17 It's Everybody's Business: Raising the Roof's Private Sector Engagement Project

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Solutions to homelessness are often considered the responsibility of NGOs, various levels of government, and the individuals experiencing homelessness. Homelessness, however, affects everyone in society – morally, socially, and economically. Hence, genuine solutions require action across society, including the private sector. In short, we believe that homelessness is everybody's business. After years of neglect, there is a growing consideration of the ways in which the private sector can play a role in addressing social problems such as homelessness (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Change Toronto, 2010; Street Kids International, 2008; Burnett & Pomeroy, 2008). To date, however, there is little research that outlines successful strategies to engage the private sector in this work. Realizing this gap, Raising the Roof sought to learn more about increasing private sector involvement in solutions to youth homelessness through our "Private Sector Engagement Project", one component of Raising the Roof's Youthworks initiative.[1]

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1. Raising the Roof launched its Youthworks initiative in 2006, which is aimed at breaking the cycle of homelessness among young Canadians. During the first phase we released the report *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions*, which gave voice to nearly 700 youth experiencing homelessness. The second phase is aimed at advocating for the recommendations made in this report through a combination of community, government, and private sector engagement, as well as by designing a public education campaign. For more information visit www.raisingtheroof.org.

The private sector can contribute to solutions to homelessness in many ways, including donating money to service organizations and lobbying for change from government. Although these are very important and necessary contributions, we are particularly interested in strategies to engage the private sector in supporting the integration of at-risk and homeless youth into the labour market through training, mentorship, and employment opportunities. There are currently a myriad of community agencies across Canada that work tirelessly to prepare youth for employment by helping them secure their basic needs and develop valuable life and employment skills. While this work is vital, it relies on youth having access to jobs where they can apply their newly learned skills. Everyone, at the beginning of their career, needs someone to give them a break, and this is particularly true for at-risk and homeless youth, who often lack the invaluable connections and supports necessary to find entry-level jobs.

Raising the Roof's "Private Sector Engagement Project" was created with two intentions: first, to learn about the ways community agencies are currently working with the private sector, and second, to use knowledge gained from this as a catalyst for change in attitudes and hiring practices within the private sector, thereby paving the way for new employment opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth across Canada. In this chapter we review the existing literature on private sector engagement, and outline some of the major findings from this project, particularly with regard to strategies that both community agency and private sector participants have recommended for engaging the private sector. We will also discuss the major challenges identified in doing this work. We conclude by discussing next steps for this project, as well as the ways in which homelessness affects all Canadians. We argue that for this reason, all segments of society must work together towards a solution to homelessness; there are important roles that different stakeholders can play in this process.

Existing Literature

While some Canadian research examines the effectiveness of employment training programs for at-risk and homeless youth (see Robinson, 2005; Robinson & Baron, 2007; Karabanow et al., 2010, for example), to date, very little investigates specific strategies for engaging private sector employers. Some authors have articulated the importance of the private sector becoming involved in social concerns in general, such as Porter & Kramer (2011), who suggest that capitalist enterprises can include both social and business goals. The authors argue that the social service and private sectors exist in a mutual relationship where each depends on the other. Businesses require healthy communities made up of citizens who can buy their products, and communities require successful businesses to provide jobs and create wealth. Hence, "shared value" can be created where

both profit-making and healthy communities are of equal importance (Porter & Kramer, 2011:4). Porter and Kramer argue that not only do businesses have an ethical obligation to the community, but by building stronger and more vibrant communities, businesses will also be able to increase their profitability.

Some literature highlights strategies for employers looking to hire youth in general, as well as calls for the social service sector to hire individuals with experience of homelessness. For instance, the City of Toronto (2009) has published a tool kit for the private sector, which highlights the benefits of hiring youth, provides suggestions for working with "generation Y", and outlines myths about hiring youth (i.e. they will be disrespectful, disloyal, have a sense of entitlement, and lack a strong work ethic). Another report, Change Toronto (2009), outlines strategies to help the social service sector hire persons with lived experience of homelessness. These include developing more inclusive policies and practices and pushing municipal governments to work with organizations to develop social enterprises (businesses focused on providing employment to people often excluded from the labour market). Organizations should also increase entry points so that individuals can get their 'foot in the door', including establishing volunteer and internship positions, holding job fairs, and hiring people with lived experience of homelessness for relief positions. Additional support should be provided once an individual is hired, including a lengthy orientation and frequent supervision so that employees can speak directly to employers about their needs (Change, 2009).

In terms of outlining specific strategies to engage the private sector in solutions to homelessness, the literature is very scarce. Two exceptions exist. Street Kids International (2008) identifies seven critical factors necessary for an effective partnership between the private sector and NGOs, including a clear purpose for the partnership, compatibility in terms of mission and values, clear and valuable roles for both organizations, open lines of communication, a process of continual learning, and a commitment from both parties to the relationship.

Burnett and Pomeroy's (2008) report, developed for the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, provides seven case examples of programs in Canada where the private sector is involved in initiatives related to homelessness, including hiring individuals with experience of homelessness. Their main focus is to outline the motivation of private sector participants, as well as the benefits they receive as a result. They found that while private sector members were primarily motivated by philanthropic or social reasons, they did in fact receive several bottom-line benefits as a result of their participation, including social branding (a good reputation in the community), new business opportunities and sources of labour, stronger human resources, and safer and more attractive communities.

