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## CASE STUDY

### ACCESS BladeRunners

Canadian Homelessness Research Network

ACCESS BladeRunners is an innovative Vancouver-based program that supports homeless and at-risk youth between the ages of 15 and 30 through a comprehensive training and support program that focuses on creating pathways to jobs in the construction industry. The core goal of the program is to provide young people with the support and resources they need to overcome the difficulties and barriers in their lives that prevent them from obtaining, and maintaining, meaningful long-term employment. ACCESS BladeRunners has quickly emerged as one of the key youth assistance programs in Vancouver. More than just an employment placement program, ACCESS BladeRunners provides its participants with education, job training, and access to an extensive and comprehensive support structure. Employing a client-centered, individualistic approach, ACCESS BladeRunners tailors the program to meet the specific needs and challenges of each youth.

One of the key strengths and unique features of ACCESS BladeRunners is the degree to which attention is paid to embedding Aboriginal cultures, practices, and traditions within the program (approximately 90% of participants are of Aboriginal descent). Aboriginal youth face increased barriers to employment, such as inadequate housing, family breakdown, addiction and/or mental health issues, involvement with the criminal justice system, and/or educational disengagement. ACCESS BladeRunners recognizes the role that community and family play in the lives of Aboriginal youth, and thus have structured the program in a way that is simultaneously respectful and supportive. Their model gives Aboriginal youth a chance at establishing a career and a new life, and features an environment that is positive, supportive, and understanding.

## Background

The original BladeRunners program began in 1994, when a group of activists observed a growing number of homeless youth in Vancouver, particularly within the downtown eastside area. They dreamt of creating opportunities for at-risk, disadvantaged, inner-city youth by training them to meet the labour needs of the local construction industry. They felt that, if these youth could be trained to work in the construction industry and be provided with the education and supports necessary to manage the responsibilities that arise from this newfound independence, all while maintaining a stable source of income, they could potentially break free of the barriers in their lives and the cycle of homelessness. They saw an opportunity to test this hypothesis in the form of a nearby construction project: GM Place (now Rogers Arena), which was a large-scale arena built to house, among other things, the Vancouver Canucks hockey team. The labour requirements of GM Place were an ideal trial for a pilot project, which would soon become the backbone of the BladeRunners program model. For the pilot, twenty-five job placements were secured, allowing the prospective model to be tested, and for twenty-five youth to gain highly desirable experience in the construction industry.

Following the successful pilot, BladeRunners began working directly with the construction industry in order to provide their participants with potential sustainable careers. One of their greatest successes has been the renovation of Woodward's, a landmark department store in downtown Vancouver, which dates back to 1903. Vacant for over a decade, and with the help of BladeRunners, it was revitalized and now houses retail spaces, a recreational centre, and social housing units. In November 2011 it was announced that BladeRunners will assist with the renovation work being done on Vancouver's former Remand Centre. This project, which will transform a space formerly home to a series of jail cells, will create 95 units of new affordable rental housing, 38 of which will be utilized in July 2014 by BladeRunners to house program participants (BC Housing, 2011).

After 18 years and dozens of successful construction projects, BladeRunners has become a vital tool for ending homelessness in Vancouver and has helped over a thousand youth become stably employed within the construction industry.

Although BladeRunners was originally created as a response to the needs of at-risk youth and has expanded across the province, it became obvious that a large number of Aboriginal youth were benefiting the most from the program. Seventy-two per cent of participants throughout the province in 2012 were Aboriginal youth; 90% of youth served by ACCESS BladeRunners in Vancouver were Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal people make up a large percentage of the homelessness population in Vancouver and are often marginalized from mainstream services and sup-

ports. For the purposes of this case study, we will focus our attention on the ACCESS site in Vancouver (in operation since 2002) and its innovative mission of working with Aboriginal youth who have had considerable difficulty maintaining employment as a result of significant barriers or hardship in their lives, including discrimination, lack of adequate housing, inadequate education, and addictions and/or mental health issues. The program strives to give young people the opportunity to realize positive, long-term goals in their lives. Connecting employment training to housing, educational supports, community-building, and an Aboriginal-focused program, ACCESS BladeRunners is designed to contribute to the social, professional, and personal development of its program participants.

