of these same participants experienced financial insecurity, they accepted this as the financial reality of being on income assistance, and they perceived low-barrier models as supporting them in accessing that much needed “top up”:

*“Well, [my different jobs], all those things help, you know when things go smoothly, every bit helps. So, I’m always appreciative with that. I think there could be improvements with the PWD thing. But, yeah, I mean it is what it is, that’s what’s available and I try to work with it the best I can.” (Non-Indigenous man of colour)*

Importantly, participants and Community Advisory Group members identified not only the impact of clawbacks on their primary source of income, but also how a miscalculation could impact their housing security as well as the receipt of ancillary supplements related to health service access (e.g., physical therapy, dental coverage), housing supports (e.g., moving fees or deposit support), transportation (e.g., bus pass) among other benefits that require income assistance receipt for eligibility.

**Recommendation:**  
*Restructure income assistance regulations to preserve, wherever possible, ancillary social benefits (e.g. nutritional support, transportation, etc.)*

While pay structures tailored to income assistance regulations were ideal for the majority of individuals involved with these opportunities, some participants who did not receive assistance experienced challenges accessing opportunities for sustained periods due to the built-in income assistance accommodations. For example, many providers only offer a limited number of hours of on-the-job paid training or supportive work opportunities since excess earnings could result in clawbacks, reviews of eligibility or the loss of ancillary benefits. As a result, the ten hours of work or less per week typically offered represented insufficient hours for those not in receipt of benefits. This pushed individuals to search for other jobs beyond the low-threshold employment hub, where they can get more hours per week, but where they may not receive the benefits which accompany supported opportunities. For example, one non-Indigenous woman of colour

**Recommendation:**  
*Reassess earnings exemptions on an annual basis to better reflect variation in cost of living, inflation and other changes affecting the material security of recipients.*

described how she got a job outside of the supportive ecosystem as she needed more hours, even though she would have preferred to work with a low-barrier provider.

The underlying challenge for participants and opportunity providers alike was income assistance, and specifically earnings exemptions and associated regulations. In light of this, it is clear that earnings exemptions need to be reviewed to ensure that they support movement along the Livelihoods Continuum by creating supportive incentives



for economic engagement rather than excess surveillance and administrative burdens for workers and opportunity providers.

***Exceptional Accommodation: Working with Absenteeism, Substance Use, and Health Issues Through Adaptive Employment Structures and Progressive Development***

Adaptations to employment structures and tasks across multiple dimensions of economic engagement were a key strength of low-threshold models to accommodate the diverse needs of their trainees and workers. Specifically, participants highlighted the importance of flexibility related to periodic absences, work or shift hours, substance use, health issues as well as the range and level of responsibilities at work.

Low-threshold economic opportunity providers accommodated, and sometimes encouraged, both short-term and extended absenteeism. Whether it was missing a shift, undertaking longer term health care or going to substance use disorder treatment, many participants described taking leaves from opportunity providers without jeopardizing their positions. Exemplifying this is a white man, who, upon telling his work he would be away for substance use disorder treatment, was told by staff to, “come back when [he felt] ready.”

Short work shifts (i.e., five hours or less) and part-time hours were preferred by most participants, particularly as many available jobs are physically demanding. For those with health or mobility challenges, shorter shifts took less of a toll physically. They also accommodated participants’ substance use, allowing them to plan their use around work. Finally, as the following Eastside Works client reveals, short shifts were more accessible than longer ones, particularly as people acclimate to more work hours.

*“I’d rather be working full-time. Well, actually, part-time to start and maybe going to full-time, but that would take me some time to get used to. Not only used to; it’s that being motivated to, right? And just with working with Eastside Works, it’s nice is that they’re four-hour shifts, and with the four-hour shifts, if I’m not feeling up to it, I sit there and just call in, or text, and let them know, and then, you know, it’s alright.” (White man)*

Although not explicitly permitted, using substances during or just prior to being on the job did not necessarily preclude work effectiveness. In fact, accommodating ongoing and active substance use supported some participants in staying focused, managing chronic pain on the job, and avoiding the onset of withdrawal symptoms. In light of these common strategies to manage concurrent substance use and economic activity, Community Advisory Group members supported the development of guidance for employment services and supportive employers around substance use and work. Unlike formal labour market standards which commonly adopt zero-tolerance approaches, low-threshold models recognized that substance use-related accommodations often facilitate greater economic engagement.

Additional adaptations related to job requirements, responsibilities and accommodations also played an important role in supporting economic engagement. Being offered a variety of jobs and degrees of responsibility, creating mobility within organizations, and accommodating accessibility requirements and fluctuations in capacity over time were all important considerations for opportunity providers. For participants, economic engagement opportunities that were less physically demanding and required lower levels of training were highly sought after. Several factors drew them to these jobs, including chronic health conditions, mobility

issues and prior negative work histories. As one participant who experiences chronic health issues put it:

*“[My ideal work is] my situation, I’m happy and I’m very easy now. I’m not doing much. I’m sitting around on my table only that, and time to time I clean up my counters and mop around, but other than that [I] am taking care of everything on a daily basis, whatever needed, but I’m happy with my job. I’m not pushing myself. That’s my dream, that’s my lottery job right now, in my situation on my health. At least I’m doing something, otherwise I’m at home sitting all day.” (non-Indigenous woman of colour)*

Participants interested in pursuing greater responsibility described a supportive process of flexible professional development that involved trainings, gradual increases in duties and responsibility, as well as transitioning to more formal and scheduled shifts. Overall, increased responsibility empowered participants, and encouraged retention and ongoing economic engagement.

Critically, timelines for increased responsibility were potentially much longer than in a conventional employment or employment services context. A noted strength of Eastside Works was how they built in progressive changes in economic engagement according to client goals and capacities, accommodating diverse needs, the management of chronic health conditions, gradually increased structure, and, as the following quotation describes, progressive professional development:

*“[Eastside Works] specializes in finding employment for people with multiple barriers. They understand that I’m a drug user, but they give us a chance. They give us something that we’re able to do. Something that’s not outside of our skill set range, although we do learn and we do develop. Since I’ve been with them, I’ve been progressing. They’ve been handing me more and more work because they see your growth. They see how you’re growing, and as you’re growing, they throw you a little more responsibility and a little more responsibility.” (White man)*

In sum, the flexibility of low-barrier models established work conditions and environments that made employment accessible to participants and continually adapted to their changing needs, capacities, and interests. This is a core consideration given the prioritization of skills development and the expansion of opportunities as a key goal of the BC Poverty Reduction strategy. Economic engagement altered individuals’ lives in diverse ways, and so opportunity providers’ ability to meet participants where they are at, adapt alongside employees, and avoid placing limiting expectations on participants (e.g. form or timing of progression) was crucial to keeping a dynamic and multidimensional workforce engaged over time.

### **Sustained Work and Retention**

Low-barrier employment initiatives provided opportunities for sustained and consistent economic engagement. The majority of participants (78%) who indicated either working within low-barrier employment initiatives or seeking employment services from low-barrier opportunity providers during their baseline interviews were also engaged with low-barrier models during their follow-up interviews. In fact, many of the participants held low-threshold positions for several years. Almost half (44%) of participants who had engaged with Eastside Works during their baseline interviews were also engaged with Eastside Works in their follow-up interviews.

Sustained engagement was a key focus of most opportunity providers, which they encouraged through growth in skills development, responsibility and task variety. Employment providers continuously connected participants with work, ensuring that the end of an opportunity did not lead to worklessness.

*“Yeah, I was volunteering at [my employer]. I was a volunteer there first and then they put me on peer support work and then they put me on [another duty] and then I moved to the front desk. So yeah, over the years, right, I’ve been slowly trying [different roles].”*  
(Indigenous woman)

Some participants described working with organizations that they initially or simultaneously accessed as clients, indicating how being supportive and community-driven can cultivate sustained involvement, and again reinforcing the impacts of wrap-around service provision alongside economic engagement.

*“I really like how [my work] involves me with the community and in helping the community because I felt like it was very difficult when I was out there to get help. And [my work] is the community group that did help me get clean eventually. They just never gave up on me, over ten years, yeah. And no matter how badly I was doing they still showed up and they never let me down once.”* (White woman)

While participants were comfortable with the flexibility of these opportunities, many of the (pre-) employment service offerings at Eastside Works and other organizations are designed to be runways where individuals can gain momentum for work, but not permanently. Nevertheless, the creation of a non-linear, longer-term, customizable runway to move across the Livelihoods Continuum and beyond the employment services infrastructure was critical. Ultimately, participants greatly valued sustained economic engagement for the stability and structure it offered, as well as variety of activities and responsibilities, consistent social interaction, institutional engagement, and income it provided.

### ***Individualized Support: The Ethos of Supportive Economic Engagement***

Low-barrier economic opportunity providers were able to sustain long-standing relationships with participants because they supported individuals as *individuals*. Participants spoke about how the staff actively practiced person-centered, trauma-informed, anti-stigmatizing approaches. Supportive workplaces and relationships were characterized by encouragement, recognition, direct and consistent communication, compassion, individualized attention, and stability. These qualities consistently surfaced in participants’ descriptions of their workplaces as safe and welcoming spaces.

*“I respect [my co-workers] and I like working with them because I always learn something different from each of my peers. They’re great. Especially [my] employer. She is the best boss you could ever, ever have. I mean she’s the greatest. She is just there for you. She’s got your back no matter what. She’ll fight for you until the end. [My work and employer] make me feel better about myself. I feel more like I can contribute to life again, you know? In my addiction I feel really worthless and useless. You know, it feels like, it gives me a sense of worth.”* (Indigenous woman)

Among participants engaging with Eastside Works, key support strategies included supportive interactions, debrief sessions after difficult shifts, or as this participant stated, through encouragement and acceptance.

*“[Eastside Works] encourages you. On your way home they say, ‘Good job. Well done.’ We need to hear that. People down there need to hear that. Lot of us are broken people that are trying to get on our feet. A lot of us have never had encouragement. A lot of us have been abused. A lot of us have been told we’re worthless. It’s good to hear that. It’s very uplifting and it strengthens your confidence and your self-esteem. And it’s true. They’re not blowing sunshine up your butt. What they say is true. And that’s what really strengthens your self-esteem.”* (White man)

Transparency was another important, anti-oppressive facet of support because it allowed participants to establish safety and community at work without needing to conceal challenges about their lives. Many participants have complicated relationships with work. Connections they forged on the job were described as healing past negative labour market experiences through establishing sense of belonging. One participant describes, *“I like that you can just be yourself. I don’t have to pretend that I was somebody else, you know what I mean? You don’t have to put on a façade.”* (White woman). Candid conversations with their employers about their substance use, their feelings about coworkers, and their mental health helped participants feel secure and accepted at work.