Burnett and Pomeroy (2008) argue that a two-tiered strategy may be necessary to engage the private sector in solutions to homelessness. The first element requires recruiting 'corporate champions' who have experience hiring individuals with current or past experience of homelessness. The second strategy involves building the capacity of community agencies to promote the benefits of hiring homeless or previously homeless individuals to businesses and society as a whole through marketing strategies, as well as assisting community agencies in assessing their local context and opportunities.

Methodology

After initial research was conducted with 25 community agencies and corporations across Canada currently involved in employment/skills-training programs for at-risk or homeless youth, eight community programs were selected to partner with Raising the Roof for a year-long research study. The eight programs include:

- A.C.C.E.S.S. – BladeRunners, Vancouver, BC
- Community Futures Development Corporation of the North Okanagan – EMPLOY! Vernon, BC
- Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY) – Growing Opportunities, Winnipeg, MB
- St. Christopher's House – Toronto Youth Job Corps (TYJC), Toronto, ON
- Carpenters' Union Local 27 – CHOICE Pre-Apprenticeship Program, Vaughan, ON
- Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre – Youth Retail Employment Program, Ottawa, ON
- Spectre de Rue – TAPAJ, Montreal, QC
- Choices for Youth – Train for Trades, St. John's, NL

The agencies were selected to represent a diverse sample geographically (5 different provinces), as well as a diversity of program models and types of training/ employment opportunities provided (from retail to construction to 'green' jobs). Researchers visited each community agency, and semi-structured interviews were administered with agency staff, their private sector partners, and youth participants. In a few cases, focus groups were conducted with agency staff. A total of 63 youth were interviewed, as well as 31 agency staff and 31 private sector participants (n = 125). Agency staff assisted in the recruitment of youth and private sector members, who included both current and past participants. Programs varied according to the criteria youth had to meet in order to participate (for ex-

ample, in some programs the youth had to have housing, whereas in others they did not), as well as their definition of 'youth'. For instance, programs funded by Service Canada defined youth as individuals between the ages of 15-30. This was the age range used in this sample, although the vast majority of youth were between the ages of 18-25, with a mean age of 20.3 years. Nearly all of the youth were housed at the time of the interview, although most identified precarious housing situations in the past. This most likely reflects the strong need for an individual to have secure housing before they can maintain employment, as well as the assistance provided by agency staff in ensuring that the youth's basic needs are met. Youth were offered a $30 honorarium for participating. Unfortunately, due to limitations in scope and the chapter's focus on engaging the private sector, results from youth interviews will not be discussed in this chapter.[2]

Strategies for Engaging the Private Sector

Both agency and private sector participants were asked to recommend strategies for engaging the private sector. The most commonly suggested strategies were 1) promoting the agency's employment program in the community, 2) building relationships based on honesty and reciprocity, 3) choosing the right businesses to approach, 4) initiating contact in a thoughtful manner, 5) pitching the benefits of participating, and 6) keeping the process as simple as possible for private sector partners. Each will be discussed in turn.

Getting the Word Out

Businesses might be looking for innovative ways to get involved in their community, but might not know how to do so. Several agency staff spoke about the importance of promoting their employment program in the community so that potential private sector partners can become aware of opportunities to collaborate. Various methods were outlined, including having an up-to-date website and social media sites, hosting community events, and placing ads in the newspaper. Others adopted more proactive methods of engaging businesses. One participant suggested inviting members of the business and political communities to speak to the youth at the agency in order to raise awareness of the program within the business community, hopefully making those businesses more receptive when the agency goes in search of youth employment opportunities. Other methods to raise awareness included having a 'meet-and-greet' night for local businesses to come and learn about the program, and having agency staff attend job fairs, rotary clubs, boards of trade, and monthly trade-related meetings.

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2. The full report can be found at: http://www.homelesshub.ca/Library/View.aspx?id=55210

When promoting the program, several participants suggested that agency staff bring testimonials from members of the private sector, such as a quote from the CEO of a partnering company who has had a positive experience with hiring marginalized youth. In general, using 'corporate champions' or private sector partners who feel passionate about their involvement and are willing to encourage others to do the same, can provide a very powerful peer influence. These findings mirror those reported by Burnett & Pomeroy (2008). Private sector champions can open doors to employment positions in other businesses in a way that most non-profits cannot, as they have vast networks and are better positioned to understand the needs of the business community.

Several agency staff discussed the importance of recognizing and promoting the work of their private sector partners using any platforms available to them, including their website, community events, newspapers, and newsletters. A few agencies have also provided awards to their long-time partners. For instance, BladeRunners has held banquets and award ceremonies to honour their loyal partners, and TYJC paid tribute to a partner who has remained with them for 20 years.

Relationship Building

Most agency staff identified relationship building with business partners as the most important factor in developing a successful partnership with the private sector. While respondents varied in how they described relationship building, most understood it to be a personal, empathetic and long-term process with mutual and practical benefits. Relationship building was described as an ongoing process that can take time to develop (possibly beginning long before a youth is hired), and that continues throughout the employment period, and afterwards if possible. At its very core, relationship building starts with understanding the business. This means doing your research. For instance, Kim from EMPLOY stated:

> *I think it's about really learning the business...because every business is different, so really finding out what they do, how they do it, what works for them, what's their culture, really finding out what their mission statement is, what their bottom line is, and trying to match a youth who might be best suited for that business.*

Most interviewees agreed that basic research on what the company does, who is authorized to make decisions, and the general environment and philosophy of the business is essential. It is also important to understand the context in which the company operates. This includes understanding the sector, and any regulatory or political issues they may be facing. Doing your research before initiating contact, shows that you are interested in not only meeting your own

objectives, but are committed to making the business more successful as a whole; as such, it is a way to invest in the relationship building process.

