

# Regional Network Literacy Service Plan (2023-24)

Waterloo Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs



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## About the Literacy Service Plan

The Literacy Service Plan is created annually by Project READ and the Literacy Service Planning Committee through Service Coordination and System Planning. Each Adult Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program in Waterloo-Wellington is represented on the committee. We work in collaboration to develop Literacy Service Plans to meet the literacy needs of our community.

This Literacy Service Plan represents Wellington Region communities, including:

- City of Guelph
- Wellington County communities

College, School Board, and Community Based Agency streams from the Anglophone sector of Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) service providers are represented in this Literacy Service Plan.

The following LBS service providers and other community services were consulted in the Literacy Service Planning and Coordination process:

- Action Read
- Conestoga College
- Skills Upgrading Program (UGDSB)
- Wellington County Learning Centre
- UGDSB - Continuing Education
- County of Wellington - Ontario Works and ODSP departments
- 2nd Chance Employment
- Agilec
- Anishnabeg Outreach
- Bridging Employment Supports (CMHA)
- Lutherwood
- Workforce Planning Board Waterloo Wellington Dufferin
- WSIB
- Better Beginnings, Better Futures - Onward Willow
- Immigrant Services - Guelph-Wellington
- St Louis Adult Education Centre
- March of Dimes
- E-Channel programs

## Current trends in the community

Reviewing the Employer One 2022 Report for Waterloo-Wellington-Dufferin we can see a variety of trends that occurred over 2021 and plans for 2022. It is important to note that the majority of employers completing the report were in Waterloo-Wellington (96.5%):

Almost 78% of employers reported they had hard-to-fill positions (up 16% from the previous report)

- Not enough applicants 69.6%
- Lack of qualifications 45.2%
- Lack of technical skills 38.4%
- Lack of motivation, attitude or interpersonal skills 37.4%

The hard to fill positions that could be supported by LBS programs providing basic skills development:

- Cooks and line cooks
- Counter and kitchen helpers
- Servers
- Lawncare technicians
- Agriculture technicians
- Equipment operators/farm labourers
- Administrative and office
- Truck drivers
- Production associate/machine operators
- Store and Sales associates
- Public works labour
- Maintenance associates
- Clerks
- Forklift operators
- Shippers
- Preparation for skilled trades

58% of employers said that retention was an issue in their company

70% of employers have added new tech or intend to add new tech in the next 1-2 years

73.7% of employers had 8,179 separations in 2021. The most separations happened in

- Manufacturing (1,430 quits and 500 dismissals)
- Transportation and Warehousing (507 quits and 47 dismissals)
- Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (184 quits and 53 dismissals)

84.7% of employers were planning to hire in 2022.

The top 5 for most potential hires were:

- Motor vehicle and transit drivers
- Labourers in processing, mfg.
- Machining, metal
- Material handler
- Customer and info service reps

It's clear to see that LBS programs can provide skills training for the top 5 in-demand positions. It's important to note that when businesses are recruiting the majority of them use online job boards/postings (76.2%). Digital literacy is key. The work we did with the online job applications and the workforce planning board is still necessary and identifies all the skills individuals will need to be successful in navigating the job market virtually.

When it comes to competencies that employers are seeking, while computer literacy is only being chosen by 14.6%, most employers, as we read previously, expect people to apply for jobs digitally. The top 5 competencies that employers are seeking in our region are:

1. Work Ethic (51.6%)
2. Communication (47.1%)
3. Dependability (45.7%)
4. Self-Motivated/Ability to Work with Little or no Supervision (44.4%)
5. Teamwork/Interpersonal (43.2%)

All of these are skills provided by LBS programs. Many are learned within small group work through collaboration and expectations. It takes a strong work ethic to learn as an adult who didn't succeed at this as a youth.

According to the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development the metropolitan census areas of Kitchener-Waterloo and Guelph fall into the Central Region. The top 5 jobs currently in demand in this region in 2022 are:

1. Material handlers
2. Retail salespersons
3. Other customer and information services representatives. This unit group includes customer and information services representatives who answer enquiries and provide information regarding an establishment's goods, services and policies and who provide customer services such as receiving payments and processing requests for services. They are employed by retail establishments, contact centres, insurance, telecommunications and utility companies and other establishments throughout the private and public sectors.
4. Cooks
5. Food and beverage servers

This list differs from the Employer One Report for the Region. This list is based on the number of current job postings in the region while the Employer One is based on employers predicting how many hires they will have.