Transparency was also experienced as a form of expectation management, that improved trust in organizations and ensured clients were not subject to cycles of falsely elevated expectations and disappointment. One participant at Eastside Works notes:

*“Like you know [Eastside Works], they don’t screw around, they don’t, you know, and they don’t make you a bunch of promises that they don’t have any intention of going through [with], it seems like. You know they let you know pretty much straight up, ‘this might not happen, but it might.’”* (White man)

In contrast, the consequences of a lack of transparency was noted by this same participant in their experience with a an employment services provider outside the low-threshold ecosystem:

*“These guys just want your name on their list and they wanted to string out whatever process they were helping you out with as long as they could... And they really, they’d make you a whole bunch of promises, ‘oh, we’ll get you your drivers’ license, we’ll do this for you, we’ll do that for you.’ Six months later after you jump through every single hoop and they’ve told you during the whole process, ‘oh yeah this is, it all looks good, yeah you should have no problem,’ then oh denied... They are just a scam.”*

The importance of organizational trust as cultivated through transparency, and the role it played in participant expectation management, self-valuation and subsequent empowerment was evident throughout evaluation participant narratives.

Low-threshold initiatives such as Eastside Works also sought to empower clients and reinforce their identities as workers. Key strategies included recognizing and validating workers’ social backgrounds, valuing existing skillsets, and connecting workers with appropriately suited opportunities for professional development and training, setting clients up for success.

*“... most support workers who came from college, they burn out so easy. And sometimes they don’t [do] their jobs and they don’t give a fuck anymore. So, it’s us in the community, we’ve been through the stuff. We’ve become one of the best support workers. Because we know the pros and cons. But if they treat me like a shit, I will do shit of the work... But when somebody is supported the proper way, and being treated like ‘oh you’re really helping the community because of your knowledge and because I’ll give you training now. And that’s the part that I like: when [my] outreach [work] started I was volunteer for them, they took me under their wing and say look right now you start as a volunteer, then we’re gonna send you for some courses at the VCC and then you become an outreach worker. And I agree with that.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

The supportive culture of low-threshold models signals providers’ commitment to investing in their client- and employee-base. When reciprocal relationships are nurtured alongside the development of organizations’ institutional and human resource capacities to support and value employees, the result is a clients and workers committed to meaningful and long-term engagement. Eastside Works is a leader in this regard, described as actively working to “*encourage, not discourage*” confidence to expand involvement beyond Eastside Works-specific programming, effectively reducing economic engagement barriers.

An additional component of the ethos of supportive economic engagement was collaborating with peer employees and community members. Participants emphasized the distinctions between organizations that they saw as working for the community and organizations that they perceived as having priorities external to the community. They were often disinclined to work for the latter. One non-Indigenous man of colour discussed how a low-barrier opportunity provider he previously worked with shifted its focus, which ultimately led him to leave the organization.

*“...they used to have the attitude ‘it’s the people first’ when I first started...but I’ve noticed throughout the years that that attitude’s kind of fucking changed. The whole outlook has changed. Now it’s down to the bottom line. Before when it was small, fine, well the whole ‘we’ll help you, the people’ and all that. I love that, but now they’ve started generating money and getting bigger and bigger and bigger, it’s gone to their head, now it’s becoming money is the bottom line. Okay, money’s not the bottom line in this world anymore. People are the bottom line.”*

An organization’s reputation for being trusted, community-driven and prioritizing lower barriers often influenced whether participants pursued an employment opportunity. In the case of Eastside Works, participants who had never accessed their programs previously expressed an interest in exploring them, emphasizing how their name has come to signal a service that is community-driven, particularly over more established employment services such as WorkBC.

*“[Eastside Works] said they were available to help me with my resume, and I know there is WorkBC, but Eastside Works is special because they’re tailored, they’re focused on helping people in the Downtown Eastside so I feel more comfortable dealing with them rather than dealing with going to WorkBC, because I know Eastside Works will be able to understand my situation a little bit more.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

This participant was not alone in experiencing barriers accessing WorkBC. As the following participant emphasizes, participants commonly felt WorkBC was not sensitive to the issues facing certain members of their client-base, failing to address barriers to engagement.



*“I went to BC Works before I started working and I don’t know, it’s just a bunch of crap. I didn’t end up working. You had to go there every day and it would be so hard at that particular time. I don’t why. Well I guess because, I don’t know, I just didn’t have proper clothes and stuff like that. It was just hard getting up and going, like it was so far away. From where I live, it was way on the other side of town. I had to take three buses and they’re long bus rides, you know. It’s on the other side of town so it was an hour to get there every morning and it was winter, it was cold. I was just like oh my god. I just couldn’t do it. It just made it, like, worse for me. Like too much work. They’d want me to go work voluntary work and I was just like no, it was on the other side of town again and I just thought fuck that, no I can’t do it. It was just too much. It was too hard.” (White woman)*

Additionally, one participant noted how the time between engagement with and actually moving forward with a job search through WorkBC was experienced as a challenge.

*“I’m currently with WorkBC, but unfortunately it does take a long time, and I don’t know if it’s COVID-related or it’s just a very lengthy process. I think I’ve been with them for about three months and we’ve still not made a resume, and we’ve not applied for one job yet, so. It’s a very lengthy process.” (Non-Indigenous woman of colour)*

Challenges linked to the use of Employment Services administered by WorkBC, alongside insights garnered through the provision of pre-employment services and employment services by Eastside Works and other opportunity providers suggest that the conventional approach to employment services provision is commonly neither appropriate nor effective for supporting the initiation or maintenance of economic engagement for people facing complex barriers to employment. Evaluation data related to operational feasibility, accessibility, timeliness and individualized support suggest a need for more diversified service offerings that recognize variability across a number of key dimensions relevant to economic engagement. In particular, the incorporation of community-based considerations around the following are critical: (1) participant capacity, (2) non-linear economic engagement pathways, (3) the importance of

**Recommendation:** *Expand Provincial Employment Services, currently administered by WorkBC, to include adaptive, equity-promoting and tailored interventions for barriered individuals seeking economic engagement and re-engagement in the workforce.*

organizational trust in community context, (4) variability in timelines and progression, (5) the value of wrap-around services, (6) the value of complex adaptations related to substance use, absenteeism and mental health, and (7) creative approaches to retention. The recognition that conventional pathways toward economic engagement may not be relevant nor feasible for people with complex barriers suggests a considerable opportunity to support and expand the scope and agility of employment services in British Columbia.

## Areas for Growth

Many evaluation participants have had adverse experiences in the conventional labour market, and so opportunity providers, such as Eastside Works, often make concerted efforts to address and repair negative experiences with work histories. To do so requires low-barrier opportunity providers to engage with their clients and workers to a higher degree than is standard for conventional employers, involving active consultation with barriered employees and the

implementation of co-developed or agreed-upon approaches. Participant accounts suggest that most low-barrier opportunity providers are successful in collaborating with workers, although participants nevertheless identified areas of potential growth that could strengthen economic engagement opportunities and the experience of people accessing those opportunities. Reinforced by Community Advisory Group members, these areas included: (1) Organizational capacity; (2) Workplace safety; (3) Compensation and transparent pay structures; (4) Increasing stability, breadth and growth opportunities, (5) Strengthening approaches to equity in a community-informed way; and (6) Improving processes of input and inclusion.

### ***Organizational Capacity***

Providing innovative programming, cultivating an ethos of individualized support, and developing appropriate economic engagement opportunities in a complex operating environment is a costly, time-and-resource consuming endeavor. Organizations do exceptionally challenging work on extremely limited budgets that are subject to grant cycles. The financial and logistic realities of sustaining organizational capacity commonly detract from the actual “doing” the work, and challenges related to funding and sustained resources for programming can impact participant experience in a range of ways, such as low pay, long-wait times for intake and assistance due to understaffing, processes involving extensive paperwork and administration, unpaid mandatory training, and short-term work programs. Long wait- and service-times were experienced by participants as disrespectful, and became barriers to accessing employment services. Stabilized funding, increased resources and subsequent expansions of organizational capacity would therefore improve the scope, scale and effectiveness of low-threshold opportunity provision and move towards addressing the opportunity gap identified above.

### ***Workplace Safety***

For participants, issues of workplace safety arose in the context of outreach or public-facing economic activities. For example, one white man expressed wanting to have the power to abstain from tasks that exposed him and his coworkers to potential violence (e.g., asking unhoused campers to move or doing outreach in encampments) without consequences to his access to future opportunities. Although most participants had effective and open communication with their employers, concerns regarding the potential for exposure to violence suggests that low-threshold employers could enhance efforts to support the real and perceived safety of workers.

**Recommendation:**  
*Identify and implement appropriate supports for workers to minimize their exposure to workplace hazards and violence.*

### ***Compensation***

Participants commonly discussed their pay rate, an expected preoccupation in a context of income scarcity. Issues raised by participants regarding the amount of compensation are a function of many complex factors, such as available resources and balancing the number of opportunities provided against the amount participants are paid, as organizations contend with finite resources on which demand invariably exceeds supply. The impact of resource pressure was described by one white woman bemoaning the lack of compensation for training:

*“The reality is I didn’t get too far with them either because they all wanted me to join all these programs that were unpaid, and if you need to work and make money, you can’t go to unpaid programs...Not healthy, no potential to make a future out of it, no... Actually, my whole experience to be quite honest with you, of the Downtown Eastside, got me really not trusting.”*

Additionally, some participants suggested that low-threshold models were not compensating them fairly for work. The majority of low-barrier employers prioritize providing the maximum number of people with consistent and appropriate opportunities, which can come at the cost of more competitive wages. Also important to note, though a decreasing reality in the community, is the existence of a “peer penalty,” whereby people with lived and living experience are paid less than others for equivalent work on the basis of their status as “peers.”

**Recommendation:** *Explore compensation and benefit standards that balance organizational capacity, resource limitations, and fair compensation that does not invoke a “peer penalty”*

Employers are additionally well aware of the delicate balance between work pay and income assistance earnings exemptions, the importance of equitable pay, and the respect that is conveyed to workers when pay structures are transparent. With commitments being made by the Provincial government in their poverty reduction strategy to examine and adjust constraints on opportunity-providing organizations, the opportunity to establish more effective and transparent pay structures is clear.

### **Stability, Breadth and Growth Opportunities**

When deciding between a low-barrier job and a conventional labour market job, one participant with chronic health conditions saw the latter as more secure given that the low-threshold opportunity was a fixed program requiring individuals to participate in multiple rotations of various jobs, some of which were physically taxing.