Honesty is a crucial element in engaging the private sector, so that potential partners are willing and prepared to face the challenges that may occur while working with at-risk youth. While most private sector partners overwhelmingly agreed that their overall experiences with the youth were positive, many did report some challenges. In some cases these issues were resolved with or without help from the agency, but in other cases, the employment placement did not work out in the end.

While every effort should be made to ensure the youth and partner are a good match and are prepared to work together, long-term involvement in the program will likely yield an occasional unsuccessful placement. This is why relationship building is so important. When a long-term plan was in place, or at least when the big picture was emphasized over immediate benefits, and when agencies were honest about some of the challenges that might be ahead, partners appeared to understand the nature of what they were getting into, and were more prepared to face the challenges. They were also less willing to give up on the program if a placement did not work out, and were often quite dedicated to not only addressing problems but learning from them. While some private sector participants expressed that their partner agency could do a slightly better job of ensuring youth were ready for work and truly understood the jobs they were placed in, these concerns did not appear to weaken commitment to the program. Whereas this should certainly be addressed by the agency, it is not always possible to avoid these problems, so having a strong relationship with the business seemed to reduce the damage done by missteps on the part of the agency or youth.

Finally, relationship building requires patience and flexibility. Using the 'hard sell' approach to quickly close the deal is not appropriate in this situation. It is important to show enthusiasm, but showing an interest in the needs of the business and highlighting how their organization can improve not only the lives of the youth they take on, but the community as a whole, is a more effective method. This approach, however, may take time. In most cases, commitment to participate in the program did not occur on initial contact but after several meetings, after talking with different levels of staff or after a period of deliberation. Roz from Choices for Youth stated: "Build the relationships. You know you might not get the answers you want right out the door, but leave it open". It is important that the business take the time to consider whether they can provide the necessary environment and to ensure that they will be in a position to hire the youth after their 'trial' period ends, should the placement work out. Also, because every business and youth is unique, it is important to be flexible. A one-size-fits-all approach will not suit every interested business or youth. In addition,

the amount of ongoing support needed will vary. Depending on the size and level of commitment to the program, some private sector partners took on more of the responsibility for supporting youth than others. Some businesses, particularly those where the program was integrated into human resources, were in a better position to provide support to youth, whereas others seemed to rely more on the agencies. This is not to say those that relied more on agencies were less enthusiastic about the program; they simply lacked the capacity to provide support to the same degree as other organizations. A part of the relationship building process is figuring out how much of a role the partner wants to play and adapting to that.

Choosing a Business to Approach

When considering which businesses to approach, it is critical that the needs of both the business and the youth are taken into consideration. Jason from RaY stated:

> [We] try to make it a good fit so we're not just throwing kids wherever, they're in a place that makes sense for them to be with a business that understands what the program is and has bought into the program.

Therefore, it is also important to be selective in the types of businesses that are approached. Many of the programs offer practical benefits such as wage subsidies and employee pre-screening services that may attract the wrong type of partners, including those who fail to see the 'big picture' and are interested in securing free or cheap labour alone. It is the responsibility of the agency to ensure that the business is capable of providing the type of support the youth need and that partners are in for the long haul. Businesses must provide a supportive environment where youth receive training in the duties of the job, and possibly also some coaching in professionalism and how to conduct oneself in a business. While this may not be an issue for all youth, some may not be used to basic aspects of work, such as getting up on time, interacting with supervisors, and appropriate workplace behaviour (i.e. not wearing an mp3 or talking on your cell phone during working hours). While it is important for employers to express their concerns over such conduct, without the right approach, youth may feel embarrassed, ashamed, angry, or even victimized. In a truly supportive environment, youth realize that they are not being attacked personally, but are being provided with a learning opportunity and a chance to improve so that these lapses become less common over time. It is important to note that these behaviours are not exclusive to at-risk youth, and may occur with all employees. In fact, many private sector partners expressed facing similar challenges from regular employees, and those who did make comparisons, did not see the 'burden' as being significant, even if more support was needed than with their regular employees.

The process of finding private sector partnerships and ensuring an appropriate fit begins with choosing which private sector partner to approach. Organizations that operate with an explicit socially-conscious mandate were a natural target for agencies. For example, Boon Burger seemed like an attractive target to RaY because they specialize in organic foods and use environmentally-responsible packaging and disposal methods, and thus, appear to be a socially-conscious business environment. While providing socially-conscious products does not guarantee a positive reception, it does increase the likelihood that the owners are mindful of other community issues as well. In most cases, however, private sector partners were not directly in the business of providing a socially conscious product or service. In these instances, agency staff suggested approaching businesses that have a well-defined human resources department, a corporate social responsibility mandate and the capacity to provide a supportive environment.

