

StartWork

JOBS FOR REFUGEES

Doing Things Differently: StartWork & the Case for Outcomes Procurement

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MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY

Institute for Community Prosperity

About Us

Mount Royal University (MRU) transforms individuals and benefits society through engaged, purposeful learning. We meet students where they are, honour what brought them here, and equip them to succeed and create impact in a changing world.

The [Institute for Community Prosperity](#) at MRU is a hub for social innovation, systems learning, and community engagement. We connect community knowledge and lived experience with academic learning to address complex social and ecological challenges.

We approach our work through a systems thinking lens, recognizing that today's challenges cannot be solved in isolation. This perspective helps us uncover patterns, understand complexity, and identify opportunities for transformative change.

Our position within the university is one of privilege that brings both opportunity and responsibility. Guided by reciprocity and inclusion, we work alongside community as partners and co-creators in building prosperity for all.

What is Community Prosperity?

Community prosperity is the interconnection of cultural, economic, social, and ecological conditions necessary for individuals, organizations and societies to flourish.

About the Authors

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Acknowledgements & Gratitude

The following is Mount Royal University's official land acknowledgement, published in 2016 and most recently updated in January 2026:

Mount Royal University is situated on an ancient and storied land steeped in ceremony and history that, until recently, was occupied exclusively by people indigenous to this place. With gratitude and reciprocity, Mount Royal acknowledges the relationships to the land and all beings, and the songs, stories and teachings of the Siksika Nation, Piikani Nation and Kainai Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina Nation, the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Goodstoney Nations of the Iethka Stoney Nakoda, and the Métis.¹

It is with this spirit of reciprocity and commitment to community that we offer this case study.

This work would not be possible without the willingness and perseverance of individuals who are part of StartWork. We are grateful to the refugees and their families who chose to participate, our valued community partners, and

the innovative and bold individuals within the Government of Alberta and Northpine Foundation who were willing to work together differently.

A heartfelt thank you to Shaun Loney for his innovative spirit and tenaciously bold vision that has inspired this work, and to Michelle Lee, the StartWork Coordinator, for her tireless dedication and refusal to give up. The relationships she has cultivated will endure far beyond the scope of this project.

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Thank you.



The image above is a photograph taken at a StartWork Social in July 2025 at Pearce Estate Park in which StartWork participants and their families are reading one of 25 land acknowledgement signs that have been installed across Calgary.

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01 Introduction

StartWork is an innovative partnership between the Ministry of Assisted Living and Social Services (the Ministry), Northpine Foundation, and Mount Royal University, applying an outcomes procurement approach to support refugees in gaining employment and financial independence.

On November 1, 2024, forty refugees chose to leave Alberta Income Support and join StartWork. Over two years, they received timely, customized support to access the labour market, including sector-specific employment training, driver's training, English literacy resources, and short-term emergency financial support. These services were offered by a dedicated team working collaboratively across community partner organizations and MRU, grounded in a compassionate, servant leadership approach.² The result was reduced Ministry costs over time, stronger collaboration among nonprofits around a shared outcome, and a greater sense of belonging and a pathway to sustainable livelihoods for new Canadians and their families.

The social sector has a strong track record of partnering with individuals navigating systemic barriers to employment, offering well-established, proven supports that build on people's skills, experiences and aspirations.³ Targeted employment training and similar supports are not new. StartWork was intentionally grounded in existing, evidence-based practices rather than novel interventions. Yet effective approaches often remain underutilized and operate within fragmented systems.⁴

StartWork's innovation lies not in the supports themselves but in how they were financed and valued. By applying an outcomes procurement model, StartWork shifted the government from funder to customer, freed community organizations from the scarcity and rigidity of traditional funding, and created the conditions for genuine collaboration across a sector more accustomed to competition.

Upfront investment was essential to making this possible. Because payment was tied to employment outcomes rather than activities, capital was needed before results could be achieved. Northpine Foundation provided that investment and brought StartWork to life, demonstrating how philanthropy can play a catalytic role in bridging government and the social sector when experimenting with new approaches.

To document what happened and why, we conducted eighteen in-depth interviews with participants and stakeholders from across the partnership. Their voices and experiences are woven throughout this case study. Together with testimonials gathered over the two years, they offer an honest account of the conditions that shaped StartWork, what it achieved, and the questions that remain. This case study examines the broader context facing refugees in Canada, the design of the StartWork model, and the financial and partnership structures that supported implementation. It analyzes what the model made possible and where its limits lie, and concludes with recommendations for policymakers, foundations, nonprofits, researchers, and refugees and newcomers seeking to understand, replicate, or adapt the approach. Closing reflections consider what the next phase suggests about the model's potential.