*“[The conventional job] was a little bit more money, and it was a little bit more secure. The [first rotation] was only for a certain amount of time, and then they wanted you to move on to [a different type of] work, which I cannot do.”* (Non-Indigenous woman of colour)

The sometimes-limited stability of low-threshold opportunities, often a function of their classification as programs or limited-term employment services, as well as the need for increased breadth of opportunity type (e.g., for people with functional or mobility limitations) creates barriers to engagement. Notably, due to external factors, the above participant later stopped working their conventional labour market job, and connected with Eastside Works, who referred them to a position at a low-barrier opportunity provider that could accommodate their health requirements. While low-barrier opportunity initiatives have emerged as pivotal partners in mitigating unpredictability in participants’ wages, work hours and job tenure, increased capacity can further ensure that workers are connected to appropriate opportunities and can prevent worklessness arising from a program-based opportunity coming to an end.

*“But when somebody supported the proper way, and being treated like a oh you really helping the community because your knowledge and because I give you training now. And that’s what part that I like it when [my] outreach [work] started cause I was volunteer for them, they took me under their wing and say look right now you start as a volunteer,*

*then we’re gonna send you for some courses at the [community college] and then you become outreach worker. And I agree with that.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

The above quote illustrates further the importance of individualized growth trajectories, and while this was effective for that participant, others noted limited growth opportunities in the low-threshold opportunity ecosystem. While this was a core focus of Eastside Works, there is additional opportunity for growth to develop, implement and individualize growth trajectories to maximize the social, health and economic benefits of sustained and meaningful economic engagement.

**Recommendation:** *Expand efforts to support the development of long-term planning, growth trajectories and progressive economic engagement for workers that recognizes non-linear pathways, engagement across organizations and flexible time frames.*

### Strengthen equity-based approaches

Organizations providing low-threshold opportunities for people facing barriers to the labour market are, by design, dedicated to improving inequities in access to economic engagement. Nevertheless, some evaluation participants who were members of equity-deserving groups discussed experiences of receiving inadequate support and unequal treatment. As a non-Indigenous man of colour observed:

*“I’m not seen the same because I’m a [racialized] man... I feel like I’m passed by, overlooked for a lot of things... Not only was I overlooked, I was just ignored because of who I was and what I was.”*

While low-threshold opportunity providers prioritize equity-oriented approaches, this evaluation identifies differences in economic engagement patterns across gender, race, age, education, mental health, ability, substance use pattern and criminalization (see Social-Structural Disadvantage and Barriers to Economic Engagement p. 28, **Table 8-Table 11**). While some of these patterns are complex, they nevertheless prompt questions about what can be done to strengthen supports for equity-deserving populations and whether training, work, or planning initiatives focused on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) could have an impact. Importantly, recent research has identified that standard EDI training has not demonstrated evidence of effectiveness, and may even have an effect that is the opposite of what is intended in many cases.<sup>iii</sup> As such, careful consideration must be taken to ensure that initiatives intended to improve equity *actually* improve equity-related outcomes.

In consultation with opportunity providers and our Organizational Community Advisory Board, key considerations were raised about how to do this effectively. First, in order to support and strengthen the broader operational culture focused on equity, it was suggested that any resources developed be done so at a community-wide level to reduce discrepancies across organizations and the resource burden of individual organizations developing their own resources. Second, input to the evaluation reinforced the need for resources to be community-specific and community-informed; many have searched for “off-the-shelf” training to use in their organizations and have found these inadequate to address complex dynamics staff and programming participants face on a day-to-day basis. Third, organizations emphasized the

<sup>iii</sup> See: <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>; Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press.

importance of broad-based training that considers dynamics of respectful workplaces and de-escalation as focal areas that can greatly improve workplace dynamics. Finally, Community Advisory Group members clearly articulated a need for any trauma- or equity- oriented training to meaningfully involve people with lived and living experience in their design. The Indigenous Advisory Circle further emphasized the importance of including Indigenous traditional teachings from knowledge keepers and Elders, to support culturally appropriate initiatives in this area.

**Recommendation:** *Develop context-appropriate training, policies and programs to support equity-deserving populations and safe workplaces related to Indigenous cultural safety and humility, anti-racism, gender- and ability- inclusivity, stigma, de-escalation and respectful workplaces.*

Ongoing commitments and resources toward prioritizing equity-oriented training, policies and programming could further strengthen organizations’ commitments to improving equity outcomes for the populations they serve. Consistent with the BC Poverty Reduction and DTES strategic plans, strengthening resources and initiatives in this area will contribute to an overall culture dedicated to supporting equity-deserving populations and providers in furnishing all clients and workers with healthy work environments and supportive relationships that sustain employment satisfaction

and challenge identity- and disadvantage-based barriers to work.

### **Strengthening Input Processes**

Evaluation participant narratives suggested a number of areas in which strengthening worker capacity to provide input to organizational leadership or participate in processes related to decision making could improve client and worker experiences.

One area that was emphasized was communication around operational or programming changes. For example, one low-barrier initiative switched the method and frequency of payment without consultation with workers, leading two participants to quit. One of them, an Indigenous man, describes the experience as follow:

*“[The organization] quit giving us cash at the end of our shift. I’m not gonna do that [work] and have to wait two weeks to get paid for it. We only were doing it because we got our cash at the end of the shift.”*

As this participant highlights, one instance of unilateral decision-making can lead to disengagement, particularly where the disadvantages of economic engagement begin to outweigh the benefits. The importance of open and robust channels of communication and feedback between workers and the organizations with which they engage was emphasized as a key component of developing organizational trust, maintaining engagement when such engagement can be extremely tenuous, and supporting the financial and daily planning of participants. Importantly, such processes are not without cost in terms of time, human resources and communication platforms

**Recommendation:** *Expand resources that support organizational consultation processes, improved channels of communication and feedback between workers and management, specifically around scheduling, workplace safety, wage transparency, and payment structures.*



involving space, digital and other resources. As such, the capacity of organizations to dedicate resources in this way should be acknowledged and supported.

Additionally, some participants felt that the input of clients or peer employees was overlooked or even ignored even within accessibility- and inclusion-focused low-threshold environments. Notably, participants described being consulted with for what they saw as insignificant decisions, such as which snacks to serve, yet they felt disregarded when voicing concerns about their roles and responsibilities.

*“Sometimes [my voice was heard]. For really the minimal things. I don’t think my voice, or any of the addicts’ or peers’ voices are used for important things. For minimal things, I believe our voices, they’ll come and ask us, “you think we should get another couch? You think we should do this?” But when it comes to important things, no.” (Non-Indigenous man of colour)*

This quote emphasizes the potential range of work dimensions around which soliciting and incorporating input can strengthen workers’ sense of purpose and belonging.

Notably, Eastside Works, and many other organizations engage in the crucial work of soliciting and integrating the employee recommendations to ensure their services continue to reflect client

**Recommendation:** *Expand processes that meaningfully involve and represent workers in leadership and decision-making.*

needs. Community Advisory Group members further emphasized how impactful involvement in leadership and decision-making processes are to employment participation. As such, specific attention to how meaningful involvement could be strengthened and expanded should be a focal point of ongoing efforts to support engagement and community responsiveness.

Overall, participants appreciated the opportunities made available to them through low-threshold initiatives. The work was meaningful, offering participants the chance to utilize their lived experiences and contribute to the community more broadly. When participants encountered economic opportunity spaces characterized by meaningful work, supportive work environments and work structures, flexible and broad accommodation, sustained relationships and individualized supports, participants developed sustainable work lives that kept them satisfied and engaged, and that furnished them with the confidence to venture beyond these employment services and flexible work opportunities. Such engagement was viewed by participants as additionally having extensive benefits to the community more broadly. Participants also raised some areas of potential improvement linked to organizational capacity; workplace safety; compensation; stability, breadth and growth opportunities, strengthening equity-based approaches and strengthening input processes. Importantly, evaluation participants noted how overwhelmingly, low-threshold opportunity providers go to extraordinary lengths to create inclusive, equity-focused economic engagement environments, and as such, shortcomings may be reflective of issues of inadequate resources and attendant capacity limitations that are experienced by participants as barriers. Thoughtful, well-resourced, and coordinated action could expand the scope and scale of opportunities provided and strengthen organizational capacity to support the economic engagement of populations with complex barriers in equity-focused and inclusive ways. Findings in this area reveal what makes economic engagement “work” and what could make low-threshold economic engagement initiatives “work better”. In the following section, we emphasize the benefits of this engagement to health and well-being.

## Part 3: Economic Engagement, Health and Well-being

The previous section explored some of the economic benefits of low-barrier economic engagement, including involvement in meaningful work, sustained economic engagement, and working in economic engagement environments that provide individualized support. This section expands on the pathways between low-threshold economic engagement and broadly defined health and well-being. Specific focus is placed on key indicators of physical and mental health, as well as social and psychological dynamics of low-threshold economic engagement, and in most cases analyses examined outcomes three months subsequent to engagement with economic engagement.<sup>iv</sup> Evaluation results should be viewed in light of design and analytic limitations that preclude any conclusions related to cause and effect; that is, linkages between well-being and economic engagement may be documenting ancillary effects of some types of economic engagement (e.g., improving social interactions), or may be the result of selection effects, where sampling is shaped by low-threshold models accommodating individuals with a particular well-being profile (e.g. functional limitations). However, the use of both quantitative and qualitative data and the longitudinal nature (e.g. time sequencing) of the data provide support for understanding the potential impacts that low-threshold economic engagement can have on participants’ health and well-being.

### Care-Based Relationships and Health Care Utilization

For some participants, care-based relationships with staff were a core feature of their experience at low-threshold initiatives. Participants described relationships characterized by awareness and consideration of participants’ health and well-being. One participant recounted how staff at Eastside Works ensured that he received the care that he needed, acting as a source of health information as well as personal support.