Social responsibility is a great start, but other factors contribute to a comfortable learning environment for youth. Three of the programs profiled in this study provide training for youth in the trades (Choices for Youth, BladeRunners, and Carpenters' Union Local 27), which is likely a suitable placement, as youth often work alongside people who come from similarly challenging backgrounds or neighbourhoods, yet were able to find success through the trades. Many of the youth interviewed commented on how they felt comfortable around their mentors in the trades, and likewise many of the staff reported that they saw themselves in the youth. For instance, Alex from Choices for Youth stated:

> *I grew up downtown too, I even know some of the people they hung around with, so at first I think they kind of looked down upon me, but they realized, this is what is going on with him, he's kind of like us and he changed, so I know I can do the same thing.*

Although there is some debate on the subject (which we will return to in the discussion section), service environments like Harvey's and Boon Burger may also be appropriate as they often hire other youth who, despite coming from less troubled backgrounds, are similar in age to the at-risk youth hired, and may share common interests and dreams. This type of normalization is important, as it gives youth a chance to identify with their mainstream peers. Mike from EMPLOY also noted that the service sector may be more willing to take on unskilled workers, and that smaller businesses tend to be easier to partner with than larger corporations. This may be because they have more to gain from the benefits (i.e. wage subsidies), or because there is less corporate bureaucracy in their hiring processes. In terms of the construction industry, new developments were often the targets of partnership requests. Garry from BladeRunners described reading the newspaper regularly to see if any new developments were being built in

Vancouver, and then setting up meetings with the developers to ask how they could get their youth working on these projects. He also spoke of a councillor at City Hall (one of the founders of BladeRunners) creating 'community benefit agreements' when a new site was approved, requiring development companies to hire a certain number of local employees, which Garry was ready to provide. In addition, new developments were described as ideal as they create new jobs once built and businesses move in, or services, such as janitorial, are required.

Initiating Contact

A diversity of strategies was reported for finding private sector partners. The most common strategy was simply networking. For example, Lambrina at Toronto Youth Job Corps finds contacts from "One Step", a network of non-profit organizations that deliver training and employment programs in Ontario. She also suggested forming relationships with local Business Improvement Associations (BIAs). Presenting at BIA meetings and networking within these organizations may be a good approach, as members are often sensitive to the needs of their community. Another participant suggested asking the board members of an agency if they have connections in the business community, or even asking business associates to join their board, in order to make contacts.

In most cases, networks were informal in structure but based on the professional experience of agency staff. Networking strategies included working with other community agencies and organizations to build networks, as well as asking existing private sector partners for leads. One participant suggested approaching businesses currently involved with the agency, such as donors. Businesses currently donating funds to an agency might not be aware of other ways they can contribute to their communities. Even personal networking played a role. For instance, Dave from EMPLOY described making contacts through activities such as skiing and golfing, and Shawn from TYJC discussed meeting people on public transit and talking to them about the program.

When contacting a potential employer for the first time, it is important to choose the appropriate person to contact. This is where research becomes important. For smaller organizations, it may be as simple as contacting the store or site owner. When navigating a complicated corporate structure, however, most respondents recommended taking the time to find out who the decision makers are. For some, this meant reaching upper-level executive staff or human resources personnel. Where trades were involved, there was some disagreement on whether developers should be approached initially, or if it was more efficient to contact the subtrades directly. Of those with existing contacts, most used their contact to set up a meeting with the appropriate decision maker. While having

a contact provided a clear advantage, the same concepts of research, relationship building and genuine interest in youth remained important.

In terms of method of contact, the most effective method described was presenting the program in person, rather than over the phone or through email. While one successful partnership did form through email presentation, this type of pitch was usually done face-to-face. Many cited this as important to the relationship building process, but also highlighted the fact that email communications in particular are too impersonal and are often ignored. Most businesses are flooded with various offers and spam, and emails are easy to disregard. Making the effort to come in person makes the program stand out, shows dedication and allows for the relationship building process to begin. Some noted that face-to-face communication is a better way to tap into the moral/emotional benefits of the program. Favoured locations for the meetings were in the business themselves, or in the case of corporate clients, in a relaxed setting like a restaurant.

The Pitch – Highlighting the Benefits of Participating

When making their pitch to potential private sector partners, agency staff highlighted the importance of being honest and up-front about both the advantages and disadvantages of hiring at-risk youth. As previously mentioned, all agreed that nothing is to be gained by sugar-coating the process, as missteps are to be expected and an appreciation for the big picture is needed. Several participants articulated the importance of tailoring the pitch to the company. For instance, does the agency provide a particular type of training, such as WHMIS[3], that may appeal to the employer? How does the potential partnership fit into corporate culture, company philosophy or community image?

When participants were asked to identify the most important message to convey to prospective partners, the majority emphasized the benefits that employers receive by taking part in the program (similar to the findings of Burnett & Pomeroy's (2008) research). After all, even the most altruistic business person needs to consider the bottom line. The benefits highlighted included wage subsidies, agency screening and support, access to trained, quality employees, positive public relations, and strengthened communities. With the exception of Choices for Youth and the Carpenters' Union, which pay their youth directly, and TAPAJ, which has employers pay the full wage, all of the programs profiled in this study offer full or partial wage subsidies to employers for a set period of time. The subsidy is provided with the expectation that youth will either get hired directly by the company or be trained in the skills necessary to enter the competitive job

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3. Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System.

market. Wage subsidies were a very important motivation for many private sector partners, as they remove the economic risk of taking on the youth. One employer stated that it usually takes 2-3 weeks for a new employee to become productive, and in some cases, given their inexperience and barriers to learning, it could take longer. By lessening the financial risk, both agencies and employers agreed that participation in the program became more likely. Interestingly, Heather from Intact Financial Corporation reported that the wage subsidy was not a factor for her company when they considered partnering with TYJC. She stated:

> We really wouldn't feel comfortable taking that. I mean our messaging is that we're trying to give back to the community, but at the same time, how could we take money from a city program or from whatever that is, to subsidize what we would have spent anyways.