Currently many of our programs support these top 5 job listings providing modular programs in Material Handling, Retail Sales and Customer Service. A number of programs help learners to prepare for and work with Conestoga College to provide the Smart Serve certification. St. Louis provides upskilling to help learners enter the chef program as well.

The programs need more funding to continue to run and update these modular programs. It's difficult to keep instructors when you can't increase their wages or offer benefits. We are running into the same difficulty that many employers talked about in the Employer One report – lack of ability to compete in the labour market due to wages.

### **Guelph-Wellington:**

During COVID and even as we slowly come out of it, individuals with disabilities are just not returning to in-person programming and they haven't wanted to do online programming (or lack the comfort/skills with working online). We've dropped by 1.7% in this category from previous years. There has been a slight increase in learners that identify as Aboriginal (0.6%), Visible Minority (1.1%), and Deaf or Deaf/Blind (0.2%).

We still have the largest majority of learners being youth at 46.1%. That's 6% higher than the province as a whole. EQAO tested their new online evaluations for schools, but no results were shared. Based on the research shared in last year's LSP Report and the lack of shared results from EQAO, we foresee this number continuing to be high.

We are seeing more people with a high school diploma than the rest of the province, proving our previous point (7.6% higher than the province). There is also a growing number of individuals with some college or post secondary education entering our programs. This is fairly on trend that when unemployment is low and it's hard for employers to fill job postings, that LBS programs will see more people struggling to find employment because they lack some critical skills.

46.3% of our learners are employed (both full and part time)...due to low unemployment rates. Guelph statistically and historically has the lowest unemployment rates in Canada and with the change in workforce needs due to an aging population, employment is available. However, 50.9% of our learners remain unemployed.

At least 39.7% of our learners live in poverty with no source of income or surviving on social assistance. We also know that with the employed a strong number of them will also most likely be below the official poverty line in Canada.

In Guelph-Wellington it is evident that our learners want employment with only 9.2% on the Independence Goal Path.

The more the unemployment rate remains low the more high-needs individuals that will be entering our programs.

UGDSB has reported that more learners transitioning from ESL to LBS on the pathway to post secondary. They are having less interactions with learners who are receiving OW as those learners are focused on life stabilization due to living with poverty. Learners who are interested in apprenticeship are able to be served but it is difficult to get them into programs because they don't have a connection to LBS as it is not promoted to them by Apprenticeship as an option for support. UGDSB is working with the PRLN on the Apprenticeship subcommittee to provide input on the research into gaps and seeking opportunities to improve access to this goal path. Referrals are made to and from ES, but they don't have connections to apprenticeship either.

So far this year, demand for services at Action Read is still a bit down, however, it is improving all the time. This is likely a result of the labour market shifts and people's level of comfort with in-person/online programs as noted above. Return to in-person learning is increasing, but it's still a bit slower than anticipated. Relaxing some COVID protocols in the coming months should help with this. There is a continued demand for employability training and a steady increase in demand for computer skills training. Their agency continues to see a steady demand for Safe Food Handling and Smart Serve Training & Certification. They are also noticing a significant increase in learners in the independence goal path (25%).

It should also be noted that Action Read and other LBS programs are finding that there's an increased level of exhaustion among staff as we slowly come out of COVID. Staff are a bit tired, morale is lower and things seem to feel heavier. Workload feels greater than ever as other funding sources such as United Way have been lost or reduced, so there is also the struggle to find new sources of funding to maintain the level of diversified funding needed to run programs. This is a big deal for community based programs as it has implications for what can be delivered and how many hours will be offered to staff.

Volunteering is notably down, and this is affecting the LBS programs. Also, we're noticing less flexibility among volunteers. Also, a good number of our volunteers prefer the convenience/safety/flexibility of tutoring remotely, making it difficult to get people to support in-person programs or tutoring options. For the goals and learning of lower level learners, in-person tends to be a more effective delivery means. At Action Read, learners who prefer remote tutoring are a minority but still need to be supported.

