



EMPowering Equity



About Us

For more than 90 years, the John Howard Society of Ontario has worked to keep the humanity in justice. Today we continue to build a safer Ontario by supporting the people and communities affected by the criminal justice system. Our 19 local offices deliver more than 80 evidence-based programs and services focused on prevention, intervention and re-integration across the province.

We promote practical, humane policies while raising awareness of the root causes of crime and calling on Ontarians to share responsibility for addressing them. Within our criminal justice system, we work toward the fair treatment of all. As the system evolves to reflect our changing society, we ensure that no one is left behind. We believe that policy should be grounded in the day-to-day reality of the people it impacts. That's why our Centre of Research & Policy specializes in bridging the gap between analysis and frontline service delivery. By collaborating closely with our local offices, the Centre's team of analysts and researchers develops policy positions that reflect the needs of each community, advances those positions to governments and other organizations, educates the public on critical issues, and evaluates program efficacy to guide future work. Through it all, we're committed to ensuring that innovative ideas can translate into real action.

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Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge that the following report was made possible by a grant received through Heritage Canada's Anti-Racism Action Fund.



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We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to making this program a reality. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the invaluable support from the staff of the John Howard Societies of London & District, Sarnia & Lambton, and York Region. Special recognition goes to Dr. Rachel Aleks, Deanna Thompson, Tracy Sauls, Riham Soliman, Emad Moghrabi, Michael Neblett, and Brett Landsborough for their exceptional contributions.



Systemic Acknowledgment

To fully engage with this report, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and systemic discrimination on the experiences of individuals with a criminal record in seeking and maintaining meaningful employment. This is especially true for Indigenous and Black populations in Canada, who continue to face disproportionately higher levels of policing, incarceration, and biased treatment within the criminal justice system. As a result, Black People and Indigenous Peoples are 3 and 5 times more likely, respectively, to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system, amplifying existing structural barriers rooted in systemic racism and colonialism.

In addition to these challenges, newcomers to Canada often face significant barriers in the labour market. A common job requirement for “Canadian work experience” unfairly disadvantages newcomers, who may be overqualified for the positions they seek. This requirement reinforces systemic biases and contributes to their economic marginalization. By demanding “Canadian work experience,” employers perpetuate exclusion, reflecting a broader pattern of systemic discrimination. The intersection of racial disparities and the presence of a criminal record creates unique and compounded challenges in securing employment.

Despite growing awareness of how racial identity shapes the experiences of individuals with criminal records, this acknowledgement has yet to be fully reflected in hiring practices. Employment is a powerful tool for addressing and disrupting existing inequities in our society. It is our hope that this acknowledgement contextualizes the research found in our report and serves as a reminder of our shared responsibility to engage in open dialogue, challenge biases, and work collaboratively toward dismantling the systems of oppression that result in persisting inequities in our criminal justice system and labour market.

The Context

The journey to meaningful employment for marginalized jobseekers involves more than providing job opportunities – it can also require comprehensive, wraparound supports that address the unique and overlapping systemic barriers experienced by these populations. Without this holistic approach, many individuals are left to navigate complex systems on their own, without the necessary support and resources needed for long-term success in the workplace.

In Canada, unemployment rates for historically marginalized groups consistently exceed the national average (5.8%) (Statistics Canada, 2024a). As of 2023, unemployment rates for Black People (8.5%) (Statistics Canada, 2024b) and Indigenous Peoples (9.1%) (Government of Ontario, 2024) demonstrate significant inequalities. These groups also encounter additional barriers to employment, including stigma, discrimination, language barriers, undervalued credentials (i.e., require “Canadian experience”), and an overrepresentation in low-wage industries (Block, Galabuzi & Weiss, 2014; Guo, 2013).

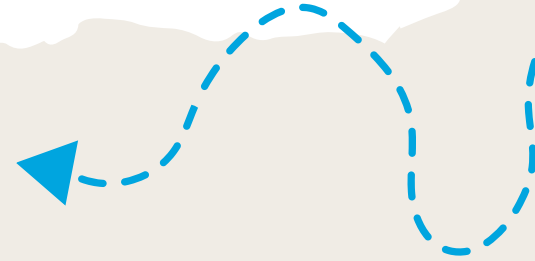
For individuals with criminal records, these challenges are even more pronounced. A criminal record compounds existing discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and/or immigration status, creating significant obstacles to employment. As demonstrated in JHSO’s recent research report, [Not in My Workplace](#), many employers are deeply hesitant to hire individuals with criminal records, a bias that disproportionately impacts those overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Cook et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, various intervention programs have shown promising practices in breaking down these barriers to employment. Pre-employment training programs that focus on job searching strategies, workplace behaviours, and fostering a positive mindset have demonstrated success (Zhong & Shetty, 2021). Skill-building initiatives designed to meet the demands of the labour market, combined with community-based support services, can help systemically marginalized individuals overcome employment challenges.