Hence, wage subsidies may not be such a motivator for large corporations, particularly if they are not creating a new position for the youth, but filling one that would need an employee regardless of their partnership with an agency.

Another benefit these programs provide is valuable pre-screening and support services that can save employers time. After spending a minimum of several weeks with the youth, agency staff are usually in a great position to select those they feel are ready to hold a job, and are most capable of doing the job. Adrien from RaY articulated this point:

> And just making sure that they [the employers] understand that ultimately we're making the placement or the decision about who will be placed there as the result of a sort of selective decision making process. We're not just some employment agency that's just throwing someone their way and hoping it will stick. We're selecting someone whose personality, whose skills, whose interests seem to be a really good fit for your organization. So really identifying that I think helps them to understand that we're not just hoping that whoever will take them… there's some serious thought put into the decision-making process.

This selection process was very important for small businesses, who often do not have a human resources department. While employers still wanted to interview the youth themselves, the referral process was far less difficult than creating job postings, interviewing a large number of applicants, and potentially hiring applicants that do not work out.

In addition to providing valuable HR services, agency staff are available to provide support to both the youth and the employer throughout the duration

of the employment period. If the youth require support for any personal or employment related problem, agency staff are there to assist them. Similarly, employers are not left alone to resolve any concerns that might arise with the youth. Simon, an employer from Natural Cycle Courier highlighted this point:

> Just to let them [other employers] know that RaY does a lot of the supporting as well. Like if there's any issues that came up, RaY was pretty responsive in dealing with it right away. So for the workplace to know that you're not on your own hiring someone that has come from a more difficult background. There is support for the workplace in a situation like that.

In addition, because many programs offer pre-employment training and certification, program youth often became attractive candidates as they were better qualified than some other applicants. All of the programs profiled in this study provide a variety of training opportunities, such as WHMIS, fall protection, customer service excellence, and first aid. They also offer valuable life skills and employment readiness workshops. This training is an asset to employers, who would otherwise have to provide it themselves. Every private sector participant interviewed described gaining access to at least one, but often more, high-quality employee through their agency partners. One participant highlighted the importance of tapping into every available resource for skilled workers, particularly as many workers in the baby-boom generation prepare to retire. Several employers discussed the ongoing challenge of finding high-quality employees who would remain loyal to their organization. Rhiannon from West Bank Projects Corp. spoke about how her work with BladeRunners helped in this regard:

> Well I think when it works, it really works. You get these incredible employees that are very loyal. And you can't buy that, you can't always find that. A lot of times there is huge turnover on a construction site, and there's not a huge turnover for BladeRunners kids.

In all cases, the benefits to companies in terms of employee recruitment, training and retention were highlighted during the pitch. Some agencies went a step further and offered additional services to their private sector partners, which can be particularly useful for smaller businesses. For example, one agency used a staff member who also teaches human resources courses to educate private sector partners on conducting orientations, providing training, and developing HR guidebooks and tools to effectively evaluate employee performance. While not all agencies have the capacity to offer these additional services, where it is possible, it is a great way to demonstrate that the agency understands and is dedicated to the business. It is also a great way to maintain ongoing contact and communication.

Finally, agency staff and members of the private sector, spoke of how businesses can benefit both directly and indirectly by giving back to their communities. Directly, businesses are able to build a positive reputation as an organization that cares about their community, which attracts socially conscious customers and employees. Similarly, companies are able to highlight their partnership in marketing and public relations materials. Indirectly, businesses benefit from having healthy communities full of people who can buy their products and services. Garry, a coordinator from BladeRunners, calls this opportunity "an economic windfall," as youth who were previously using social services become tax-paying employees, and more skilled workers are added to the workforce.

It should be noted that several participants from the private sector spoke about the importance of giving back to the community whether they obtained any benefit or not. For instance, Thomas from Boon Burger in Winnipeg stated:

> *Right now, the benefit to me, is the gratification of being able to help someone like Bill [4] out, which is like, very rewarding, you know, just to think that he has gone through like such hell in his life and to know that he enjoys coming to work here, and you can see how he is making friends here, you know what I mean? It's really nice to see. I know it sounds kind of corny, but you can't really put a monetary value on it.*

Keeping it Simple

As a final note, several participants from the private sector expressed the importance of keeping the process as simple as possible for business partners. This involves calling or visiting them at an appropriate time (for example, in retail, not while managers are busy), having all necessary information available for them, and not bombarding them with paperwork. It is important that the pitch be made in an efficient manner, and that agency staff have answers to potential questions or concerns ready. Agencies should make the hiring process as seamless as possible, and be readily available to support employers should any concerns arise.

Challenges in Engaging the Private Sector

While all agency staff appeared very passionate about their work and about the need for the private sector to become involved in their programs, many challenges were reported. The main challenges described were 1) a lack of resources, 2) strong competition with other youth and agencies, 3) a scarcity of quality jobs with adequate pay, 4) the recent economic crisis, 5) difficulties

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4.   Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

making contact with decision makers, 6) employer fears, and 7) challenges maintaining relationships with employers if a placement did not work out.