*“Well [my co-workers and boss] care about me and always make sure, “you’re taking your medication? Are you eating properly?” everything like that. If I come in and any of my coworkers or my boss sees I’m not looking very well, they tell me I’m not looking very well and they make sure I take care of myself.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

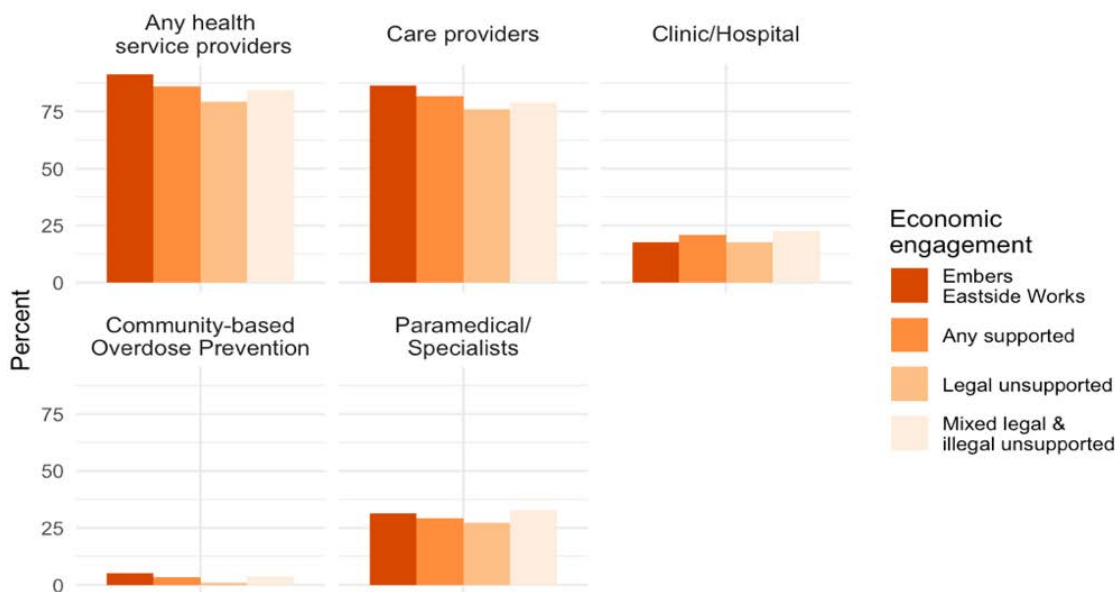
In addition to serving as important touchpoints for monitoring individual well-being, participants reinforced how care-based relationships with staff in flexible work environments were central to their ability to support healthy behaviours and access health services, in direct contrast to other less accommodating forms of economic engagement.

*Let’s say I decide I’m gonna work for a temp agency for a day, right? I’m broke or I’m low in money but I want to work at the temp agency or there’s some work that’s outside the area for that day. I can’t access food lines because they have their own time or they’re taking too long and I got to get to my job. So I’m gonna work that day hungry and it more likely would be physical labor. It may impact, like a lot of times I’ll plan to do something but then I’ve got to make appointments, I can’t just cancel my doctor’s appointment because then he’s gonna reset it for three months down the road and I can’t wait that long so now it’s a toss-up: do I work or not work and be broke for the rest of the week. So those are decisions like that that you have to make.* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

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<sup>iv</sup> This was done by forward lagging outcomes with hypothesized change resulting from economic engagement. Forward lagging was not conducted when examining concurrent phenomena (e.g., providing ancillary services)

When we assessed participant engagement with health care providers, the vast majority of evaluation participants were engaged with health care providers and reported having seen one following economic engagement, suggesting a population with high health care service needs and high engagement with health services. We observed a partial gradient whereby engagement with Eastside works was generally linked to the highest engagement with health services, and undertaking any supported economic activity, and legal unsupported income generation demonstrated slight incremental decreases in accessing a health care provider. **(Figure 12).** Engaging in mixed legal and illegal unsupported income generation did not follow this gradient but was nevertheless consistent with the high levels of health care utilization.



**Figure 12. Health care provider access<sup>a</sup> by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023**

<sup>a</sup> Includes primary care provider, addictions doctor, specialists, HIV doctor, HCV doctor, nurse practitioner, street nurse/outreach nurse, STOP team, psych nurse, psychiatrist, emergency department, Rapid Access Clinic at St. Paul's Hospital, Hospital Ward, paramedics, EMS, community-based overdose prevention, dietician, physical therapist, dentist

Given high rates of health service utilization alongside indications that such services are less accessible in unsupportive environments, the potential health impacts of work environments that do not accommodate access to services directly or indirectly linked to health and well-being are clear. These ripple effects of the multiple roles that opportunity providers fulfill not only identify economic opportunity providers as crucial components in participants' overall well-being, they also illustrate the unique material, workplace, and social processes through which economic opportunity providers support the linkage between uniquely adapted economic activities and improved health.

## Physical and Mental Health

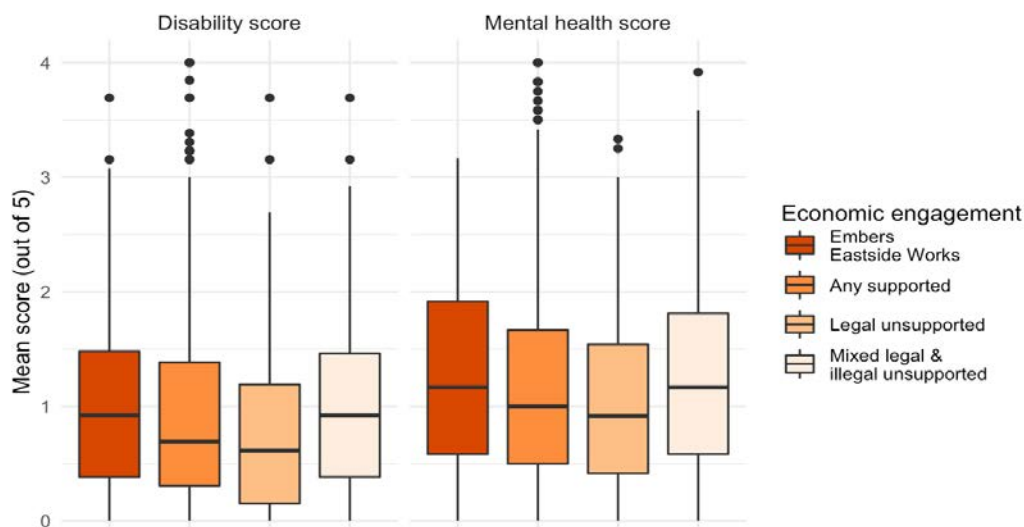
Participants defined health in terms of their physical and mental health as well as their alcohol and substance use. The relationship between their health and low-threshold employment opportunities were dynamic and complex. Health was integral to participants' access to and experiences of work, and economic engagement also shaped their experiences of health.

Most participants reported experiencing discrimination and exclusion in the conventional labour market based on their varied health needs, including substance use, at some point in their lifetimes resulting in lower access to employment and greater vulnerability to job loss. In contrast to their experiences of the formal labour market, descriptions of experiences with low-threshold economic initiatives highlight how these employment services and organizations – by acting as inclusive work environments, and in the case of Eastside Works as a centralized hub for services; by making referrals to jobs and other agencies; by providing job matching and training services; and by providing wrap-around ancillary services that support health and well-being alongside economic opportunities – disrupt the potential harms to participants’ health and well-being that result from labour market discrimination and exclusion. Participants described in particular how opportunity providers were more willing to accommodate ongoing health and functional limitations. As one white woman describes:

*“Well just that people don’t judge me because I have a really bugged up knee so when I’m at work, I drive my scooter to work but I park it, and then I just use my cane because I’m behind the front desk there, so most of the time I don’t have to go too far but if I have to go and let somebody on the elevator or something like that, people don’t even look twice at me; they just always know that’s just the way it is.”*

Low-barrier initiatives also connected participants with jobs that were better suited to their health needs than they would have obtained through the standard labour market.

Interestingly, when we assessed functional limitation scores three months after initial engagement with low-threshold economic opportunities (**Figure 13**), we see only slight differences across different types of economic engagement, with those reporting involvement with Eastside Works and those reporting a mixture of legal and illegal unsupported economic activity with the highest scores on the WHO disability index (where higher scores = worse functionality).



**Figure 13. Functional limitation and mental health by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023**

Rather than indicating that Eastside Works is the cause of declining functionality, analyses more likely indicate the capacity of Eastside Works to support the economic engagement of individuals with higher functional limitations. Many participants described being better able to

balance job demands with their health needs, especially when compared to the physical demands that many participants experienced in previous jobs in, for example, construction and manual labour. Community Advisory Group members reinforced that many people in low-barrier opportunities have health and pain issues that need to be accommodated at work.

Similarly, when assessing mental health symptoms measured by the Colorado Symptoms Index (where higher scores = more symptoms), while similar across economic engagement types, Eastside Works engagement and mixed unsupported income generation had the overall highest mental health symptomology. This again suggests that Eastside Works, as well as other forms of supported economic engagement, are able to engage people with higher mental health-related symptoms that may have otherwise presented barriers to labour market engagement.

The dynamics of participant mental health and economic engagement have been alluded to throughout this evaluation: participants describe how accessible supportive economic opportunities can improve their confidence and sense of belonging, heal past negative experiences of discrimination and stigma in the labour market, and value participant life experiences and skills developed through those experiences. Over and above these important contributions, participants' connections with opportunity providers and their paid experiences can lessen financial and psychological stress. This was particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many participants lost access to their jobs and other opportunities and were solely reliant on income assistance. The resultant wage loss, economic instability, reduced access to basic needs such as food and housing, and constrained spatial mobility often had significant impacts on stress, as exemplified by the following assessment:

*“[COVID] has been a little bit depressing. It definitely was depressing when it first hit, when I got first laid off and the last pay-cheque that I got before laid off was enough to keep me, me and my [partner], enough for food for six weeks until EI came in. I wasn't able to pay rent right at the end of that month, and I wasn't able to pay rent the next month, and it was depressing. It caused us to start drinking and it caused us to start fighting... there is a good reason why a couple, especially living together, needs those eight hours a day to go out and work and be away from each other because once that stops and you're with that person in your home 24/7, it can be tough.” (White man)*

As this quote reveals, experiences of extreme stress could push participants to adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as increased substance use, which can further impact multiple dimensions of individual well-being.

Past research documents a range of patterns linking economic activity, payment patterns (particularly around income assistance receipt) and substance use.<sup>11,64,67</sup> Examining relative levels of substance use across relevant dimensions of economic activity (**Figure 14**), participant drug use patterns were predominantly consistent when engaging in economic activity, on days they made money (for example, in evenings after economic activity), on the days they were paid and when they had steady work. On the whole, this reinforces the idea that economic activity and substance use are commonly concurrently managed, contradicting common perceptions that these activities are incompatible. Notably, data suggest slight differences in substance use patterns across economic activity types. For example, participants were most likely to use less than usual when engaged with Eastside Works across all four dimensions of economic activity. Those undertaking a mix of legal and illegal unsupported work were the most likely to maintain levels of use while engaging in their economic activity and on days when they were making



money. And, those undertaking any supported activities or legal unsupported work were slightly more likely to use more than usual on days when they were paid.