To improve employment outcomes, programs should combine hard and soft skills training with essential wraparound supports. Addressing structural barriers through advocacy and employer education is equally important for long-term change. The ultimate goal extends beyond job placement – it is about providing the comprehensive supports needed to maintain long-term employment success.

JHSO designed the EMPOWER program to address employment challenges faced by justice-involved individuals from diverse backgrounds, with a focus on supporting Black, Indigenous, and newcomer populations. By focusing on skill development, cultural responsiveness, and holistic support, the program aligned with best practices for improving employment outcomes among these groups. The program’s inclusive and adaptable approach helped participants build the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in the workplace, ultimately contributing to reducing employment barriers and promoting economic inclusion.

JHSO’s Employment Resources



Police Record Hub

The Police Record Hub is a centralized resource providing free, evidence-based information on police and criminal records in Ontario. The resources are helpful for supporting individuals with records, employers, the volunteer sector, and legal and HR professionals in navigating the complexities of criminal records.



Not in My Workplace: Addressing Workplace Exclusion of Individuals with Criminal Records

In January 2024, JHSO published a report based on a survey of 400 hiring managers across Canada, aimed at understanding their views on hiring individuals with criminal records. The report highlighted the significant challenges these individuals face and presented six key recommendations for promoting a more inclusive employment environment. One key finding was that employers identified skill improvement and upgrading as one of the top factors that would make them more likely to consider hiring someone with a criminal record.



Fair Chances Coalition

JHSO recently spearheaded the founding of Canada’s first Fair Chances Coalition, a group of cross-sector employers and organizations committed to fairly assessing job candidates with criminal records. The Fair Chances Coalition website has a wealth of resources for employers on criminal record checks. JHSO is currently developing a toolkit for job developers to best support job seekers with criminal records to employment.





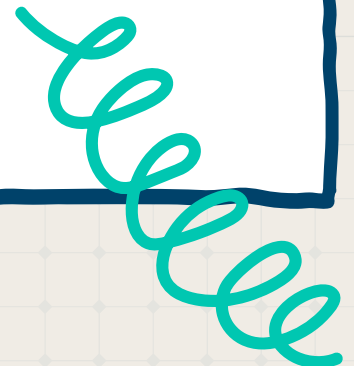
Program Description

The EMPower program was an innovative pilot program aimed at improving employment outcomes for individuals facing barriers to employment. The program focused on helping individuals from diverse backgrounds, including Black, Indigenous, and newcomer populations, as well as those involved with or at-risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. The program also addressed other employment challenges such as mental health, substance use, homelessness, disabilities, and childcare needs. EMPower offered pre-employment training followed by supporting participants in seeking relevant job opportunities within their communities.

Through funding that was received from Heritage Canada's Anti Racism Action Plan (ARAP), between April 2022 to March 2023, the EMPower program was delivered by three John Howard Society (JHS) local offices across Ontario: JHS London & District, JHS Sarnia & Lambton, and JHS York Region. While each office had dedicated staff and management to implement the EMPower program, it was developed, coordinated, and evaluated by JHSO.

This initiative was further supported by key academic partners, including the [University of Windsor's Odette School of Business](#) faculty members, whose insights were instrumental in shaping the program curriculum. This partnership helped to ensure that the program was informed by extensive research and best practices.

This report will detail the program's development, outcomes, the key lessons learned, and best practices for future implementation. The following sections outline the program's lifecycle through five distinct phases.



Program Development & Implementation

Phase 1: Research

Before developing any program materials, extensive research was conducted to identify the best practices for addressing and supporting the employment needs of Black, Indigenous, and newcomer individuals with criminal justice involvement.

This research followed a three-phase approach:

1. Literature Review
2. Consultations with Employment Service Providers
3. Labour Market Scan

The insights from this research, along with the support of the **University of Windsor's Odette School of Business**, helped shape the program modules and curriculum, which will be detailed in subsequent sections of the report.