Learners need a variety of supports such as – in-person, synchronous and asynchronous, online and remote. In addition, the scheduling limitations learners are experiencing also indicate a need for short

term, online and in-person delivery methods as well. There is a need for “Drop-in” style programs to allow greater flexibility for learners in accessing services and creating referral pathways to further Literacy learning. More flexibility is needed to support under-skilled learners (including seniors and youth) needing to enter or return to the workforce due to increased costs of living and trying to juggle finances and employment.

All programs in Wellington Region continue to see the impact of restrictions due to COVID. Even though public health has removed restrictions, staff and learners continue to be at risk of illness and this impacts the ability to learn and deliver training. In the event that COVID causes restrictions in our ability to serve Learners face to face again, this will reduce our ability to serve those who do not have high enough digital literacy skills and also those who do not have internet or cannot afford internet in the rural area. Connectivity in rural areas continues to be a concern even though since COVID, the amount of rural connectivity projects by tech companies has increased. The lack of affordable internet service options continues to be an issue for those in poverty.

Unemployment right now is low and there are many jobs available to adults with low literacy. However, since COVID, WCLC, and other local LBS programs, have had similar experiences of many adult learners being more selective in what jobs they will take on and more so the wage rate of the job. Businesses who are having a difficult time hiring are not getting applicants due to the rate of pay of the job. Retail work at \$15/hr does not suffice in high inflation and requires workers to have a second job. Also, retail work has really changed since COVID and requires the ability to have high customer service skills due to increased tension and behaviour of customers since COVID began. Restrictions in stores must also be learned and workers are required to enforce them. This is a fair bit of stress for a job that only pays \$15/hr. Thus, Learners are looking to change fields, increase their skills and transferable skills to get a decent paying job. However, from a literacy perspective, Learners on this path will be in literacy longer and require more time to serve than clients who are just upgrading their skills. These clients will also more likely go onto further education rather than into the employment stream. So there may be a shift from the number of clients going into employment (it will go down) and an increase in clients seeking further education and training.

Managing two types of service online and face to face is logistically difficult in small offices like Action Read and WCLC. Instructors who are online require quiet spaces to provide instruction online. It is not possible to run a face to face small group and instruct online at the same time at the WCLC location.

More learners accessing Conestoga LBS are in part-time positions or they are participating in the gig-economy (e.g. Skip, Uber) with unpredictable schedules, making scheduling time for learning and upgrading more difficult. There are many learners wanting to upgrade to improve their employment situation or apply for Post-secondary opportunities.



## Impact of current trends for LBS programs

Demand for services doesn't address the need for services. We can see from the various trends that LBS programming is needed to help our community and economy rebound after the pandemic, but it will be about getting these learners to our doors. It is important to note that COVID has caused and will continue to cause an increased cost per learner. Less learners can fit into a classroom when physical distancing is required. If there was space for 30 learners pre-COVID, that number is now reduced to 15 to maintain a 6-foot distance between learners. The costs for the classroom and the instructor don't get cut in half. Many of our local LBS programs no longer require the 6-foot distance between individuals, however, we still come across people interested in the programs but are not comfortable with group situations due to personal or health reasons making it an ongoing need to be monitored and managed within each program. There has also been additional time required for development of curriculum to either an online format or create curriculum due to the varying needs that COVID has presented. Community-based programs have needed to have more paid staff as the number of volunteers decreased during COVID. The cost of living continues to increase faster than our funding which makes it difficult for programs to continue offering and improving programs to meet the needs of learners and the economy. Programs need MLITSD to continue providing flexibility around numbers to ensure that when people feel safe in our communities, our programs will have the capacity to serve them.

These trends we are noticing in the labour market, our learners and the community will impact the demand for services in several ways. The need for alternative hours for service delivery will be increasing as many seeking services are not able to leave work/income necessary to make the commitment to daytime studies. While this can be mitigated with remote/hybrid and asynchronous/synchronous delivery methods, we know that in-person has greater success for some learners, depending on their literacy level and comfort with technology. Flexible delivery hours, including evenings, are another potential solution to meet this need. However, it is important to note that many learners continue to need computer skills training before they can be successful with online/remote delivery methods. It will be important for programs to continue balancing the capacity of their staff & volunteers with the learning options they offer to meet learner needs.