Availability of Resources

The most frequently reported challenge faced by the agencies in this sample related to funding. The availability (or lack) of ongoing funding impacts an agency's ability to seek and maintain partnerships. Without secure, long-term funding, it may be hard to develop a long-term plan or relationship with employers. Dave from EMPLOY described this difficulty: "[funding has] been a real issue with the partnering and the ability to develop long-term relationships. I mean you never know if the program is going to be here next year".

Ongoing support is also a condition necessary for the comfort of potential private sector partners interested in participating. While all agencies received positive reviews from their private sector partners, some agency staff pointed out the challenge of providing support to partners in the resource-limited environment of the non-profit sector. While agency staff work tirelessly, long-term success may require additional training that the agencies simply do not have the capacity to provide. For example, some private sector partners suggested that additional training in social skills, literacy and numeracy, and support for substance abuse issues would make the experience less challenging, though they recognized that this was not possible.

In addition to being short on resources, agency staff are increasingly evaluated by funders based on the number of youth employed at the end of the program. If numbers are not high enough, agencies run the risk of losing that funding source. While at first glance it makes sense to ensure that agencies are accountable to their funders in this way, this type of pressure can put agency staff in the difficult position of recommending youth for positions that are not an ideal fit, so that they can continue to produce high employment statistics. Funders very rarely require long-term statistics, so while a youth may be employed at the end of the program, this does not ensure that they will be in several months time, or that they are gaining the skills and experience needed to build a career. This pressure to place youth in jobs may also endanger relationships with private sector partners who are counting on agency staff to find appropriate candidates for their organizations. Moreover, while finding employment is obviously a successful outcome, for many of the youth who have faced tremendous barriers in their lives, some of the greatest benefits they receive during participation in these programs are less concrete, such as gaining social support, or an increase in self-esteem. While these benefits will ultimately help youth move forward in their lives, they cannot be captured by statistics and often go unrecognized.

Availability of Jobs/Competition

Finding employment can be challenging for youth in general, including for those who have high school or post-secondary educations. Many of the youth in these programs do not have a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), and often have little work experience. It can be difficult for agency staff to get employers to take a chance on these youth, particularly if there are more qualified applicants available. Moreover, competition does not only come from the competitive job market, but in some cases from other agencies running employment programs. This appears to be particularly true for those working in large cities such as Toronto and Montreal. Lambrina from TYJC recalls hearing from potential employers, "you're like the ninth agency that's called us," particularly during the recession. Two respondents from TAPAJ also noted that agency competition has been a significant challenge, particularly when the program was first established.

A related difficulty faced by agency staff is finding quality jobs with reasonable pay for the youth. While the definition of a 'quality job' may vary from person to person, it should include interesting, challenging work that is within the youth's ability. The types of jobs offered to youth, excluding those in a specific trade, are often low-skill customer service positions including fast food and restaurant positions, various retail positions, general labour, and in one case, a bicycle courier position. Of course, this is to be expected given the limited education and work experience of the great majority of the youth. There was disagreement among participants as to whether any job is a positive step forward for youth, as they are able to get 'a foot in the door' and can develop transferable skills such as social and job maintenance skills (punctuality and attendance, for example). Other participants stood firm on the need to place youth in jobs that they can structure a career around. For instance, Garry from BladeRunners states:

> I think the message too that we want to get through to potential funders or private industry… is that we're not just trying to get them a job, it's long-term attachment to the workplace, building careers. It's not just getting them a job, getting them out the door, getting rid of them. We want to see these kids in careers in this industry.

This may be easier for agencies using a training model for a specific trade such as BladeRunners, The Carpenters' Union and Choices for Youth, which all provide on-site training to prepare youth for a possible career in the construction industry. Unfortunately, however, challenges exist in this model as well. Youth are often given specific, repetitive tasks, and options for employment outside the program environment may be limited.

While it is to be expected that the positions available to at-risk youth are entry-level, the problem is that many of these positions do not provide a living wage. This is important, as poverty itself affects readiness for work. Without adequate income, it can be difficult to keep stable housing so that youth can rest and prepare for work the next day. It may affect food security, and hunger can affect performance. Travelling to and from work can become difficult to afford, and the stress of chronic poverty can also impact concentration, attitude and energy levels. It can also make quick money available through the underground economy more alluring. While small businesses are a good target for agencies due to higher community involvement and less red tape, they may lack opportunities for advancement. Even retail stores and restaurants that appear to offer opportunities for advancement in their administrative offices are unrealistic, as these positions are often given to those with post-secondary education. In fact, like most occupations, the retail and hospitality sectors have become academic disciplines in many colleges across Canada, and most advanced positions within these large companies require some type of post-secondary education, leaving youth without this education stuck in the lowest positions in the organization. To be sure, many agency staff noted entry level positions that their youth are capable of performing well that do provide opportunities for career advancement. Office work, for example, can be a great starting point, as general administrative skills are highly marketable, can be used in any sector, and can be added to gradually. Moreover, several programs assist youth in furthering their education, such as Choices for Youth, which dedicates one morning per week during their program to GED prep or other literacy training. Hence, while employment opportunities are vital to helping at-risk and homeless youth move forward in their lives, it is critical that educational opportunities also be made available to ensure long-term success.