Phase 2: Collaboration with Advisors

To ensure the program was inclusive and culturally sensitive, JHSO worked closely with advisors who had direct experience in providing employment services to individuals with criminal justice involvement. These advisors, who also identified as Black and Indigenous, played a key role in shaping the program in various ways:

- 1. Reviewing Program Materials:** The advisors reviewed the proposed curriculum, modules, and materials during the program's development. This ensured that the content accurately represented the lived experiences of justice-involved individuals from diverse backgrounds and was relevant to their specific challenges and strengths.
- 2. Consulting on Module Development:** As each program module was created, advisors provided feedback. This helped shape the content to meet the unique needs of Black, Indigenous, and newcomer participants with a history of justice involvement.
- 3. Providing Staff Training:** In addition to content development, the advisors delivered specialized training to EMPOWER staff. The training focused on job development strategies and best practices for supporting justice-involved individuals, and better-equipping staff to deliver effective and sensitive client support.

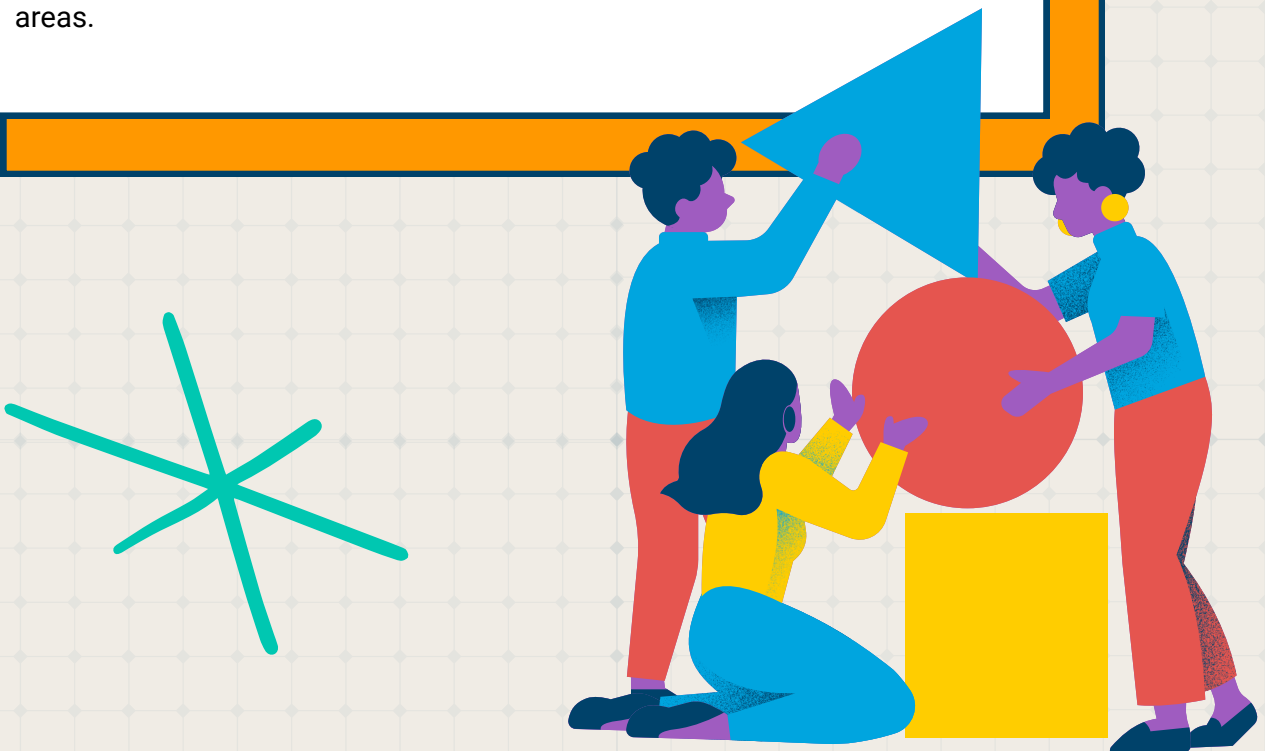


Phase **3**: Program Development

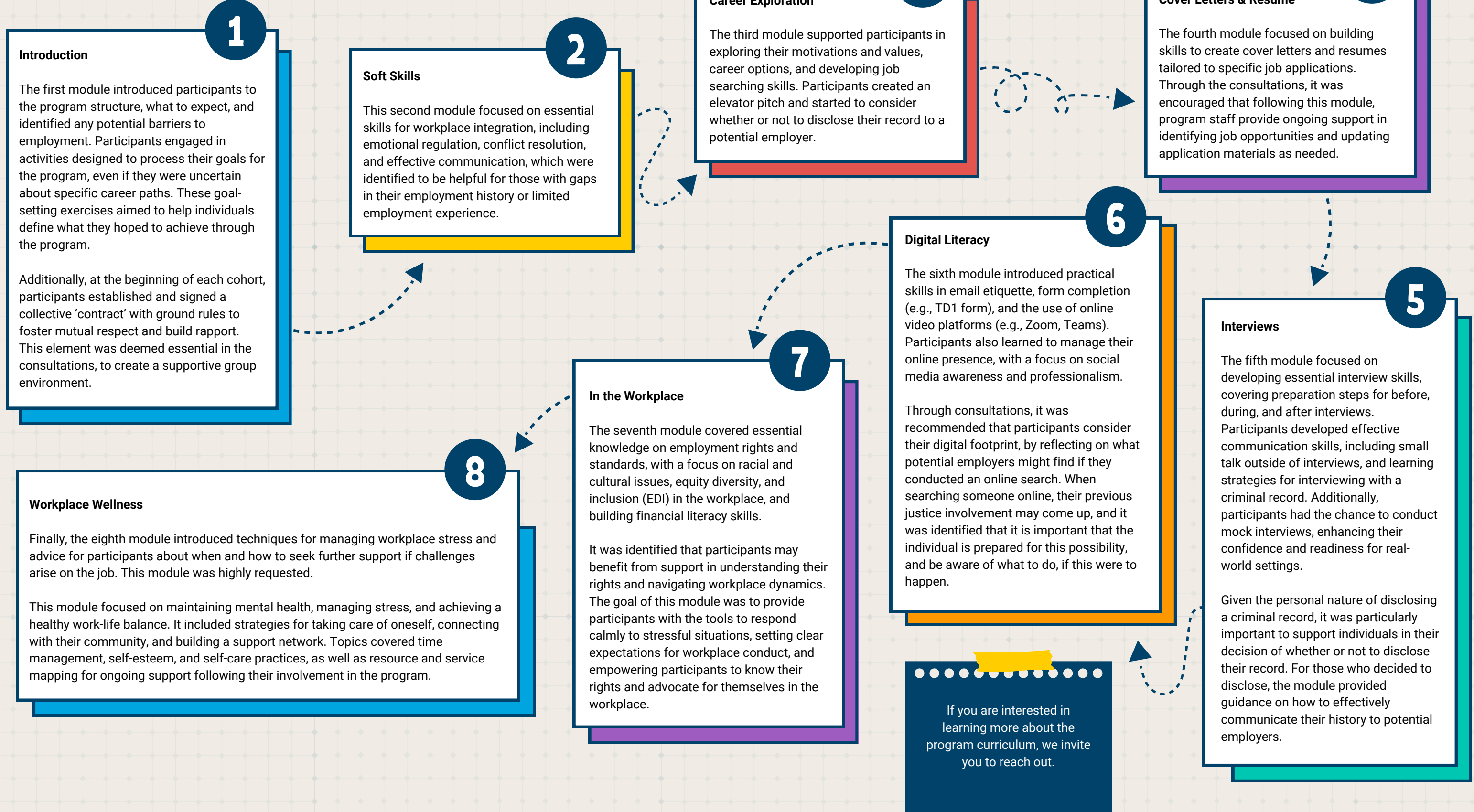
Based on Phase 1 research findings, the EMPOWER program was developed as an eight-module pre-employment training series designed to be delivered over 12 weeks. Participants were required to complete all program modules to be recognized as having successfully finished the program. Each module was designed to support the program's end goal, which was to seek and secure employment after completing the training.

Existing research demonstrates that the most effective employment programs combine both soft and hard skills with wraparound supports to improve employment outcomes (Zhong & Shetty, 2021). The EMPOWER program integrated these components throughout its curriculum.

The program's delivery, as well as the information and materials included in each module, were informed by consultations with employment service providers who had experience working with those with justice involvement. These discussions provided insights into what aspects of programming are most effective and areas they felt could be further enhanced. It was also recommended to begin with life skills topics before progressing to employment-related content, aiming to build stability and independence first. The modules addressed eight key areas.



Program Modules



Phase 4: Pre-Employment Training

The EMPower program offered a 12-week pre-employment training, with 8-weeks dedicated training using the modules outlined in Phase 3 above. Before entering the program, each participant was assessed for job readiness to ensure they were prepared to engage fully and transition into the workforce.