## About the Program

ACCESS BladeRunners succeeds because of the all-encompassing nature of their response to Aboriginal youth homelessness. The program addresses the barriers that keep their participants in a state of poverty and unemployment. ACCESS BladeRunners is a low-barrier program that assists young people who are most at-risk, and may be facing housing, addiction, mental health, criminal justice, and/or educational issues. With support from ACCESS BladeRunners, youth are able to obtain, and more importantly, maintain, employment. They provide a level of support that goes beyond the typical employment assistance program, giving participating young people access to housing, education, food, clothing, counseling and other forms of support. Of these elements, housing is of particular importance, as Senior BladeRunners Coordinator Gary Jobin outlines, “ninety-five per cent of the kids we work with are homeless when they first start the program. Our need for affordable, stable housing is unbelievable” (BC Housing, 2011). Though providing young people with employment opportunities is at the core of ACCESS BladeRunners’ mandate, establishing structure in the lives of participants is also an important element of their program model. ACCESS BladeRunners does not provide temporary solutions; participants are provided with the tools, support, and opportunities they need to establish a career, gain confidence, and improve their quality of life. To this end, enhancing the education of young people while they are in training is seen as key to improving their long-term employability.

Participants in the program are motivated; that is ACCESS BladeRunners is looking for young people who are ready and committed to making a change in their lives. Applicants to the program undergo a series of interviews to assess their needs and suitability for the program. The interviews prepare the applicant for subsequent stages of the program, as well as situate them and their needs within the overall structure of ACCESS BladeRunners. As the program is highly individualized, these interviews help ensure that each participant has a support system tailored specifically to their needs. ACCESS

BladeRunners goes to great lengths to assist both male and female youth, and as a result, approximately one in four ACCESS BladeRunners are female (Galway, 2012). Following these interviews, the applicant will participate in the ACCESS BladeRunners' training program and receive a job placement.

For new ACCESS BladeRunners, training is conducted over a period of four weeks. The first week is comprised of life skills and cultural awareness training. During this week participants are educated on basic life skills, including workplace etiquette and expectations, home life and maintenance, and money management. As the focus of ACCESS BladeRunners is to support Aboriginal youth, the cultural awareness units teach participants about different Aboriginal cultures, practices, and traditions. The second week is the health and safety week, where participants complete their WHMIS certification, fall protection training, occupational first aid training, and are generally provided with the knowledge needed to remain safe on the job site. The third week, called the experiential week, requires that participants put the previous weeks' training to use in real-world situations and learn further job-specific skills. Working in a training centre, participants learn basic power tool handling and maintenance and gain insight into the jobs they will be doing. They also work on a series of construction projects in a controlled environment. This week's activities are all done in partnership with the Squamish Nation and certified Aboriginal trades people. The final, fourth week of training is called the enhancement training week, and at this time, participants are given the opportunity to branch out from traditional construction into different roles and learn new skillsets. This includes flagging (traffic control) and forklift training. Following the successful completion of the four-week training session, participants transition to a job placement on an actual job site. Job placements are not short term or temporary positions. These are legitimate positions, where the youth are hired into real positions within the construction industry. Ideally, these placements will set youth on a long-term career path, but in instances where this is not the case, participants are able to return to ACCESS BladeRunners, speak with staff, and try again with another placement.

ACCESS BladeRunners offers a full spectrum of services, and staff ensure that while in the program, participants are fed, clothed, and sheltered. During the four weeks of training, participants are provided with breakfast and a hot lunch ensuring that hunger is not distracting them from their training. To round out the day, dinners are covered by the participants themselves, but as they are given a \$25 daily stipend during these four weeks, they are not left without the means to feed themselves (Galway, 2012). As well, they are given the tools and equipment they need to succeed on the job site. Hardhats, work boots, tool belts, hammers and even work clothes are provided to the participating youth. This ensures that participants are able to show up to their jobs ready to work.

Participants also receive housing supports. During the four week program, if necessary, staff will make arrangements for participants to find housing through local partners. Following training, they are able to take advantage of monetary supports, which assist them in arranging their own, long-term housing solutions. One of these supports is a fund called the “rent bank” (Galway, 2012). This fund exists to provide financial assistance to participants who are attempting to secure housing following the program. Should they need help making rent, or need help putting down a deposit for a new rental agreement, this fund helps ensure that the youth stay housed, so that they in turn, can stay employed. They are given access to this rent bank without contract or interest, or expectation of repayment. The only caveat being that the BladeRunners who access these housing funds are reminded that repayment will afford this same opportunity to future BladeRunners (Galway, 2012).

These supports are all equally important, as they ensure that the basic needs of all ACCESS BladeRunners participants are taken care of. Youths who do not need to worry about food, shelter, or clothing are then able to focus on the training, getting the most out of the program, and starting their potential careers.