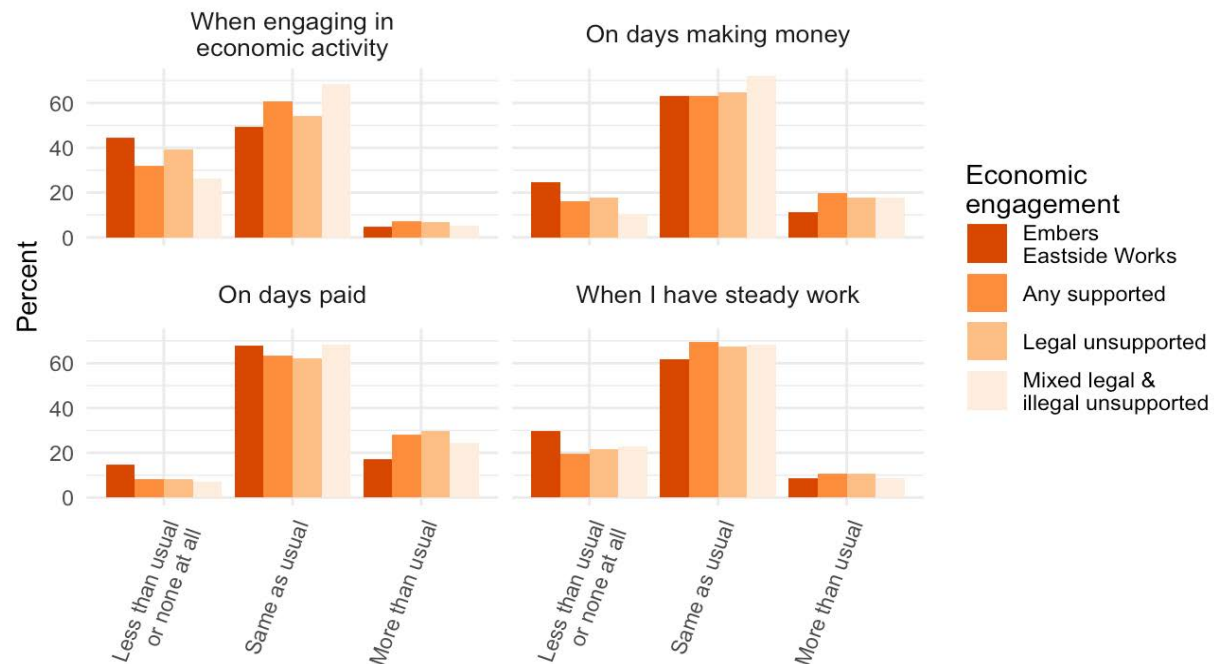


Figure 14. Substance use patterns by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023

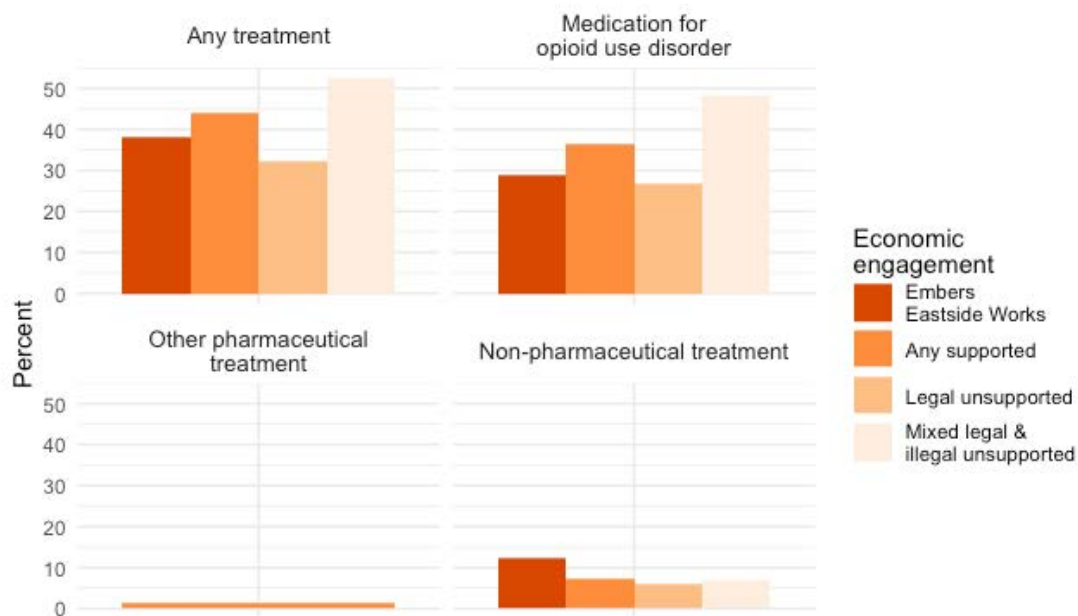


Figure 15. Substance use treatment<sup>a</sup> by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023

<sup>a</sup> Medication for Opioid use disorder - methadone, suboxone, SR Kadian - oral, Dilaudid, iOAT, M-Eslon, Fentanyl Patch, Oral Fentanyl, Sufentanil injections, Fentanyl powder, Smokable opioids, Oxycodone  
Other pharmaceutical or substitution treatment - Sustained-release Dexedrine, Concerta, Ritalin, Methylphenidate, Benzodiazepine, Powder cocaine, Manage Alcohol Programs  
Non-pharmaceutical treatment - Alcohol and Drug counselling, AA/NA/Smart Meetings, Detox, OnSite, Treatment Centre, Recovery, Daytox/day programs, Residential community programs, out-patient treatment, Drug-treatment court

The evaluation additionally examined enrolment in substance use disorder treatment (**Figure 15**). Data suggest considerable enrolment in treatment, particularly medications for opioid use disorder. People engaged in legal, unsupported work had the lowest levels of engagement in substance use treatment, and those in a mix of legal and illegal unsupported work had the highest levels of enrolment, with the exception of non-pharmaceutical modalities, where those engaged with Eastside Works had the highest levels of enrolment. Overall trends may be in part attributed to previously identified incompatibilities between employment and the operational requirements of treatment engagement, particularly that characterized by daily supervised ingestion of medications for opioid use disorder.<sup>14</sup> Overall, evaluation data substantiates the capacity to accommodate active drug use by supportive economic engagement models as a key characteristic of these models, with further exploration of operational compatibilities between economic engagement and substance use disorder treatment enrolment warranted.

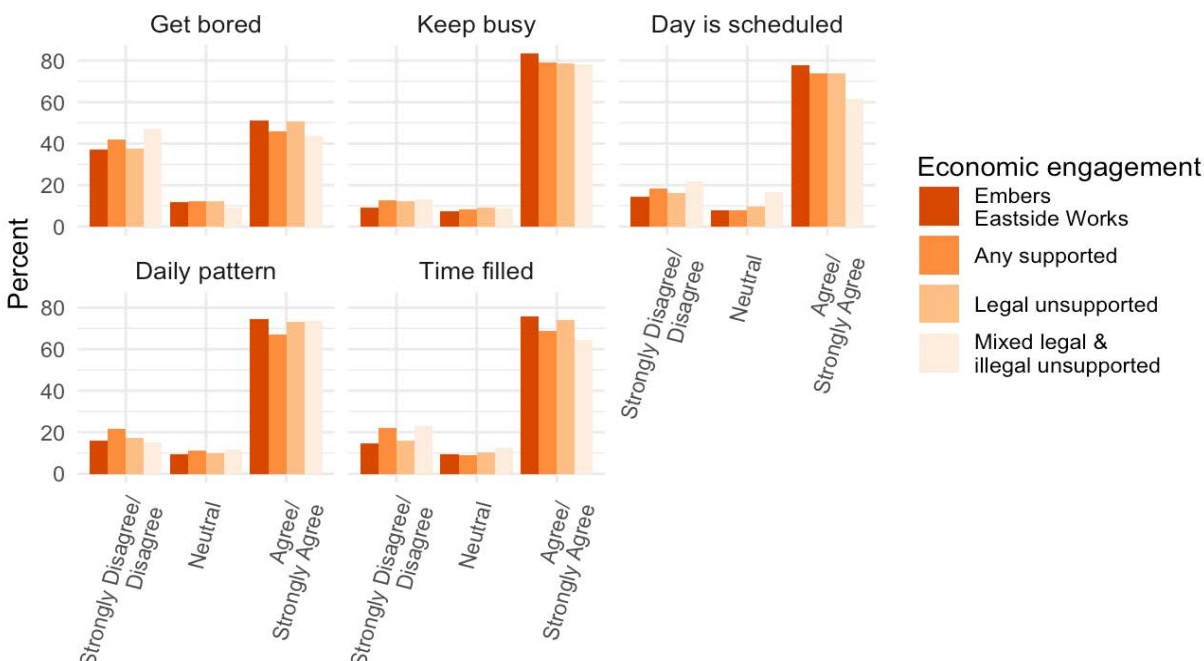
## Social and Psychological Benefits of Economic Engagement

The social and psychological benefits of work emerged as a major theme within participants’ economic engagement experiences. Research identifies social and psychological benefits of work including time structure, regular activity, collective purpose (i.e., a sense of purpose beyond individual goals), identity and belonging, and an expanded set of social interactions and relationships.<sup>68–71</sup> Many of these benefits are closely linked with mental health, and are generally less accessible to individuals who experience multiple barriers to employment, including people living in poverty, facing criminalization, institutional exclusion, and other dimensions of health, social, and structural disadvantage.<sup>72,73</sup> Low-threshold economic engagement opportunities that provide such benefits thus hold the potential to support the equitable promotion of social and psychological well-being. Participants elaborated on psychological and social benefits of economic engagement in their qualitative interviews unprompted, including sense of fulfilment, self-respect, purpose, and giving back to the community. Analogous concepts were observed in the survey data using eleven indicators pertaining to five broad social and psychological benefits (**Table 15**).

Table 15. Social and psychological benefits of work as measured in the ASSET study survey.		
Concept	Measure	How strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Regular activity	Getting bored	I get bored with my day-to-day activities.
	Keeping busy	The things I have to do keep me busy most of the day.
Time structure	Day is scheduled	Much of the day I've got things to do at regular times.
	Daily pattern	I plan my activities so that they fall into a particular pattern during the day.
	Time filled	My time is filled with things to do.
Social interactions and relationships	Variety of interactions	Most days, I meet quite a variety of people.
	Friends and workmates	I see a lot of my friends or workmates.
Identity and belonging	Felt respected	Society generally respects people like me.
Collective purpose	Fulfill purpose	My main interests/activities fulfill some purpose in my life.
	Collective goals	I am able to work with other people on goals and make progress on those goals.

The time-related benefits of low-threshold economic engagement were widely supported in qualitative interview data, with less pronounced but nevertheless informative distinctions in

survey data (**Figure 16**). For example, quantitative analyses suggest the existence of a gradient in the likelihood that participants report days that are more structured, through agreement with statements pertaining to having purposely scheduled days (i.e., “Much of the day I’ve got things to do at regular times,” and “My time is filled with things to do”). The gradient generally identifies the highest levels of time structure for those engaged in Eastside Works, followed by any supported economic activity, legal unsupported activity and finally engagement in a mixture of legal and illegal unsupported work. These patterns suggest that low-threshold economic engagement models support the time structure of individuals, with differences most pronounced for indicators of keeping busy or having a scheduled day.