In addition to the modules, the program required participants to complete three certifications, and the program fully covered the associated costs. One certification focused on digital literacy, while the other two were selected by the participants based on their career goals and professional development needs. Common certifications included Smart Serve, WHMIS, Food Handlers, CPR, Driver's License Test, Forklift License, and Working at Heights.

Upon successful completion of the training, participants received a \$500 honorarium to assist with workplace preparation. This funding could be used for various needs, including work clothing, specialized footwear, transportation, food expenses, or specific computer software.

The insights gained throughout the program's development will be discussed in the Lessons Learned section, where we reflect on the challenges and adaptations made throughout the program duration.



Key Considerations for Program Structure

During consultations, employment providers also explained how they deliver programming. Based on their insights, the EMPower program adopted the following structure:

Group Programming Paired with Individualized Case Management:

Program staff delivered the module training in a group setting, while scheduling weekly one-on-one appointments with each client to review program content (e.g., reviewing the clients resume) or to provide wraparound support as needed (e.g., assistance with finding housing).

This approach combines the advantages of both group and individual settings. Group sessions offer peer learning and create a supportive environment for clients to share their experiences, while individualized case management ensures that each client receives personalized support when needed.

Modular Structure with Built-in Flexibility

A key takeaway from the consultations was the necessity for a modular structure to set participants up for success. The program was designed so that participants could complete the 8 modules independently, in any order. This flexible design accommodates unexpected interruptions (e.g., mental health crisis, housing instability, lack of childcare, etc.), ensuring that those who miss a session can continue the program without impeding their overall progress.

In practice, the pre-employment component of the program spanned 12 weeks, with only 8 weeks dedicated to training. The additional weeks provided participants with dedicated time to catch up on missed modules (which the staff would review with them one-on-one if needed) or to apply for job opportunities and complete any pending certifications. This structure allowed the participants to remain engaged and supported in the program while recognizing that life can present challenges.

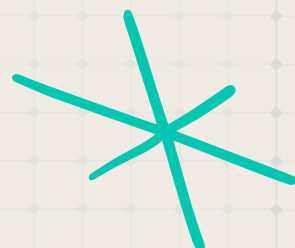
Hybrid Format for Accessibility

The program also utilized a hybrid format of in-person and online session to accommodate diverse learning needs and reduce any barriers to access such as transportation and childcare, which were identified as major barriers in other employment programs. Additionally, to enhance accessibility, computers were made available for participants who needed them for virtual sessions.

Consistent Scheduling

Consistent scheduling, ideally five days a week, mimics workplace routine, helping participants develop essential skills for the workplace, such as time management. Those who were consistently late or absent without a valid reason were removed from the program.

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Phase **5**: *Connecting to Employment*

Throughout the program, program staff provided ongoing support to participants in securing employment within their industry of interest. This included identifying relevant job opportunities, assisting with updating cover letters and resumes tailored to specific job applications, and helping participants prepare for interviews.

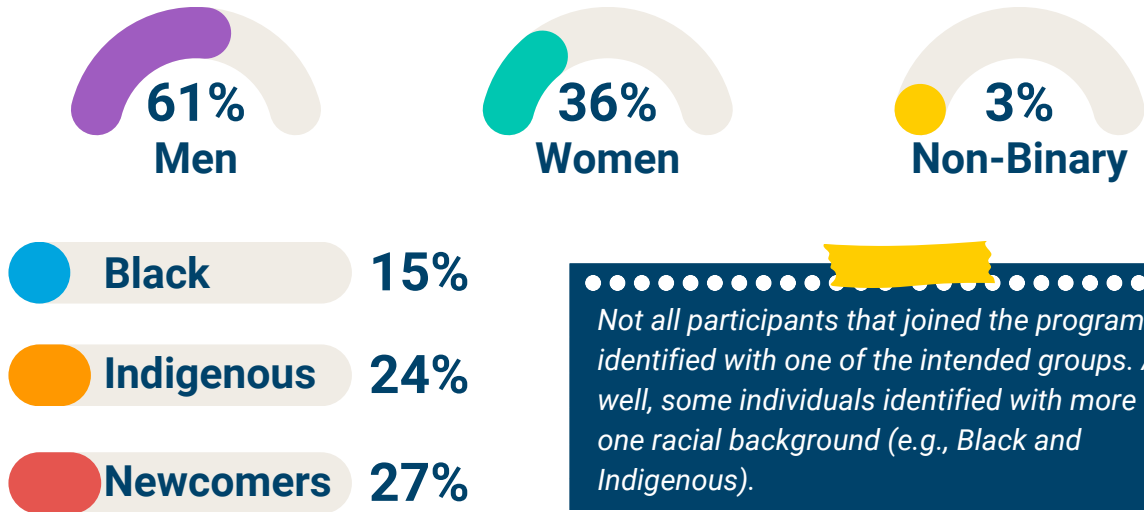
Shifts in labour market trends during the program's implementation also influenced how the program was delivered. Many participants secured jobs before completing the pre-employment training, using the job-seeking skills gained through the program.