The continued demand for employability skills training will remain a focus for program delivery in 2023-2024. There is a higher percentage of women than men who were forced out of the workforce to take care of their children who were learning from home rather than being in a classroom. We expect to see more women who were displaced from the labour market to access services and upgrade their skills. Many of these women have decided not to go back to their old job. However, COVID also created a learning environment that is now online and many women were unprepared and did not have the knowledge to manage online learning platforms like Zoom, Google Meets, Teams, and other platforms used by Colleges and Training Programs. Thus, we have seen an influx in adults wanting to take a course with us to improve their digital literacy skills. This has caused a decrease in the suitability markers set by our funder.

We know that the trends we are noticing in the labour market, our learners and the community will impact the profile of learners accessing LBS services. We expect to have:

- More working learners
- More ESL transitioning learners
- More learners not fitting into the suitability factors because there is demand
- More learners in the independence goal path at Action Read
- Learners accessing services who have left jobs, were laid off during COVID and are 40 to 55 years.
- More women entering LBS programs to upgrade their skills and get better jobs
- Increased number of young adults looking for options to upgrade for post-secondary program acceptance

The trends we are noticing in the labour market, our learners and the community will continue to impact how all 5 LBS services will be delivered. Hybrid learning options remain a priority to meet the learner's needs as well as the providers which requires constant pivoting as well as learners having this ingrained right from intake to be served this way. Programs might have to look at offering more alternative hours programming to meet the increased demand of "working learners" schedules, which will impact staffing as well as financial and HR resources to support this. Currently, all LBS programs in Wellington Region have some online and face to face programs. Using hybrid systems of synchronous/asynchronous and remote/in-person helps programs serve those with and without internet or connectivity tools, but a great deal of prep and planning and coordination is needed to manage these options. The biggest area of difficulty when teaching online is often math and numeracy. Sitting face to face and working on math is much more efficient and effective than online math programs where you cannot necessarily intervene while a learner completes a math question.

The 5 LBS services will be delivered and improved upon to address the trends we are noticing as follows:

#### 1. Information and referral:

- Marketing and promotions and shared learnings through LSP committee coordination and collaboration
- Sharing links on websites to book appointments for information and intake
- Contact info shared on all flyers to connect for information
- Referrals are made to relevant community services at any point during program to help learners access the support of other wrap-around services
- Connect regularly with ES providers (E.g. GWETC) to ensure I&R processes are shared with other programs in the community

## 2. Assessment

- Assessments are conducted by individual intake coordinators at each LBS program to confirm that they are the appropriate program (referring to other programs if needed)
- Conestoga offers online delivery of assessments to clients
- Assessments are ongoing through programming for learners including through informal procedures, standardized tests, task-based activities (Milestones) and culminating tasks.

## 3. Learner plan development

- Completed with each learner when starting to work with an LBS program.

## 4. Training

- Hybrid, in-person, synchronous/asynchronous learning options are available to learners depending on their needs and will be continually monitored and assessed for improved delivery and learner outcomes

## 5. Follow-up

- Completed by program staff using forms.
- assess formal and informal feedback from our learners and partners, in order to make improvements to our programs.

The Literacy and Basic Skills service providers plan to address these demands in the following ways:

- Continuing to offer a wide range of employability training to meet the needs of learners.
- Offering new modular programs all the time. (ex: Call Centre Training @ WCLC, using a CLO curriculum as a basis, but updating it as it was written 7+ years ago.)
- Adapting / updating other curriculum and resources such as the CLO Material Handler course for delivery.
- “Sharing curriculum” with other programs across the Region and Ontario to support other LBS programs
- Connecting with new community planning tables.
- Relaxing some internal COVID protocols where appropriate should help with the return to in-person learning.
- Continuing to seek alternative funding from other sources/foundations/grants
- Accessing workshops on grants, project applications and fundraising, wellbeing and self-care provided or coordinated by Project READ.
- Continuous Improvement Performance Management System (CIPMS) is an important tool and practice for Action Read to support learning and growth as an organization. They are constantly assessing formal and informal feedback from our learners and partners, in order to make improvements to our programs.
- Offering various streams of support such as – in-person/remote, synchronous /asynchronous and hybrid

- Working to update and clarify advertising and promotions of various streams of support to improve learner uptake and understanding
- Continue to respond to participant needs through curriculum development and pivoting to accessible learning modalities when needed
- Continually manage online and physical files to track learner and program information securely. Moving from physical files to digital is complex and requires many considerations for safety, security and efficiency. Support from the Network to plan and implement these changes would be helpful.