## **The Keys to ACCESS BladeRunners’ Success**

ACCESS BladeRunners has shown that it is possible to support at-risk Aboriginal youth through training, education, and employment opportunities. The program’s longevity has been the result of having a team of highly dedicated staff, as well as an innovative program and support model. The following are some of the elements that have combined to make the ACCESS BladeRunners program a success.

### **Creation of Real and Sustainable Jobs for Marginalized Youth**

ACCESS BladeRunners is not a training program that merely builds individual skills. They focus on engaging the private sector and trade unions in their work to help transition young people from training to sustainable employment opportunities in the local construction industries, as well as other employment areas, including hospitality and the creative arts.

### **24/7 Support**

ACCESS BladeRunners is successful because the level of support participants receive during pre-employment and employment stages remains constant. From the moment they are brought into the ACCESS BladeRunners program, participants have access to the program’s support model, twenty-four hours a day, seven days

a week, for as long as they feel is necessary. The staff who underpin the support model are called *coordinators* and are crucial to the success of the intensive support model. They help new ACCESS BladeRunners deal with their troubles, barriers and newfound responsibilities. They are called if a participant has an issue on the jobsite or after-hours. They ensure that program participants get to work on time, and are fit for work. When issues arise, they take participants aside and help them through whatever challenges may be troubling them. Whether the situation calls for an advocate, a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on, or just a new pair of boots, the coordinators are there to support the program's youth in any way they can.

ACCESS BladeRunners' coordinators are dedicated and enthusiastic. As with any strong program, it is necessary to have the right staff in place to ensure fidelity to the program model. These staff are trained to provide support for participants on both a professional and personal level. Many participants will not have necessities such as a bank account, identification, or health card, and it is the responsibility of coordinators to assist young people with these types of issues. Additionally, coordinators negotiate jobs and positions for participants, ensuring they receive a rate of pay equal to industry averages.

Overall, the program recognizes that even after a participant gains employment, the barriers in their lives may still be present. Having access to ACCESS BladeRunners' high and constant level of support, even while employed, ensures that participants have the necessary support to help them maintain their employment and continue to positively develop over the long term.

### Aboriginal Focus and Leadership

ACCESS BladeRunners focuses on helping at-risk Aboriginal youth. In terms of housing, employment, and education, the experience of Aboriginal youth can be markedly different from the greater population, and lends itself to a unique set of challenges and barriers.

For many of the Aboriginal youth who come to ACCESS BladeRunners, completing high school is no longer seen as a priority. The formal education system has proven to be a negative, alienating experience, fraught with marginalization and a general dismissal of their cultural heritage. A report from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found that many youth felt that the traditional education system inadequately prepared them to understand their positions as Aboriginal within society (1996). This report also found that many youth were alienated to the point of being ashamed of their culture, which only serves to further marginalize these youth, drive them away from education, and erect a barrier that will have negative ramifications for their future development and employment.

ACCESS BladeRunners, which not only features Aboriginal staff members, also includes cultural awareness and appreciation as part of its training curriculum and strives to maintain an environment that is culturally positive. A study conducted by Kunz, Milan, and Schetagne also found that many Aboriginal youth have had difficulty maintaining long-term employment due to instances of discrimination or marginalization in the workplace (2000). As a result, ACCESS BladeRunners goes to great lengths to support their participants while on the jobsite. In addition to the elements of training that prepare the youth for the stresses and pressures of working in the construction industry, ACCESS BladeRunners' job coordinators continue to be available to the program's Aboriginal youth, even after they have completed their training. Emotional and psychological barriers that have kept these youth from maintaining long-term employment may still exist following the training program, so having access to job coordinators who are trained in coaching and supporting youth through potentially difficult situations is an important element of the ACCESS BladeRunners' system. Having access to a network of individuals who understand their struggles and challenges is incredibly beneficial.

In addition to providing education and training, ACCESS BladeRunners encourages their participants to embrace their backgrounds, and provides opportunities to work with educators and contractors from Aboriginal backgrounds.

### Ongoing Participation of Program Graduates

ACCESS BladeRunners creates opportunities for program graduates to remain engaged with the program. When participants are finished with the training component of ACCESS BladeRunners, many continue to be involved in the organization. Known as Senior ACCESS BladeRunners, these program veterans provide unique insights into the program, its challenges, stresses, and benefits, all to help new participants manage their new duties and responsibilities. This can include helping with the programing and being a mentor to new participants on the jobsite. It is extremely helpful for young people in the program to interact with Senior ACCESS BladeRunners who share similar experiences and who understand their fears and questions. It is also important for them to see that with the program, success is possible. For Senior ACCESS BladeRunners, there are also additional benefits. It allows them an opportunity to 'give back' to a program that has supported them. They are able to put their personal learnings to good use and enable other at-risk Aboriginal youth to move forward with their lives. This ongoing engagement allows them access to both staff and Senior ACCESS BladeRunners, ensuring that they have a comprehensive support system at their disposal whenever they may be experiencing challenges in their lives.