Program Outcomes

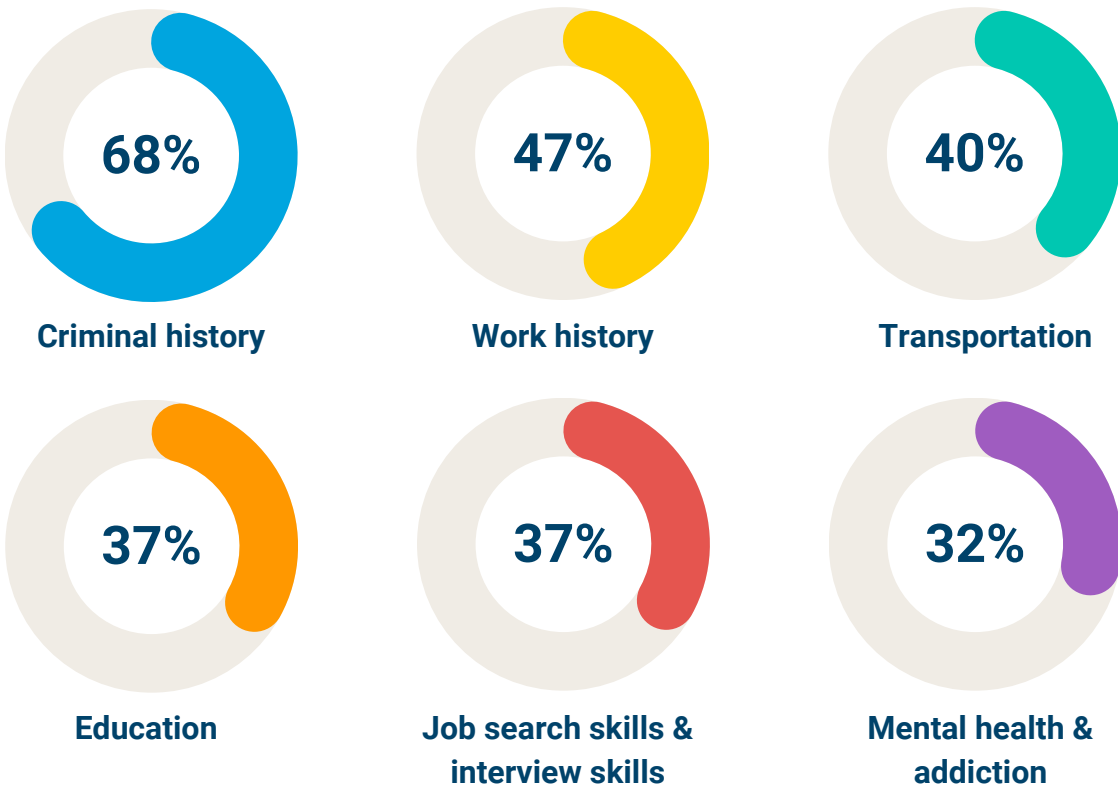
Over a one-year period, the EMPower program was delivered to five distinct cohort groups. Designed to support individuals facing barriers to employment, the program helped participants build the skills and confidence needed to re-enter the workforce. Below is a summary of participant demographics, barriers to employment, and key outcomes.

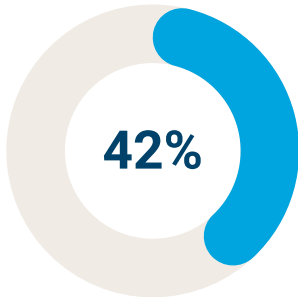
Participant Demographics: A total of **100** individuals entered the program.



Not all participants that joined the program identified with one of the intended groups. As well, some individuals identified with more than one racial background (e.g., Black and Indigenous).

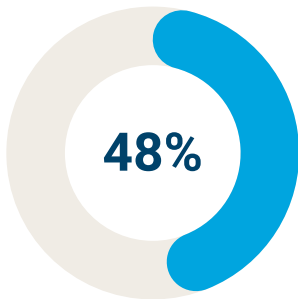
Barriers to Employment





Completed the pre-employment training

It became clear that more individuals needed to join each cohort, as many participants dropped-out for a variety of reasons. In some cases, individuals decided to go back to school, they left the program early because they found a job, or the program was not the right fit for them.