The Literacy and Basic Skills service providers will need various additional supports to support this work, such as:

- Long term funding increases that work with inflation.
- Additional funding to hire additional staff and offer benefits to meet the cost of living increases in our region
- Additional funding for marketing and communications
- Additional funding to update technology that is no longer secure (this is an ongoing need as technology becomes out of date within a few short years).
- Small increase in demand for “sharing curriculum” from programs with which we have no real relationship with. I would love to have a conversation with others about how to navigate this, but it would have to be done very carefully as I wouldn’t want to discourage this behaviour, rather have
- Better tools/recommended practices to navigate “sharing curriculum” and resources across LBS. The standard isn’t the same across the field and yet there is no additional funding for turning an internal course into a product that can be shared and represent your organization professionally.
- Networking with other digital literacy service providers to reduce digital literacy barriers in the community.
- More staffing to manage hybrid programming.
- Supports to improve advertising to differentiate face to face programs and online programs to be less confusing for the community and our Learners. Having additional staff would be very helpful to allow our hybrid system to function effectively.
- Enabling LBS staff to provide Training Support monies and support the basic needs of learners without requiring such a formal/intense level of proof/evidence of need.
- Tools to support continuous improvement practices that are easy to implement
- Mental health and anxiety: support in working through this or countering this through learning opportunities that bring pleasure, build community and help us connect with humour and trust

## **Service delivery gaps within the LSP community**

Currently many of our programs support the top 5 job listings providing modular programs in Material Handling, Retail Sales and Customer Service. A number of programs help learners to prepare for and work with Conestoga College to provide the Smart Serve certification.

The programs need more funding to continue to run and update these modular programs. It's difficult to keep instructors when you can't increase their wages or offer benefits. We are running into the same difficulty that many employers talked about in the Employer One report – lack of ability to compete in the labour market due to wages.

We could also increase the number of learners in our programs if we expand to more immigrants entering our programs. ESL and LINC are very important to immigrants but are still curriculum based on language acquirement. LBS is learner-centred with individualized learning plans. There are no transition programs or hybrid models serving ESL within our regions. Hamilton did run a hybrid model with their school board a number of years ago with great success. However, without further funding to develop this kind of hybrid program it's not possible to be done. And so we miss out on helping immigrants to gain reasonable employment and we don't have enough people to fill the jobs.

LBS programs are also in a situation where they must work towards their SQS numbers, but most immigrants do not fit into those categories. It's important to work with the most vulnerable, absolutely, but we also need to match that with the employment needs in the community. The most vulnerable are usually the furthest from employment.

Community based programs see the need and opportunity to support the independence stream for seniors to be able to function. Unfortunately, this does not meet any of our suitability requirements but it is important for the long term functioning of Ontario. Many seniors will struggle or be left behind as many services have moved to digital delivery methods that older generations are inexperienced with.

We also need to work together as an LSP to support and learn from each other and other providers across the province as we continue to deliver remote LBS learning options. Networking with other digital literacy service providers to reduce digital literacy barriers in the community is also greatly needed. For many, the experience of delivering both in-person and remote learning simultaneously is still quite new and can be complex from a scheduling, technological and even HR point of view.

## Challenges and opportunities for LBS program delivery

One challenge that is constant among all service providers is supporting the complex needs of learners that need more than one type of training or support. Local LBS programs coordinate and share learners when the opportunity/need arises and is best for the learner, in addition to referrals to other wrap-around services. Ongoing connection with other literacy and employment agencies is important to ensure that there is a good working knowledge of other services in order to support learners in referrals and resources. Cooperative not competitive is the philosophy of the organizations that we work with in Wellington Region. PRLN supports all LBS programs by promoting them at various community tables and through the Directory of Programs and Services. PRLN supports the LBS programs' awareness of other local programs and services by managing email groups and sharing relevant information.

In order to address the need for flexible programming, additional staffing may be required or existing staff may need to adjust their schedules which is not always possible. It can be difficult to attract new instructors to work with learners outside of the Monday to Friday daytime hours in order to meet learners' schedules. Agencies need to find creative ways to attract talent without additional funding or benefits. If benefits could be offered, this would greatly increase agencies ability to attract talent.