## Partnerships

It is important to note that, although the support model is a key element of the BladeRunners program, equally fundamental to its long-term success has been BladeRunners' ability to develop lasting partnerships with the construction industry, local partners, and the provincial government. In its infancy, BladeRunners did not benefit from having a peer organization or successful model from which to draw influence. Its founders saw the construction of GM Place as a great opportunity to address homelessness, and the subsequent program model was born out of a perceived necessity within their community, not because it was a proven concept. Quickly establishing strong, positive partnerships with the construction industry and provincial government was crucial to BladeRunners' long term success, as it represented secured funding for program operations. BladeRunners is a high-profile program, with housing, training, support, and employment components. Despite their high level of status, they, like many small organizations, struggle with securing adequate funding for their programs. Much of the funding they are able to secure is earmarked for specific tasks or aspects of the program, such as housing or training, and this can, at times, create sustainability challenges for other budgetary areas. Similarly, these partnerships provide access to job placement opportunities for program participants.

## Private Sector Engagement

Without positive working relationships with organizations and contractors within the construction industry, ACCESS BladeRunners' youth may face difficulties in finding employment as a result of their personal or experiential barriers. Not to mention that as a job placement program, ACCESS BladeRunners' general operations are highly dependent on maintaining a steady flow of quality job opportunities to which their trained youth are well-suited.

During periods of economic growth, job availability is somewhat of a lesser concern. During periods of decline, however, when jobs for highly skilled labourers are at a premium, being able to place newly trained, inexperienced, at-risk youth into open positions is definitely a challenge. Positive relationships within the construction industry are especially vital during these times. Of course, this does not mean that ACCESS BladeRunners is limited to seeking jobs within the private sector. On February 8, 2010, ACCESS BladeRunners signed a memorandum of understanding with the BC provincial government, stating, "Contractor and Subcontractors for Provincial Homelessness Initiative projects must participate in the ACCESS BladeRunners Program' by hiring ACCESS BladeRunners participants" (ACCESS, 2010). In addition to securing positions for participants, strong relationships with the public and private sectors are important to ACCESS Blade-

Runners' success because they offset the public's misconceptions regarding the program's participants. Convincing employers to take on at-risk youth is not an easy task, especially when these youth may have addictions or mental health issues.

## The Cost of ACCESS BladeRunners

It makes economic sense to help youth maintain employment and break the cycle of homelessness. After all, the longer people remain homeless, the more they must rely on emergency supports and services, which can be costly. ACCESS BladeRunners' program model ensures that youth are housed, fed, and emotionally and professionally supported, and does so at a cost that is much lower than allowing youth to remain at-risk and on the streets. As a whole, the average cost per participant can range from \$6,000 to \$10,000, depending on how much support is needed (Galway, 2012). This figure includes the cost of training, supporting, and housing the participant, their food, and a wage stipend (Galway, 2012). It should be no wonder, then, that the provincial government acted as a funder and steward of the program from 1996 until 2002, at which point, the Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society (ACCESS) assumed management of the program's general operations. In 2010, the fifteenth anniversary of BladeRunners, these relationships resulted in the program receiving \$14 million in funding from the BC provincial government, which will ensure funding to support an additional 600 youth (ACCESS, 2010).

## Evaluating the Impact of ACCESS BladeRunners

The most recent external evaluation of ACCESS BladeRunners was completed in March of 2011, and examined training for three cohorts, totaling 37 participants, assessing the program for its ability to reach its target population, implement project activities, produce outputs, engage partnerships, and the effectiveness of their staffing model. The evaluation concluded that all 37 participants learned skillsets and workplace training that could situate them in high-demand industries, and found that at the time of the report's publishing, 27 had found successful employment, though that figure may have been low, given the fact that the third cohort completed their training rather close to the report's publishing date. This report concluded that ACCESS BladeRunners provides a unique combination of training and entry level employment to at-risk Aboriginal people (Izen Consulting, 2011).