Economic Context

If the availability of quality jobs is a significant challenge for agencies trying to engage the private sector, it is not hard to imagine that the recent global economic crisis has created additional challenges for private sector engagement in youth homelessness. Economic downturns are often associated with layoffs, increased focus on the bottom line and less concern for social responsibility. Employers are also less willing to take what they perceive to be risks. Many agency staff reported that the recent economic downtown created additional challenges for them in their work, particularly in terms of finding employment for the youth. As many Canadians lost their jobs in the recession, competition for available jobs became quite strong. Many Canadians who worked in skilled, well-paying jobs found themselves working in service or general labour positions that are the main target for employment programs. This not only created additional competition with regard to numbers, but also put youth in direct competition with adults with many years of experience,

and in many cases, post-secondary education. Lambrina from TYJC said:

> *There may be a woman who is working in an office where there have been cut backs and ends up getting a job at Tim Horton's or Harvey's because that is all that that person can get at the time, and they have bills to pay, so you know, so I think the recession has created a little bit of competition in a lot of those jobs.*

Similarly, Dave from EMPLOY explained how his small town of Vernon, BC was affected by the recession:

> *Our forest industry has taken a hard hit, our Grasslands closed, our RV manufacturing they shut, capital foods shut, so lots of big industries with the recession, took a big hit...So I think that's a big challenge. Front Line Global, a big call centre, used to be here, moved out too, I think they took their business off shore, and that employed 300 people. So lots of our industries left.*

Even programs with established partners, like the trades prep programs, faced tremendous challenges during the recession. For example, BladeRunners and the Carpenters' Union both faced a shortage of work due to the recession. Very few new developments were created, and current sites were shut down. Staff from both organizations described this as being particularly hard for their youth who face harsh economic realities and need to be working. It was difficult to get the youth to remain positive and motivated during these hard times. On the flip side, one agency respondent reported increased interest in his program during the recession due to the wage subsidies. However, these 'partners' may not be appropriate as they are only looking for short-term gains and may not provide long-term support. As such, an additional challenge for agencies is to take extra precaution in assessing the motives of potential partners during times of economic turmoil.

Making Contact

Making contact with potential partners in the private sector, and specifically with the right person within the organization, can be challenging for agency staff at times. While it was recommended in the previous section that face-to-face meetings be arranged with potential partners, these meetings can be difficult to secure, particularly if businesses are flooded with other requests from non-profits or charities. Several participants, such as Tony from TYJC, stated that it is especially difficult to get the attention of key decision makers in private sector organizations: "You're continually calling the HR departments, being transferred and transferred...waiting and waiting. There are just

so many challenges you have to go through". Speaking to those in authority is important, as several participants described speaking to employees who were very keen on participating in the program, only to find that those in a higher position were not interested. For instance, one respondent spoke about the enthusiasm he often gets from store managers at various locations only to be told later that head office does not wish to form a partnership with the agency.

Employer Fears/Stigma of Youth Homelessness

Several participants described the challenges they face when telling employers that they work for an agency that supports at-risk or homeless youth. A common reaction is that either there is 'something wrong' with the youth, or that they are dangerous. In this sense, it can be a tough 'sell' for agency staff, who not only have to convince employers of the importance of the program, but also educate them about the youth they work with. One participant discussed how he regularly has to give employers background on who the youth are, what kind of situations they may come from, and what kind of barriers they face in gaining employment. Another respondent spoke about how many employers are uninformed about homelessness in general, and how he works to increase their understanding of this issue and of the circumstances youth experiencing homelessness face.

This challenge not only affects employer willingness to hire at-risk youth, but also the types of positions they may offer. For instance, some employers will send youth to the back of their stores where they do not have any interaction with the public, or will refuse to train them in certain tasks, such as handling cash. This can be a barrier to youth learning valuable skills and increasing their confidence. Finally, due to the perceived risk of working with at-risk youth (or any population with barriers), some organizations have policies against working with employment agencies such as the ones profiled in this study.

Burning Bridges

Unfortunately, sometimes the fear expressed by employers is grounded in reality. Although every private sector participant in this study indicated a willingness to continue working with their community agency partners in the future, several agency staff spoke about difficulties in forming long-term relationships with employers after a placement does not work out. The reality is that due to tremendous barriers and the often troubled pasts of these youth, it is likely that some placements will not be successful. One agency stated that some youth may even sabotage themselves once they reach a position of success, perhaps because they feel overwhelmed or afraid. In these scenarios, agency staff reported working to control the damage however they

could, but some employers still chose to withdraw their participation.

One agency staff described how he attempts to prevent this by being up front with employers about this possibility. He stated that in general, if employers do not understand this risk, it is probably best that a partnership does not form. Agency staff also try to provide support to employers when a position is not working out by speaking to the youth themselves, and in some cases firing the youth. Of course, the problems that might arise in these placements are not unique to at-risk youth, and are a risk that employers must take with any employee. Some employers explained that they accept this risk, understanding that by taking a chance they have the potential to help a youth with few other options. For example, Rhiannon from West Bank Projects Corp. stated:

> You need partners that really understand that it's about more than getting a person on the site to do a job, it's about changing a life. When you think about it in those terms, you're more willing to roll with the punches of it. And you know having people on site that don't work out, that happens to the best of us. We have, you know, graduates with their MBAs, Master's in Development that don't work out. It's no different than any employee. Not everyone is going to work out.