The Employment Services (ES) agencies seem to have new sets of pressures facing them due to the transformation. Referrals from ES are down in Wellington Region. Also, there has been some retirement among our community partners and this seems to be affecting referrals. It shows the importance of personal relationships with others. We have been reaching out to less formal community partners, and Action Read has been going directly to housing superintendents and community centres to share program information. This has been quite successful, however can be quite labour intensive. More volunteers could help with this work if available, as some of it does not need to be done by staff. The low level of volunteerism makes this difficult but programs continue to work to engage new and existing volunteers for in-person and remote support.

On the other hand, referrals with OW continue to increase at Action Read. Co-delivering a program with OW has been a good way to build connections and relationships. Action Read will continue to work with OW to maintain this relationship and co-deliver programs when the need arises.

Another challenge that LBS programs are facing this year is adapting to the new restrictions and rules set out for using Training Support monies to support learners in need. Due to an unexpected change from the Ministry, Training Support rules have been tightened to such an extent that it is embarrassing for a Learner to have to submit proof that they require training supports. For example, this includes; submitting proof that someone has not paid their hydro bill in order to access training support monies to enable the learner to take an LBS course while trying to better their employment situation; proof that they are short on food; proof that they are hungry. This is an embarrassing and unsafe position to force the learner into. Prior to this change from the Ministry, staff could note lack of food by a

growling belly, listlessness of the Learner, a headache, lack of a snack etc. LBS programs need the tools to be available to them to help the learners with their basic needs so they can prioritize their learning and skills development.

Incentives for Learning have been basically not allowed under the new Training Supports rules. It is unfortunate that low literacy learners who are often living in poverty, cannot access training supports without a litany of documentation. LBS service providers like WCLC, have a limited amount of Training Support Dollars; \$46 per client served. That is very low. Not all Learners accept or need training supports. Program staff and learners are respectful of the training support dollars we have and decline support if they feel someone else's need may be or even could be greater than theirs. Please find a way to give the LBS funding recipients other means of providing evidence or proof to facilitate the spending of funding wisely and efficiently to help Learners needing additional support to truly get ahead in their journey to increase and upgrade their literacy without creating additional barriers.

LBS programs have been, and continue to be, challenged by re-establishing which in-person services will return and how they will be run with pandemic restrictions lowered while at the same time attempting to balance the ongoing need for virtual programming. Not all staff or learners are able or willing to work/learn in close proximity in-person due to ongoing concerns about COVID, despite the reduced restrictions. We have many learners, staff and volunteers who fall into categories of higher risk due to pre-existing health conditions. As noted by several programs, the number of volunteers available to support in-person programming is still quite low. Some learners and staff are more comfortable with virtual delivery methods, however there are still many who don't have those skills or they prefer the benefits of in-person programs. In-person can be better for those with lower digital literacy skills or with learning disabilities, or when teaching math or digital skills. This complexity makes it challenging for programs to coordinate adjustments to programming. It is important for programs to continually monitor recommendations from Public Health and consult with learners and staff about their needs, comfort levels, and levels of individual risk. Programs will continue to update in-person & virtual program delivery methods and services while balancing learners/staff comfort levels, needs and taking into consideration the importance of providing safe & effective learning spaces for everyone.

Relationships over virtual platforms were not as easy to maintain, but they were better than no relationship. Programs continue to learn, practice, and improve on their ability and comfort with technology to build trusting relationships while delivering training and working to support each other's programs. Training, tools, and support to continuously improve remote delivery and support each other will be useful.

## **Plans to support workplace/workforce literacy**

Project READ's current work with ONA's will help to strengthen the workplace literacy work we do. Each ONA will receive one clear language review of an internal document as an extra bonus with their final report. Programs will gain the capacity to deliver more workplace/force literacy training with recommendations from Phase 1 of Skills for Success funding that will lead to work done in Phase 2.

Also our work with the Workforce Planning Board on mapping of employment supports and services and connecting how LBS programs fit will strengthen the quality of workplace and/or workforce Literacy and Basic Skills delivery in our region. Workforce development begins with Employment Services and we are ensuring they are kept aware of how LBS fits into this process.