**Figure 16. Time-related dimensions of economic engagement by type, April 2019 - April 2023**

The psychological and social benefits of time structure related to economic engagement were strongly pronounced in qualitative narratives. One participant highlighted the importance of having structure, regular activity, and social contact when contrasting their ability to access work through low-barrier opportunities with the lack of opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic, describing the effect on their mental health, self-image, rumination, and coping.

*“It felt great because everybody’s back in the game, everybody started working more, we all got to see each other more. But if people aren’t working, especially when, um, addicts and people with issues, when they’re not working, they’re doing other things or being alone or isolating. And once you’re isolating you get in trouble. Where you start thinking and bad things you saw in your head and yah de yah de yah de, it just snowballs from there. But if you’re generating money and you’re working and you’ve got something to do, it gives you some structure, it’s better, it’s healthier.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

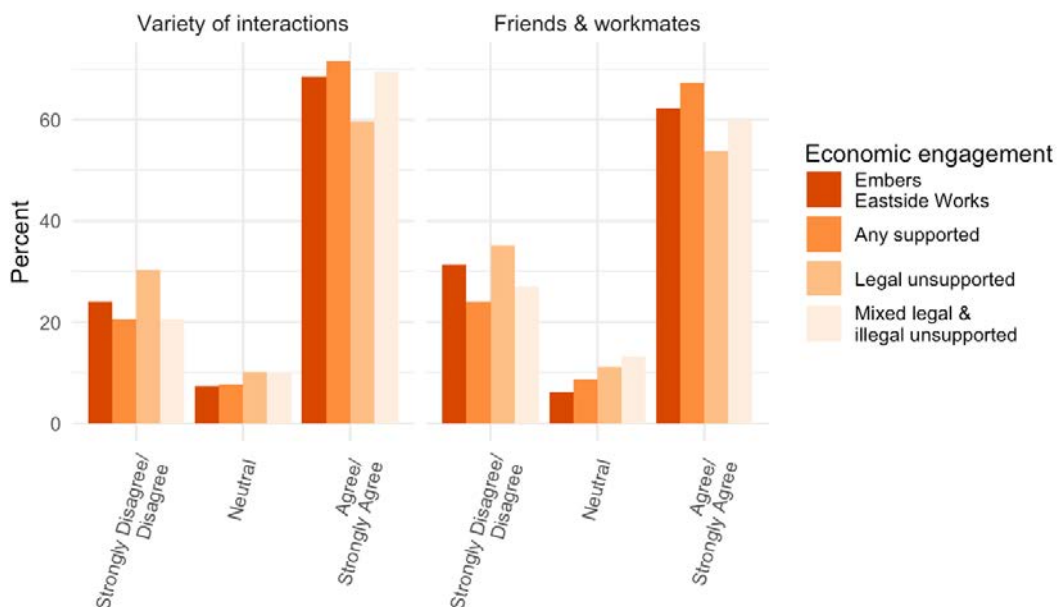
Even within a flexible economic opportunity where working time was unstructured, participants were often motivated to structure their time to enhance their contributions to the workplace. This was exemplified by one participant’s desire to build stronger connections with clients by keeping a regular schedule:

*“...most of the jobs I have I can come and go; there is no structure. I can go and put in two or three hours and take a break nicely. But I try to make a habit of going kind of at the same time so that I’m talking to the same people, so I’m being helpful to them.”*  
(Indigenous man)

These findings indicate how important engagement with low-threshold models are to the overall structure of participants’ lives, and how time structure shaped a day-to-day sense of purpose.

Of particular note are mixed results on participants’ self-reported levels of boredom (**Figure 16**). Boredom is a common challenge for those experiencing barriers to employment, and has been associated with lower mental and physical health.<sup>74,75</sup> In people with pre-existing conditions and complex trauma, the absence of resources to cope with boredom and isolation has been associated with amplified health harms.<sup>74,75</sup> Slightly lower levels of boredom among those engaged in mixed legal and illegal unsupported activities suggest that the expansion of the quantity of available activities or specific efforts to alleviate boredom by economic opportunity providers could better support outcomes in this area.

A notable contribution of low-threshold economic engagement models was increased social contact that produced opportunities to combat the isolation commonly linked to boredom, build social networks, and create regular social connections. Those that accessed low-threshold economic opportunities saw more of friends and workmates across the study period, particularly when compared to those accessing legal unsupported work (**Figure 17**).



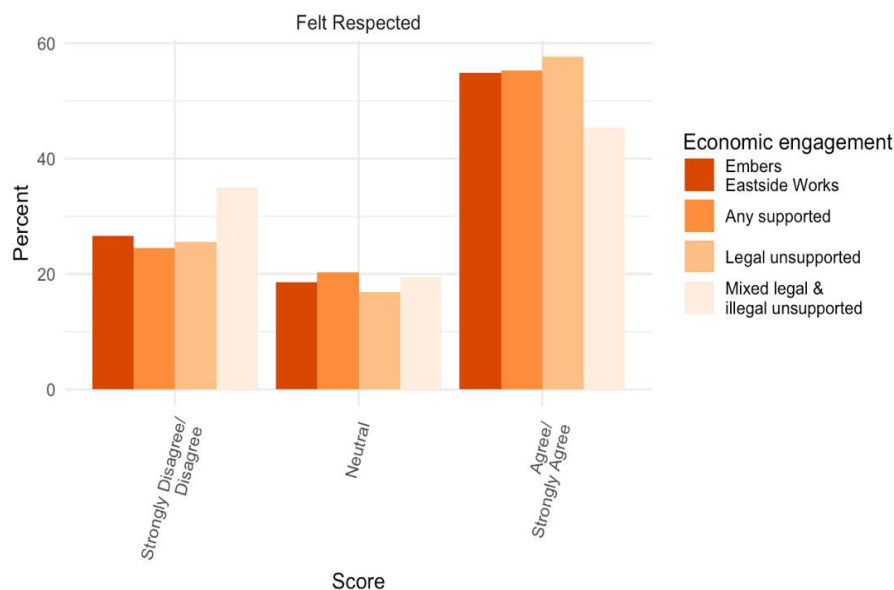
**Figure 17. Social benefits of economic engagement by type, April 2019 - April 2023**

Specifically, these models introduced connections to like-minded peers as well as organizational staff who became trusted friends, social contacts, and in some cases, peer mentors, which were widely identified in qualitative data as important dimensions of low-threshold economic engagement. Participants shared how new types of interpersonal interactions helped them to reinforce their visions for their lives. With these expanded networks, people became optimistic, seeing opportunities for personal development. As an Indigenous woman engaged with Eastside Works stated:

*“Oh, I love them, they’re just like my family. They love me too, ‘cause they talk, they always talk to me nice and I talk to them nice and that’s the kind of friends I want. Not like my past, my past is gone, this is my new life ... new people.” (Indigenous woman)*

As this quote shows, participants identified how expanded social networks through low-threshold economic engagement also expanded opportunities for participants to realize their future goals.

The expanded interactions and personal growth stemming from low-barrier economic engagement also represented a potential mechanism to shift participants’ self-worth. When asked whether they agreed with the statement “Society generally respects people like me” (**Figure 18**), those engaged with Eastside Works and other low-threshold opportunity providers were more likely to agree or strongly agree than those who were engaged in a mixture of legal and illegal unsupported. The potential for engagement in economic activity to increase self-perceptions of respect is important in light of existing research on the spillover benefits of self-respect for dignity, well-being, mental health and ongoing economic engagement.<sup>76 77,78</sup>



**Figure 18. Perceived respect by type of economic engagement, April 2019 - April 2023.**

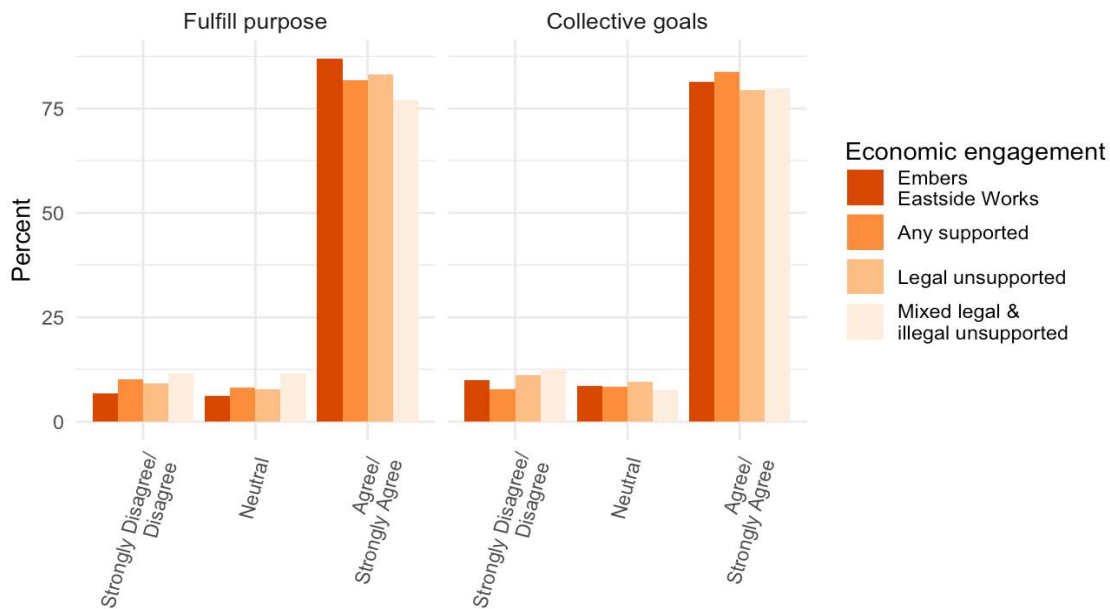
Participants’ qualitative reflections show that low-barrier economic engagement can be a mechanism to mitigate the impacts of internalized stigma related to their work identities. Because of their inclusive approach, low-threshold initiatives, in which participants were able to work no matter their past or current experience with work, drug use or training, and able to do so flexibly, were key to transforming participants’ work identities. Participants reported benefits to self-confidence, greater optimism, and a sense of community connectedness. For example, it commonly reinforced a growth mindset around their identity as workers:

*“And the [employment] was a positive experience for me... And kind of like I realized I could be like a functioning addict again, when I was at the [workplace]... Yeah, it just made me be able to actually like work, because of the job skills that they needed wasn’t really a lot, so I kind of like was able to like be on time for work, actually stay for the*



*whole duration of work. Yeah, like it made me kind of like train myself again, like to work...” (Non-Indigenous man of colour)*

Further, low-barrier economic engagement reinforced a greater sense of collective purpose, or a purpose outside of their own goals as workers. While differences across economic engagement types were small, they were notable. Participants who took part in low-threshold employment opportunities, particularly those who engaged with Eastside Works, reported higher levels of agreement with the statement that their activities fulfilled a purpose (**Figure 19**). Both those engaged in supported economic engagement, including Eastside Works, had marginally higher levels of agreement with the statement that their activities supported collective goals.