Found Employment

There were more individuals who found employment than those who completed the pre-employment training. This happened because program participants were able to use the skills they acquired through the program to secure employment before the training concluded.





Challenges & Lessons Learned



Throughout the delivery and evaluation of the EMPower program, we gained insights that helped us modify the program and informed our recommendations for future programming. Below are the key challenges faced and lessons learned along the way:

Participant Enrollment – The program initially aimed to serve Black, Indigenous and newcomer individuals with justice involvement or other barriers to employment. However, it was challenging to recruit participants strictly within these groups. Many individuals who identified as people of colour but not as Black or newcomers expressed interest in joining. As a result, recruitment criteria became more flexible, allowing a broader range of participants to benefit, better reflecting the communities being served.

Attrition – As expected, the program experienced significant attrition, particularly during the first cohort. To address this, program staff began recruiting more participants to account for dropouts. The program also adopted a rolling intake, allowing participants to join after the cohort had started, provided they had enough time to catch up. Many participants also left the program early as they found employment before completing the training. To mitigate this issue, participants and staff recommended shortening the training duration.

Recruiting Employers – As this was a pilot project and the first direct employment program being delivered at these participating offices, staff initially struggled to connect participants with employers. However, overtime, building relationships with employers became easier. For future programs, it is recommended that employer outreach start earlier and that a repository of employers willing to hire individuals with criminal records is made. Including a wage subsidy component would also facilitate employer recruitment.



Challenges & Lessons Learned - cont'd

Employment Expectations – Originally, the program aimed to place participants in jobs following training, but without wage subsidies or established employer partnerships, this was not feasible. Instead, the program evolved into a resource to support participants in finding their own employment. From the outset, it was crucial to communicate to participants that the program could not guarantee a job but would provide the tools and support needed to find work independently.

Advanced Training/Certificates – While participants could earn certifications like Smart Serve and WHMIS through the program, budget and time limitations prevented offering advanced certifications like carpentry or welding, which could further improve employability. A major barrier identified was the lack of support for obtaining a driver's licence, which many employers expect and is often required for employment. Participants frequently requested driver's training, as well as assistance with obtaining identification (ID) or covering the costs of attending English language courses. Future iterations should consider offering more advanced and practical certifications to better meet participants' needs.

Individualized Programming – The diverse backgrounds and needs of the participants accessing the program made it difficult to offer a one-size-fits-all approach. Future iterations should focus on a more individualized approach, tailoring the program to meet participants' specific needs. Additionally, not all modules are equally relevant to every individual, so it may be beneficial and more effective for participants to have the flexibility to select the modules that align with their goals and areas of development.

Staffing Changes – The program experienced significant staffing turnover. Unfortunately, the new staff that were hired did not receive the same level of training as those originally hired due to budget limitations. Additionally, running a 12-week training program while also providing ongoing support for participants seeking employment proved to be a heavy workload for just one staff member. Future iterations should allocate more staff to manage the program effectively. Staffing changes are common among short-term programming, and to retain quality staff and ensure consistent program delivery, the program should seek sustainable and long-term funding.



Best Practices

The following section identifies and highlights aspects of the program that have been successful as outlined by EMPOWER program staff, program participants and the Evaluation Team at JHSO.

1

Staff with Lived Experience – It was encouraged that the program staff that were hired had lived experience, meaning they identified with one of the groups accessing the program. Participants consistently noted that staff who shared similar experiences provided meaningful, relatable support.

2

Staff Training – When seeking training opportunities for program staff, it was difficult to find specific training geared to employment services and job development for those with criminal justice involvement, as this population is often excluded from social services. As a result, JHSO collaborated with advisors with experience delivering employment services to this population to provide training to program staff. This training was extremely informative for program staff, especially for those new to working with this population.