In order to support learners in achieving employment, it is important for LBS programs to be aware of local labour market opportunities. We want to focus on jobs/training that have a good hiring potential (hospitality industry, support workers) and the specific skills required for those professions. The information provided by the Workforce Planning Board is helpful in identifying these. Bringing them into the LSP for targeted sessions and discussions is helpful for keeping up to date with what is happening in our Region and creating the opportunity for feedback to them in regards to skills retention and challenges that employers might be seeing. We can better support learners when we understand the market and what will be expected of them in the workplace.

UGDSB adult co-op programming helps our local labour market to be made aware of LBS services which allows for coordination of "workplace centered delivery". The alternative hours of delivery, and multiple locations throughout the county allows for learners with varied schedules to access LBS services. Action Read has begun a placement component for one of their employability courses. WCLC continues to take LLEO workshops to keep apprised of labour rules and employee rights.

Project READ is also working with a sub-committee of the LSP members to work on the area of Apprenticeship to strengthen LBS support of this goal path.

## **Evaluating and updating LBS referral protocols**

Internal protocols are reviewed annually and updated as needed. We will also review our LSP meeting protocols to ensure we are building in opportunities to hear from or have representation from other groups such as Employment Services, Indigenous Services, and Developmental Services to better understand their needs and look for opportunities to collaborate or support each other's work. We need to meet, discuss, reflect, and learn from each other. We need to be sensitive to what's happening in other programs. We need to take partnership opportunities as a great opportunity to learn and grow together. From there we can tweak referral protocols as needed. It is easier to work on these issues when there is a commitment to working together. We are fortunate to have this among the members of the LSP committee.



Additional strategies that LBS programs are using to ensure referral methods are accessible, up to date and easily maintained include creating standard program email addresses that do not change with changing staff, annual updates of 211 information, and ensuring program information is updated in the PRLN Directory of Programs and Services which is promoted and shared across the community.

## **LBS program delivery for learners from underrepresented groups**

It is important to recognize that the standard for high quality doesn't change based on underrepresented groups. LBS programs support all learners with the highest standards for delivery. That being said, we recognize the need to ensure that underrepresented groups feel like we have programming for them and that they are welcome in LBS. We need to build direct bridges with individuals, staff and community groups that work in these areas or have experience as an underrepresented group. We need to understand from their perspective what they want and need, and where we might fall short. For example, how can we build increased representation within our agencies? What specialized training can we get to better support working with people with disabilities such as individuals with learning disabilities, or individuals with hearing or vision issues? Are there training options available to these groups that we can leverage? Do we need to consider more co-delivery programs with new community partners? Participation in the LSP to provide input and share learnings, challenges and opportunities to support and improve services for these groups will continue to support our efforts in this area.

We are currently working with a sub-committee of LSP members from Waterloo and Wellington Regions to identify the underrepresented groups that may need services here. We are also investigating what programs and services are currently provided for underrepresented groups in order to find any gaps in these service offerings. We will review our research findings in order to make recommendations and plan for new programs and outreach methods to address those gaps and ensure equitable access to LBS services for those in need. We plan to apply for the Skills for Success phase 2 funding in order to implement new plans and strategies to meet the needs of the underrepresented groups within our areas.

Recognizing youth as an underrepresented group, WCLC has a youth literacy program sponsored by United Way of Guelph Wellington Dufferin. This program supports children and youth ages 5 years old to 18 years. This allows Learners who are on the cusp in age to transfer smoothly from our youth to adult literacy programming.

We know that learners with developmental disabilities are an underrepresented group that we can support. To this end, Project READ has developed the "LEG Up! To Retail" program in partnership with KW Habilitation (DS) and The Literacy Group (LBS) with funding from the Skills Development Fund. The program is designed for LBS and Developmental Services (DS) to deliver in partnership and we are pilot testing this currently in both regions. In Waterloo Region, the DS provider offers

Employment Supports in house. In Guelph, we are bringing Employment Services into the partnership because the DS provider operates differently than in Waterloo Region and we are testing this type of partnership as well. Our goal is to have a fully integrated LBS-DS program that offers Employment Supports in tandem with LBS training to better meet the needs of the participants. According to local labour market information, we know that 2 of the top 5 hard to fill positions in our community are related to retail: retail salespersons and other customer and information services representatives (that often work in retail settings). “LEG Up! To Retail” is an in-person program that enables us to meet the need of individuals with disabilities to return to in-person programming and work towards employment in this high needs sector. Once the project is complete in April 2023, it will be available to local and provincial LBS agencies to deliver this program in the future and it will support LBS in reaching and supporting this underrepresented group.