**Figure 19. Collective purpose by economic engagement type, April 2019 - April 2023**

Participants described this sense of purpose using the words, ‘productive member of society’, or ‘making a difference’ when referring to their economic engagement. Ideas of ‘contribution to society’ and ‘being useful’ were widespread in qualitative interviews. Notably, these feelings empowered participants, many of whom are contending with complex adverse experiences, trauma, and feeling a lack of agency.

*“Working day-to-day makes me have purpose. And makes me feel like I’m being a productive member of society. I’m contributing. I’m not just sitting in my pity. I don’t want to just feel sorry for myself anymore and stick a needle in my arm and just neglect everything. [I] think it’s okay to do that. For a little bit of time, it’s okay, because that’s what you’re going through, but after so many years, I think you should be accountable for helping your own self. Or else it’s just like you’re committing suicide. But there’s a lot of things that come into play, so I don’t know...” (White woman)*

In this way, providers had a role in supporting individuals as they worked through stigmatizing narratives about substance use, labour market engagement and poverty. Access to opportunities facilitated reimagination of how various barriers to employment factor into social narratives about their work and identities as workers.

Participants also spoke directly about how, when they were ready and the opportunity was appropriate for them, the challenges associated with work were motivating.

*“Also like with this training thing where we have to actually [do this work] ... But it’s good though, it’s a challenge, and like I said I’ve always loved everything to do with it, so to me if it’s a challenge it just means that I have to try harder.”* (White woman)

Importantly, the ethos of supportive economic engagement and individualized supports ensured such challenges had positive, rather than negative impacts. The cycle of failure and disengagement commonly described by participants in their regular labour market experiences was directly counteracted by supported economic engagement.

In sum, our evaluation broadly recognizes the close linkage between low-threshold economic engagement and health and well-being, as well as the exceptional capacity of low-threshold opportunity providers to adapt conventional labour market models to better support the health needs of their clients. Further, our data suggest that the social and psychological benefits of work were not simply outcomes of low-threshold economic engagement. Rather, economic engagement emerged as a mechanism through which individuals' existing values and perceptions around the benefits and contributions of working could be actualized. The importance of these non-monetary benefits for populations for whom standard forms of employment are inaccessible or incompatible with people's current life circumstances should not be understated. Benefits such as time structure, social contact, work identity, and collective purpose can have profound mental health implications. Given the psychological and social costs of living with poverty, criminalization, institutional exclusion, and other dimensions of social and economic disadvantage, low-barrier economic opportunity providers are crucial actors in promoting well-being for multiply-barriered communities. This was reinforced in community consultations and by Community Advisory Group members, who expressed the value of these opportunities, their intrinsic connection to well-being, their potential impacts on criminal activity, as well as their contributions to addressing the stigma associated with poverty and drug use, and enhancing social connectedness and quality of life.

## Discussion

This report outlines the mixed-methods evaluation of Eastside Works and other low-barrier economic opportunity providers, drawing on survey data, qualitative interviews, and insights and input from Community Advisory Groups and community consultation to outline the innovative ways that these models are reshaping economic activity among multiply-barriered individuals. A leader within this supportive and innovative economic ecosystem is Eastside Works, which offers employment services as a centralized, storefront opportunity provider and referral hub, strategically blending aspects of pre-employment services and employment services with supportive economic engagement models to create offerings that engage people at different opportunity types across the Livelihoods Continuum. Offerings aim to meet people where they are at in terms of skills, capacities for engagement and responsibility, commonly supporting non-linear or longer-term trajectories than other pre-employment and employment service models, and providing services that often resemble and are perceived by participants as work. As an employment services provider, the goal of Eastside Works is to prepare people to move into more stable employment within or outside of the ecosystem of low-barrier opportunities, and as such, a robust ecosystem of opportunity providers with diversified offerings is a critical component of community-wide efforts to support the economic engagement of people facing multiple complex barriers to labour market engagement.

This evaluation describes the economic engagement of those participating in programming at Eastside Works and the broader low-threshold opportunity ecosystem, highlighting key programmatic strengths that facilitate engagement and the unique adaptations undertaken by opportunity providers to promote initiation and retention in economic engagement. It also identifies areas for growth to expand and strengthen the provision of low-threshold economic opportunities. These strengths and best practices may provide insights into how employment services providers and employers more broadly can support economic engagement for people with complex intersecting identity- and circumstance-based disadvantages. On the whole, expanding these adaptations and the ethos of supportive economic engagement is aligned with key priorities identified in [Together BC: British Columbia's Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) and the development of a more equitable employment sector.<sup>79</sup>

Participant survey, qualitative interview data and community advisory board feedback also identify a fundamental tension between adaptive economic engagement models and existing institutional structures, including: (1) institutional frameworks for workers and opportunity providers; and (2) regulations around income supports. These tensions point to the potential for institutional and other reforms to create a more supportive context for those traditionally excluded from the conventional labour market and the organizations that develop economic opportunities for them. In this section we outline key findings and recommendations derived from the evaluation.

## Key Findings

### ***The Critical Role of Low-Threshold Economic Engagement Models***

This evaluation demonstrates that most multiply-barriered individuals not only want to work, but they want increased hours, equitable and adaptive compensation, and opportunities for high quality work, skills development, and advancement. For those engaging with low-threshold economic engagement initiatives, they want more work precisely because their work is

personally meaningful, accommodating to their capacities, and beneficial to their social, economic, physical and mental well-being. In these ways, low-barrier economic engagement plays an important role along the Livelihoods Continuum, providing accessible, equitable, supportive and empowering opportunities.

These models offer a range of material benefits to individuals, primarily through the provision of payment that accommodates the financial reality of community members (e.g., daily payment in cash; weekly cheque payments). They also, where possible, provide wrap-around supports that range from food and housing supports to referrals and support groups. Low-threshold opportunities also confer crucial social and psychological benefits, such as expanded social networks and a greater sense of belonging and life-purpose. In adapting conventional labour market models, low-barrier initiatives can transform negative self-perception of their participants and redress internalized stigma, particularly for those individuals impacted by negative work experiences. This evaluation highlights the potential for these models to contribute to broadly-defined well-being, and to begin to address longstanding challenges to labour market inclusion. They point towards the need for, as this evaluation recommends, sustained and ongoing support for the incubation and operation of innovative and adaptive economic engagement models that facilitate improved material, economic, social, and health security.

A leading example in this growing field is Eastside Works. As the following quotation from a qualitative interview demonstrates, Eastside Works changes the participant work trajectories, keeps them engaged, and shift participants’ outlooks:

*“You know what the day I walked into Eastside Works is one of the best decisions I’ve made in my whole entire life because for one when I walked in there like I said I was a dick and it kind of cured me and helped me along and it helped me self-realization that hey, things are not all that bad and I can do things and make a difference. And they’re always there for me. They are always there for me.”* (Non-Indigenous man of colour)

Eastside Works implements the key features of innovative economic engagement models in that it adopts an individualized, flexible, supportive, meaningful and pragmatic approach in delivering pre-employment and employment services. Eastside Works additionally serves an innovative and unique function in the economic ecosystem of economic opportunities in that it operates as a drop-in, storefront hub in the heart of the Downtown Eastside community, providing referrals to other opportunity providers, and endeavouring to tailor support and opportunities to individual need, capacity and intention. Greater investment into Eastside Works and other low-barrier models would further facilitate the ongoing innovation across the ecosystem in support of individuals who otherwise face considerable barriers accessing employment services and the labour market more broadly.

Importantly, our findings are reinforced by existing research on low-threshold models, particularly the emerging literature on peer-led drug intervention and rehabilitation programs. This research documents how peer workers are perceived in the community as more trustworthy and knowledgeable than other employees.<sup>8,35,80</sup> Peer workers also benefit from working in drug intervention programs. They have an increased sense of purpose as well as higher social and emotional support gained from their work in community care.<sup>34</sup> The current evaluation corroborates these findings in documenting how Eastside Works, as a low-barrier economic engagement hub, has similar benefits for the community of people that they serve, arguably additional advantages given their unique person-centered, hub-based and highly

accessible model. These and the many other strengths of low-threshold economic engagement models point to the value of continuing to develop sustainable low-threshold initiatives as part of the health and social service infrastructure in the community.

### ***Areas for Growth***

While promising practices are developing at the community level as service providers continue to develop innovative, client-centered approaches, participants identified a number of areas for growth and tensions with institutional contexts that challenge the full realization of the potential benefits of low-barrier economic engagement.

### ***Resources and Funding***

First, organizations providing low-barrier opportunities face considerable resource constraints that impact the quantity, quality and diversity of opportunities they are able to provide. These constraints also inhibit more fulsome collaboration within and between organizations and with other relevant actors such as government bodies or adjacent service providers. This was articulated by evaluation participants through concerns regarding a lack of stability, low pay, and limited opportunities for growth and mobility. Community advisory members also acknowledged the need for more growth and involvement within and outside the supportive economic engagement spectrum. Additionally, participants sought increased levels of involvement in the form of collaborative consultation, participation in decision making, and worker advocacy, with organizations having varying levels of capacity to engage participants in these ways. Such processes are important, but are also human-, time- and financial resource-intensive activities that low-threshold opportunity providers may not have the capacity to implement as fully as is desired, or may forego in the interests of directing resources to increasing the quantity and quality of opportunity provision. However, with sufficient human and material resources, providers could more effectively implement policies and processes dedicated to ensuring the concerns of employees and the community are more fully addressed and supported through internal and between-organization collaborative structures.

Additional resources could also strengthen low-threshold economic opportunity providers' initiatives to support workplace equity. Despite being – by design – equity focused, organizations still described the need for community-informed initiatives to support equity-deserving populations, and some members of racialized, gender- and ability-diverse populations described the consequences of insufficient or untailored supports. These experiences underscore how, a culture of supporting equity-deserving populations could be facilitated through, for example, ecosystem-wide, community-specific, equity-focused training platforms that include foci on de-escalation, anti-stigma and respectful workplace initiatives alongside resources to support organizational planning and programming.

### ***Institutional Frameworks***

Importantly, evaluation participant-identified areas for growth, alongside input from Community Advisory Groups and community consultations reveal tensions between key adaptations of low-barrier economic opportunities and frameworks for employment standards and protections such as those enshrined in the British Columbia Employment Standards Act (“ESA”), Worksafe BC regulations and other regulatory frameworks dedicated to formalizing employment relationships for workers and employers. That is to say that many of the adaptations undertaken by opportunity providers to make economic engagement accessible and sustainable for people



facing multiple barriers – such as scheduling and pay flexibility, as well as accommodation of periodic and unexplained absence, active drug use, and sometimes-intensive social, treatment, and health service utilization – are incompatible or in tension with many of the regulations for employees and employers under the ESA. The consequence for clients and workers engaging with low-threshold models is that they may be excluded from some of the benefits of formal employment, such as employer contributions to CPP and EI, as well as Workers’ Compensation coverage. PWLLE Advisory Group members additionally identified consideration for things such as retirement savings, tax exemptions and holiday pay as important advantages commonly conferred to employees that are generally excluded from low-barrier opportunities.