In addition to external evaluations, ACCESS BladeRunners staff frequently (generally at intervals of three months, six months, and one year) connect with participants (either in person, by phone or over email) to evaluate their development and progress in the program. They also utilize the TOWES test, a test of work-

place essential skills, as a tool for evaluating the program's effectiveness. TOWES tests individuals on nine essential workplace skills, including numeracy, writing, document handling, and reading. The test is administered both before and after the training program to assess how successful a participant was at improving their aptitude in the testing areas, as well as to monitor how effectively the training's structure helps the participants to develop in these areas, as a whole. As a result of their efforts to monitor and improve their programs, recorded statistics show that their participants have a successful job placement rate of 75% (Galway, 2012). Most importantly, these evaluations provide ACCESS BladeRunners and their funders with qualitative feedback, granting them insight into the less tangible outcomes of the program (i.e. increased hope, self-esteem and sense of purpose, confidence to go back to school, or enhanced social relationships, for instance).

## The Local Context

In 2006, Vancouver reportedly had 20.9% (Statistics Canada, 2010) of their families living below Statistics Canada's low-income cutoff (LICO) of \$33,221 (for a family of four in an urban area with a population greater than 500,000) (Statistics Canada, 2007). The census from that year determined Vancouver had a population of 578,041 (City of Vancouver, 2006), meaning that over 120,000 people were considered to be living below the LICO. The City of Vancouver has also reported that homelessness increased three-fold between 2001 and 2011 (City of Vancouver, 2011). Impacting the situation is the fact that construction of new, non-market housing is unable to meet demand. Between 2006 and 2010, there existed a demand for 2,510 units, but only 510 were constructed (City of Vancouver, 2011). Even amongst already-constructed housing, rising market prices are quickly making housing unaffordable for low income families. Between 1979 and 2008, while wages rose an average of 9%, the average cost, for example, of an eastside condo rose 280% (City of Vancouver, 2011). To attempt to address this rapidly growing issue, in 2011, the City of Vancouver adopted a strategic plan to address homelessness, *Vancouver's Housing and Homeless Strategy 2012 – 2021: A Home for Everyone* (City of Vancouver, 2011). How ACCESS BladeRunners might factor into this plan to build 2,900 new supportive housing units, (1,700 between 2011 and 2013), 5,000 new units of social housing, 11,000 new units of rental housing, and 20,000 new units of market housing remains to be seen. Provided all plan elements come to fruition, a significant amount of affordable housing will be in place within the next decade, and this would represent more work for future ACCESS BladeRunners, and more changed lives.

## Conclusion

ACCESS BladeRunners works because it takes at-risk Aboriginal youth and provides them with training, support, and employment opportunities, thus helping them to overcome the barriers that have kept them from maintaining successful long-term employment. There is no judgment within the program, no forced workshops, and no mandatory rehabilitation stretches. There are no barriers that can prevent youth from being admitted into the program, and the program accepts participants as they are. All that is asked of participants is that they be motivated and ready to work.

ACCESS BladeRunners participants face challenges including addiction, inadequate housing, mental health issues, experiences with the criminal justice system, and/or educational issues. ACCESS BladeRunners ensures that participating youth have access to food, shelter, clothing, and support for all of these issues. On the surface, ACCESS BladeRunners may resemble a typical training program that places program graduates into positions within the construction industry, but it is much more than that. There is a robust program model that is highly individualized, highly flexible, and highly reflexive of the specific needs and barriers of its participants. It is a model that has worked for nearly twenty years in Vancouver, and has found similar success when expanded to other communities in British Columbia.

The ACCESS BladeRunners model is significant because it has the potential to be replicated or adapted to improve new or existing program models in any community. While much of its success in placing its participants into jobs can be attributed to the high number of construction projects that are present in a large urban centre like Vancouver, there is no reason smaller or less-developed communities could not forge the relationships needed to sustain a program like ACCESS BladeRunners. This process is further simplified if there is a preexisting youth employment or support program already in place within the prospective community. Provided there are youth who would benefit from supportive training, any given community could build relationships with the public and private sectors. ACCESS BladeRunners, for instance, is being successfully delivered in many rural locations, such as Zeballos and Gold River.

Programs like ACCESS BladeRunners, that demand a high level of commitment from funders and their staff, are often met with a certain level of skepticism. Easing many of these concerns, ACCESS BladeRunners operates using an established and effective program model, with an extensive system of support, training, and education, all focused on breaking the cycle

of homelessness and placing at-risk Aboriginal youth into satisfying, sustainable employment. Not only does their program improve the lives of their participants, it also positively impacts the costs associated with homelessness. There is a program model of genuine quality that can be implemented to affect positive change in the lives of youth in any community.

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