WCLC provides literacy and survival English to newcomers as needed. They were ready with programs when Syrian refugees arrived in Wellington County several years ago and are ready again if Ukrainian refugees begin to arrive. They work closely with Guelph Wellington Citizenship and Immigration to connect with and support newcomers in rural areas.

Recognizing that ESL learners are an underrepresented group, Project READ is working with QUILL Network to map the ESL needs in rural communities this fiscal. More and more newcomers are settling in/relocating to rural areas of the province where there are limited or no formal language training programs available, or not enough immigrants/participants to meet required minimum ESL class sizes. As a result, rural LBS agencies are now reporting more language learners accessing training through LBS programs. The mapping of ESL learner populations and services available in rural areas will help us to fully understand the impact on LBS programs. Once the research is completed, we will create a list of recommendations that will propose some solutions/best practices to address the current situation and make it easier for LBS programs to fill the gap in training to newcomers when needed and ensure that we aren't duplicating services.

Individuals with mental health issues is a subgroup that is often not addressed as a subset requiring literacy programming. This subgroup requires many supports during training and are very vulnerable as they address and learn to manage their mental health. Mental health should be a suitability factor that is counted as a subgroup due to the time, approach to learning, ability to listen and comprehend while managing their mental health, medication and general emotions. LBS has the ability to help and support these Learners but our capacity to do it is limited.

## Increased demand for remote LBS services

Wellington Region has continued to experience the increased demand for remote LBS service delivery as indicated by the following trends and challenges:

- individuals with disabilities are just not returning to in-person programming and they haven't wanted to do online programming (or lack the comfort/skills with working online).
- the majority of businesses are recruiting using online job boards/postings (76.2%). Digital literacy is key.
- the work we did with the online job applications and the workforce planning board is still necessary and identifies all the skills individuals will need to be successful in navigating the job market virtually.
- Managing two types of service online and face to face is logistically difficult in small offices
- Instructors who are online require quiet spaces to provide instruction online.
- It is not possible to run a face to face small group and instruct online at the same time at the WCLC location.
- additional time is required for development of curriculum to an online format
- many learners continue to need computer skills training before they can be successful with online/remote delivery methods.
- COVID also created a learning environment that is now online and many women were unprepared and did not have the knowledge to manage online learning platforms
- all LBS programs in Wellington Region have some online and face to face programs
- Using hybrid systems of synchronous/asynchronous and remote/in-person helps programs serve those with and without internet or connectivity tools, but a great deal of prep and planning and coordination is needed to manage these options.
- The biggest area of difficulty when teaching online is often math and numeracy. Sitting face to face and working on math is much more efficient and effective than online math programs where you cannot necessarily intervene while a learner completes a math question.
- Supports to improve advertising to differentiate face to face programs and online programs to be less confusing for the community and our Learners.

Project READ and the LBS programs in Wellington Region will:

- continue offering online and hybrid programs
- continue working to improve remote delivery tools, resources and methods to meet learner needs
- Apply the recommendations from the "[The "How To" of Hybrid Meetings](#)" report by PRLN, LiNDR, LNW on best practices and recommended equipment for hybrid meetings to improve hybrid and virtual meetings/programs/classes (<https://projectread.ca/tools-and-resources/practitioner-resources/publications/>)
- continue working together to share learnings and strategies to manage online delivery and support each other through the LSP committee

## **LBS trends with e-Channel referrals**

E-Channel programs listed in Directory for LBS, ES to support learner awareness of programs and referrals to their programs. We also share the E-Channel Newsletters with LBS programs to promote the course offerings.

Local LBS programs continue to see a need for blended delivery even with the current remote options. LBS programs do not want to duplicate what is already available for our learners when it is already available on e-channel. Their programs enhance what we can provide with our current capacity.

However, it can be hard to get learners engaged in e-channel programs when extra technical support is needed from agency staff to get learners in and through the programs - learners often have low digital skills or none at all. With COVID it's hard to find tutors to support learners in e-channel programs and the extra support isn't counted for the agency & ministry targets. Programs find that e-channel is best suited for level 2+ learners who are able to navigate digital technology independently.