**Recommendation:** *Explore how to better accommodate adaptive low-threshold economic engagement models through the use of existing legislation and regulations, or, potentially, through the creation of a new category of economic activity that enhances access, protections, safety standards and benefits for participants and opportunity providers.*

While organizations and organization coalitions in the community can and do work to establish and implement best practices, there is significant opportunity to enhance or create more supportive regulatory frameworks that allow for the preservation of key strengths of low-threshold opportunities – the things that make this engagement “work” for people, alongside the development of more formal structures for those that participate in them.

### ***Income Assistance Regulations***

A final challenge participants navigated is the relationship between paid economic engagement and income assistance. For the majority of participants, the amount they received through income assistance was insufficient and required participants to seek out other income sources in order to “top up” their monthly support payment. Income assistance regulations, particularly those linked to earnings exemptions created significant administrative obstacles to increased economic engagement and barriers to increased financial security. Participants limited their hours, lowered their pay expectations, and spent considerable time and effort ensuring they were not subject to income assistance clawbacks or the retrenchment of ancillary benefits such as nutritional or transportation supplements. Individual stories from participants and Community Advisory Group members of the challenges and burdens of navigating income assistance regulations made clear such systems are not client-centered and fail abysmally to support people in pathways to economic growth and stability.

In this way, many participants were disincentivized from advancing along the Livelihoods Continuum, as “excess” involvement in work directly impacted their most reliable income source and their access to associated social and health benefits. The average income of our study participants, a group selected by their engagement with low-barrier opportunity providers, is significantly below the Market Basket Measure cutoff. As current support levels and earnings exemptions position recipients below the Official Poverty Line, it is important to acknowledge the under- and unemployment “traps” created by current support structures that disincentivize economic engagement and fail to address health and social equity. Opportunity providers consistently identified the constraints and inadequate thresholds of earnings exemptions even as they worked to design opportunities to be compatible with these constraints. They further expressed the challenges they experienced staying informed of income assistance regulations, providing appropriate compensation that did not risk their employees’ assistance and educating

employees about their entitlements and limitations. Despite being focused on low-threshold economic engagement, a core set of recommendations from this evaluation specifically focus on reform to the income assistance system given its consistent deleterious impact on the economic trajectories of barrierred individuals.

### ***Low-Threshold Economic Engagement as Ideal Work***

Despite the interlocking structural forces that make labour market engagement challenging, most participants valued the opportunities offered through low-barrier models and were interested in continuing and expanding their involvement with supported economic engagement.

*“I don’t know what’s in my future, but I’m happy where I’m at and, it’s ideal and I know it’s gonna lead to where I’m supposed to be in the future. I’m really excited to be working where I’m at, so.” (White man)*

Indeed, most participants identified this form of economic activity as their *ideal* work opportunity. Thus, despite resource, contextual and regulatory constraints, opportunity providers have developed innovative, accessible, equitable, supportive and empowering opportunities to not only address, but also reverse the effects of previous negative work experiences, stigma, and discrimination.

Strengthening these innovative models is one of the most direct means of ensuring meaningful opportunity, stability and security for multiply-barrierred persons. The positive impacts documented in this evaluation can be expanded through additional resources to increase the strength, scale and scope of opportunity provision and by adjusting regulatory structures to create a more supportive policy environment for opportunity provision and economic engagement. Achieving balanced conditions wherein individuals rely on an adequate combination of wage and income supports will require a coordinated effort, involving the multifaceted commitment of government, opportunity providers and workers. With such a coordinated effort, there is the potential that individuals at any point along the Livelihoods Continuum will enjoy the social, economic and health benefits of economic engagement as beneficiaries of a more equitable and inclusive labour market.

## **Evaluation Recommendations**

The below are specific recommendations from evaluation findings, community engagement activities and input from community advisory groups.

### **Recommendations for the Policy and Program Development**

- 1. Support the scale-up of low-threshold economic engagement opportunities**
  - 1.1. Provide expanded, ongoing and sustained funding dedicated to the creation and operation of innovative economic engagement models, recognizing the operational complexity and time and human-resource intensity of opportunity provision.
  - 1.2. Expand Provincial Employment Services, currently administered by WorkBC, to include adaptive, equity-promoting and tailored interventions for barrierred individuals seeking economic engagement and re-engagement in the workforce.
  - 1.3. Fund ancillary supports commonly provided alongside opportunities that facilitate the initiation of and retention in economic engagement.

- 1.4. Monitor, evaluate and disseminate data on participant and organizational economic engagement outcomes through broad indicators of social, health and economic well-being, with specific focus on equity, diversity and inclusion.
- 2. Expand access, equity and protections across the Livelihoods Continuum**
  - 2.1. Establish and disseminate best practices in low-threshold economic engagement to optimize access and beneficial outcomes for workers.
  - 2.2. Explore how to better accommodate adaptive low-threshold economic engagement models through the use of existing legislation and regulations, or, potentially, through the creation of a new category of economic activity that enhances access, protections, safety standards and benefits for participants and opportunity providers.
  - 2.3. Develop context-appropriate training, policies and programs to support equity-deserving populations and safe workplaces related to Indigenous cultural safety and humility, anti-racism, gender- and ability- inclusivity, stigma, de-escalation and respectful workplaces.
- 3. Revise and annually review the structure of income assistance regulations**
  - 3.1. Restructure income assistance regulations so that earnings exemptions for people receiving income assistance do not constrain their economic engagement, for example by minimizing or eliminating clawbacks.
  - 3.2. Restructure income assistance regulations to preserve, wherever possible, ancillary health and social benefits (e.g. nutritional support, transportation, etc.).
  - 3.3. Reassess earnings exemptions on an annual basis to better reflect variation in cost of living, inflation and other changes affecting the material security of recipients.
- 4. Build avenues for coordinated action across government, organizational and community actors**
  - 4.1. Increase collaboration across government ministries with mandates for education, pre-employment and employment services, and employment to streamline experiences of economic activity and the organizations that provide economic opportunities.
  - 4.2. Formalize consistent collaboration forums between provincial ministries and municipal government representatives, opportunity providers, scholars and people with lived and living experience that feature third party facilitation, shared agenda setting, and proportionally meaningful membership across groups.
  - 4.3. Affirm, strengthen and better utilize ongoing knowledge exchange networks to facilitate reciprocal learning, information sharing and the expansion of evidence-based best practice for low-threshold economic engagement support models across British Columbia.

## Recommendations for Practice

- 5. Strengthen organizational systems that support worker input and experience**
  - 5.1. Expand resources that support organizational consultation processes, improved channels of communication and feedback between workers and management, specifically around scheduling, workplace safety, wage transparency, and payment structures.

- 5.2. Explore compensation and benefit standards that balance organizational capacity, resource limitations, and fair compensation that does not invoke a “peer penalty” where similar work is paid differently.
- 5.3. Expand processes that meaningfully involve and represent workers in leadership and decision-making.

## **6. Tailor employment practices to meet community needs**

- 6.1. Expand efforts to support the development of long-term planning, growth trajectories and progressive economic engagement for workers that recognizes non-linear pathways, engagement across organizations and flexible time frames.
- 6.2. Identify and implement appropriate supports for workers to minimize their exposure to workplace hazards and violence.
  - 1.1. Offer flexible payment approaches that center material needs, financial planning and economic security.

## **Conclusion**

There are numerous complex, intersecting structural and systemic barriers that make conventional labour market engagement inaccessible to many populations who, in spite of these limitations, want to work. Filling this gap, low-barrier economic engagement serves the critical function of making meaningful, supportive, and flexible work accessible to individuals who may otherwise find themselves unemployed or in employment that may be unsustainable, or that may expose them to conditions that undermine their health and well-being. In contrast, low-barrier models keep multiply-barriered people engaged in work-related experiences that accommodate their unique health and financial needs, and that support them across the Livelihoods Continuum. Although not permanent, individuals can move through this ecosystem of (pre-) employment services and supportive work opportunities, gaining transferable and soft skills, confidence, motivation, and material benefits that will help them navigate formal and informal labour markets. Involvement with these initiatives also offers clients and workers access to the myriad benefits attached to employment, and that enrich individuals and society more broadly. While this report has focused on the impacts of low-barrier models on populations facing multiple barriers in the Downtown Eastside, the best practices outlined here have relevance beyond this context, specifically for other populations facing complex barriers to economic engagement.

The value and positive impacts of low-barrier initiatives on the economic security, health, and well-being of populations who face systemic barriers to employment are evident. From this report, there is significant evidence to support focusing on how existing programs and opportunities can be expanded to increase the scale and breadth of opportunities, sustained to promote ongoing engagement and adequate compensation, and maintained as community-driven initiatives to ensure that the expertise and needs of people who face barriers remain at the heart of operations. With the provision of more resources, the revision of income assistance regulations, and the extension of formal protections, low-threshold economic opportunities can more appropriately address the needs of barriered individuals, particularly as they shift to reflect changing economic, social, political and environmental contexts. While the broader employment landscape will continue to fluctuate, low-barrier initiatives keep multiply-barriered individuals current, thanks to their adaptive, forward-looking, person-centered approaches.

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## Appendix – Community Advisory Board Members

The following are partial lists of members on the Assessing Economic Transitions (ASSET) Study Community Advisory Groups who wishes to and were willing to be identified by name

### ***Indigenous Advisory Circle***

Elder Roberta Price  
Diane Campbell  
Robert Chippeway  
Marvin J. Delorme  
Hector Hil Gy'ax

### ***Person with Lived and Living Experience***

Bryan Alleyne  
Dianne Campbell  
Paul Henry  
Jeanette  
Matt Lottridge  
Samona Marsh  
Melanie Pratt  
Jason Scherer  
Richard Shields

### ***Organization Community Advisory Board***

Sarah Beley – *Executive Director, Working Gear Clothing Society*  
Tara Chang-Swanson – *Manager of Momentum, Mission Possible*  
Brienne De Man – *Manager of Charitable Programs, Binnens' Project*  
Michelle Lackie – *Executive Director, Exchange Inner City*  
Kathleen Leahy – *Director, UBC Learning Exchange*  
Johanna Li – *Director, EMBERS Eastside Works*  
Tara Taylor – *Executive Director, SpencerCreo Foundation*  
Lara Debie – *Business Skills Training Lead, Employ to Empower*  
Alberto De Castro – *Business Skills Training Coordinator, Employ to Empower*

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