3

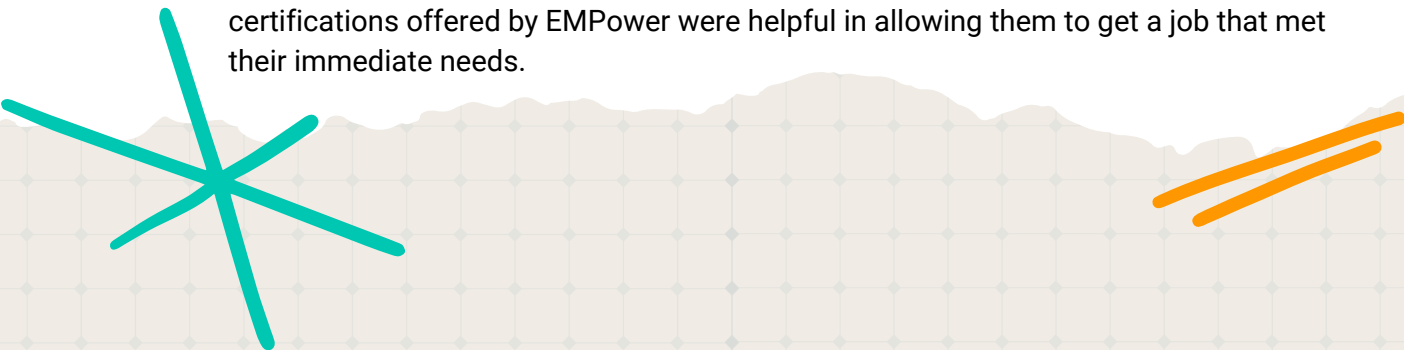
Community of Practice Among Staff – Each of the offices running the EMPOWER program were delivering employment services for the first time, with one program staff member as the only employment staff at each of the three offices. To provide program staff with a space to talk through any concerns regarding clients and the program, JHSO coordinated and facilitated monthly meetings among the three EMPOWER staff and their supervisors to share updates, discuss challenges, and support one another. This fostered a strong working relationship, with staff continuing to support each other outside scheduled meetings.

4

Respecting Clients' Privacy with Employers – During the research phase, it became clear that many clients did not want program staff to engage directly with their employer due to the personal nature of disclosing a criminal record. Therefore, staff avoided employer check-ins without client consent. Some clients preferred minimal involvement from staff in their job application process, while others requested more hands-on support, including advocacy and communication with employers on their behalf.

5

Prioritizing Groups that are Often Excluded – The EMPOWER program successfully delivered programming to groups that are often excluded from social services. Many of the individuals who had been involved with the justice system reported that they had been out of the workforce for some time and the program was helpful in giving them practical help in re-entering the job market. Additionally, many shared that the certifications offered by EMPOWER were helpful in allowing them to get a job that met their immediate needs.



6

Empowerment & Confidence – A recurring theme throughout participant interviews was that the EMPower program boosted their confidence and sense of empowerment for their job search. The program’s support helped participants feel less isolated, especially through group sessions with others in similar situations. The program provided many participants with practical job-searching and resume-building skills that were useful to many of the diverse participants in the program. Many participants also noted that the job interview training was especially helpful in building skills and confidence and alleviating some of the anxiety around interviews. In addition, many newcomers noted that the program provided an opportunity to practice their English-speaking skills.

7

Sense of Agency – Often, those with criminal justice involvement and individuals of certain racial identities (particularly newcomers) are limited to job opportunities in very few industries. The EMPower program provided its participants with a sense of agency to choose the field of work that they want to go into and provided them with the support and encouragement to get them there.

8

Flexibility – The program was designed to accommodate personal challenges, allowing participants to take breaks without falling behind. While participants had 12 weeks to complete the program, there were only eight weeks of content, with each module standing independently. This structure allowed participants to return to the program at their own pace without feeling pressured to complete modules in a specific order.

JHSO E-Learning Courses

Unlocking Opportunities: Supporting Justice-Involved Job Seekers

This course takes users through various introductory components of helping individuals with criminal records find meaningful employment. It provides an introduction on the justice system and justice system involvement, explains the different types of criminal records, different types of charges, what they can mean, and how they can appear on a criminal record check.



Conclusion

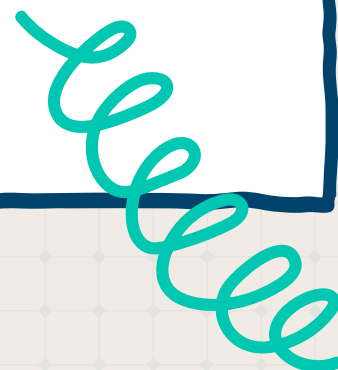
The EMPOWER program provided meaningful support to individuals facing multiple barriers to employment, offering them the tools, skills and confidence needed to navigate the workforce. Through its flexible and inclusive design, the program helped many participants develop the skills and confidence needed to enter the workforce successfully. The lessons learned from this pilot program can inform future initiatives to break down employment barriers and promote economic inclusion.





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