Conclusion

Many community agencies such as the ones profiled here work tirelessly to ensure that at-risk and homeless youth have their basic needs met and acquire the skills necessary to maintain employment. This work, however, depends on the presence of employers willing to take a chance on youth whose life opportunities may have been limited, and to provide jobs where their new skills can be put into practice. Private sector engagement, therefore, is crucial to providing youth with pathways into the labour market. We are not arguing that increased employment opportunities will single-handedly solve youth homelessness. We are reluctant to contribute to the misguided notion that 'getting a job' is the only barrier preventing young people from escaping homelessness. Solutions to youth homelessness require a holistic approach, one that addresses both individual concerns and broader structural barriers. This involves a well-coordinated strategy including emergency services (shelters, drop-ins), long-term services in areas such as mental health and addiction, and structural changes such as an increase in affordable housing, universal access to post-secondary education, and the availability of quality jobs that pay a living wage. Homeless and at-risk youth face multiple barriers to employment (most notably, finding housing), which must be addressed before they can realistically be expected to hold a job. It is our intention to

address one component in an overall strategy: engaging the private sector, which has traditionally been overlooked when developing solutions to social problems such as youth homelessness.

Increased private sector engagement in itself will not solve youth homelessness. In fact our message is quite the opposite. We believe that homelessness is an issue that affects everyone in society, and thus requires action across society. This includes governments, community agencies, *and* the private sector. Homelessness affects everybody in Canada, and it is therefore necessary that all segments of society work together towards a solution. Engaging the private sector in no way lessens the responsibility of the government to address homelessness. In an era of massive debts and pressure to introduce austerity budgets, there has been increased pressure on governments to withdraw spending on social programs, such as employment programs for homeless and at-risk youth. Agencies are increasingly being asked to seek private dollars to fund their programs, or are provided with short-term funding with the expectation that they will obtain an alternative source for the long-term. This, of course, will only make the problem worse, as the agencies profiled in this study require long-term, stable funding from public sources, *as well* as solid partnerships with the private sector. In this sense, our call for increased private sector engagement assumes that there will be continued, if not increased, public funding.

By bringing various segments of society together, we can begin to develop a more comprehensive strategy to address youth homelessness. While it is only one component of an overall strategy, much can be gained by increasing the involvement of the private sector in training and employing homeless youth (and in addressing homelessness in general). Raising the Roof's research suggests there are many benefits of private sector engagement, including but not limited to:

1) Homeless and at-risk youth have the opportunity to participate in meaningful job placements and potentially gain long-term, permanent positions. Increasing opportunities for youth with few options allows them to develop the skills needed to structure a career, and perhaps instils hope for a brighter future when previously there was none.

2) Private sector engagement can lead to meaningful collaboration between businesses and the non-profit sector with the goal of addressing important social issues. By engaging a sector that has traditionally been left out of discussions about solutions to social problems, the two sectors can work together towards a common goal rather than being pitted against one another.

3) Businesses and their staff have the opportunity to directly contribute to solutions to youth homelessness by changing the lives of the youth they work with.

4) Such engagement nurtures and supports a collaborative, community-based response to homelessness – citizens can work together to strengthen their own communities.

5) It can lead to the development of new understandings of youth homelessness. As more people have direct contact with youth whose lives have been affected by homelessness, a greater awareness will develop regarding the hardships and barriers to employment many youth face, hopefully challenging common stereotypes and misperceptions.

In this paper, we have identified not only the goals of private sector engagement, but also key strategies for engaging the private sector. In addition, we highlighted some key challenges to consider when engaging the private sector. All of this information is intended to help communities engage the private sector in ways that will benefit the community, and in particular, homeless youth.

Moving forward, the findings from this research will be used to develop a major report and two toolkits: one for community agencies and one for the private sector. We are currently working on a distribution strategy to ensure that our work reaches a large audience of community agencies and private sector companies across Canada. We hope to stimulate further collaboration between community agencies and the private sector, ultimately resulting in increased employment and training opportunities for at-risk and homeless youth. We will use the strategies and suggestions gathered from this research to strengthen the capacity of community agencies to approach and work effectively with the private sector, and to be a catalyst for a change in attitudes and hiring practices within the private sector.

Homelessness affects all Canadians morally, socially, and economically. The only way for society to exist in a peaceful, cohesive, and productive manner is to ensure that *all* of its citizens are taken care of. If we wish to live in a peaceful and relatively crime-free society, we need to address the exclusion and deprivation of some, which leaves them with few options but to turn to alternative, sometimes criminal, means to survive. Homelessness also exerts a financial burden on society. The costs of emergency shelter, social services, health care, and the use of the criminal justice system to 'address' homelessness is extremely expensive, much more so than putting money into preventive measures such as affordable housing and income security (Wellesley Institute, 2010; Gaetz, 2012). By ensuring that all of our

citizens have access to housing and employment, not only are the costs of services drastically reduced, but there are more people to contribute to our tax base and stimulate the economy through increased spending. Furthermore, the costs incurred in terms of the lost potential of these youth are incalculable. With current demographic shifts, such as the mass retirement of the baby-boomer generation, society needs a skilled and knowledgeable population of youth to take their place. On a moral level, how a country takes care of its vulnerable citizens reflects its priorities and values; it is a statement of the kind of country we want to live in. For these reasons, we hope that through our work the most important message of all can be heard – homelessness is everybody's business. Our work has demonstrated that there are ways to increase the engagement of the private sector in solutions to youth homelessness. We have also learned that in many cases, members of the private sector would like to contribute, but do not necessarily know how. Although there are challenges in doing this work, it is ultimately a worthwhile initiative, one that can help tens of thousands of youth reach their true potential.

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