StartWork participants, community partners, Mount Royal University team members, and their families are in a group photo in Pearce Estate Park in Calgary, Alberta. They are gathered for a StartWork Social celebrating approximately six months of employment.

02 The Challenge Landscape for Refugees

This chapter explores the broader context surrounding the group prioritized for the initial StartWork cohort: refugees. Their inclusion aligned with Northpine Foundation’s mission to support individuals at risk of poverty in building stable and fulfilling lives. This focus ensured the pilot addressed a clear area of need.

For the Ministry, the primary interest was reducing reliance on Income Support, regardless of the barriers affecting participants’ economic participation.

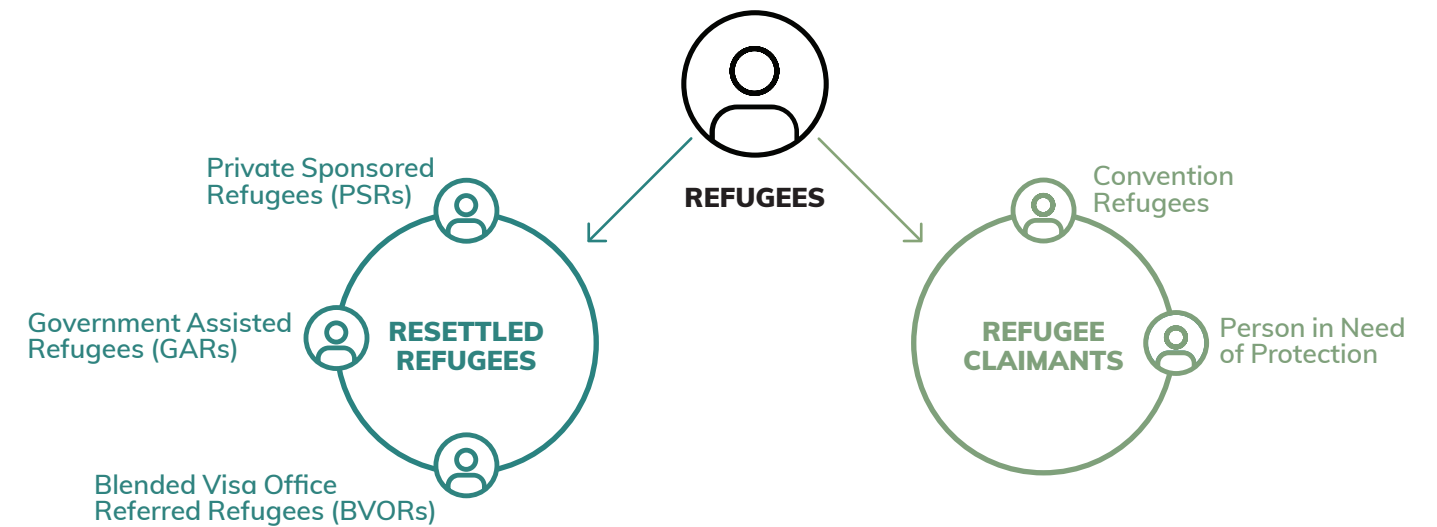
Background

In the summer of 2024, as StartWork was getting underway, a literature review was conducted to better understand the labour market and settlement experiences of refugees in Canada. This work highlighted the complexity and nuance of navigating a new country while seeking economic stability. In Canada, refugees generally arrive through two pathways: as resettled refugees or as refugee claimants.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines resettlement as, “The transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another state that has agreed to admit them, grant them the right to permanent residency, and eventually offer them a chance at Canadian citizenship”.⁵

Resettled refugees arrive in Canada with Permanent Residency status, access to federally supported settlement, and financial assistance programs.⁶ Despite these supports, many still transition onto provincial Income Support after their first year in Canada.⁷ Refugee claimants, also known as asylum seekers, face a markedly different experience. They are ineligible for many federally funded financial supports and settlement programs, as they do not have permanent residency status upon arriving in Canada.⁸ Their immigration process is often lengthy, uncertain, and costly, while they navigate employment with temporary work authorization and limited financial security. As a result, many refugee claimants find themselves relying on provincial Income Support much earlier when they arrive in Canada.

Figure 2.1 Navigating Refugee Pathways to Entry into Canada



The **Navigating Refugee Pathways to Entry into Canada** figure above illustrates the two categories of refugees defined by the Government of Canada, and explores the varying pathways of entry they might encounter.

Immigration in Canada is a shared federal-provincial responsibility, with the federal government overseeing admission and provinces responsible for social services and income assistance.⁹ According to federal policy, refugee claimants and board-recognized refugees receive no special income assistance and may only access provincial social assistance on the same basis as other residents.¹⁰ While publicly available data on refugee access to Alberta Income Support is limited, existing literature points to significant demand for both income security and meaningful employment supports among refugees and newcomers.¹¹

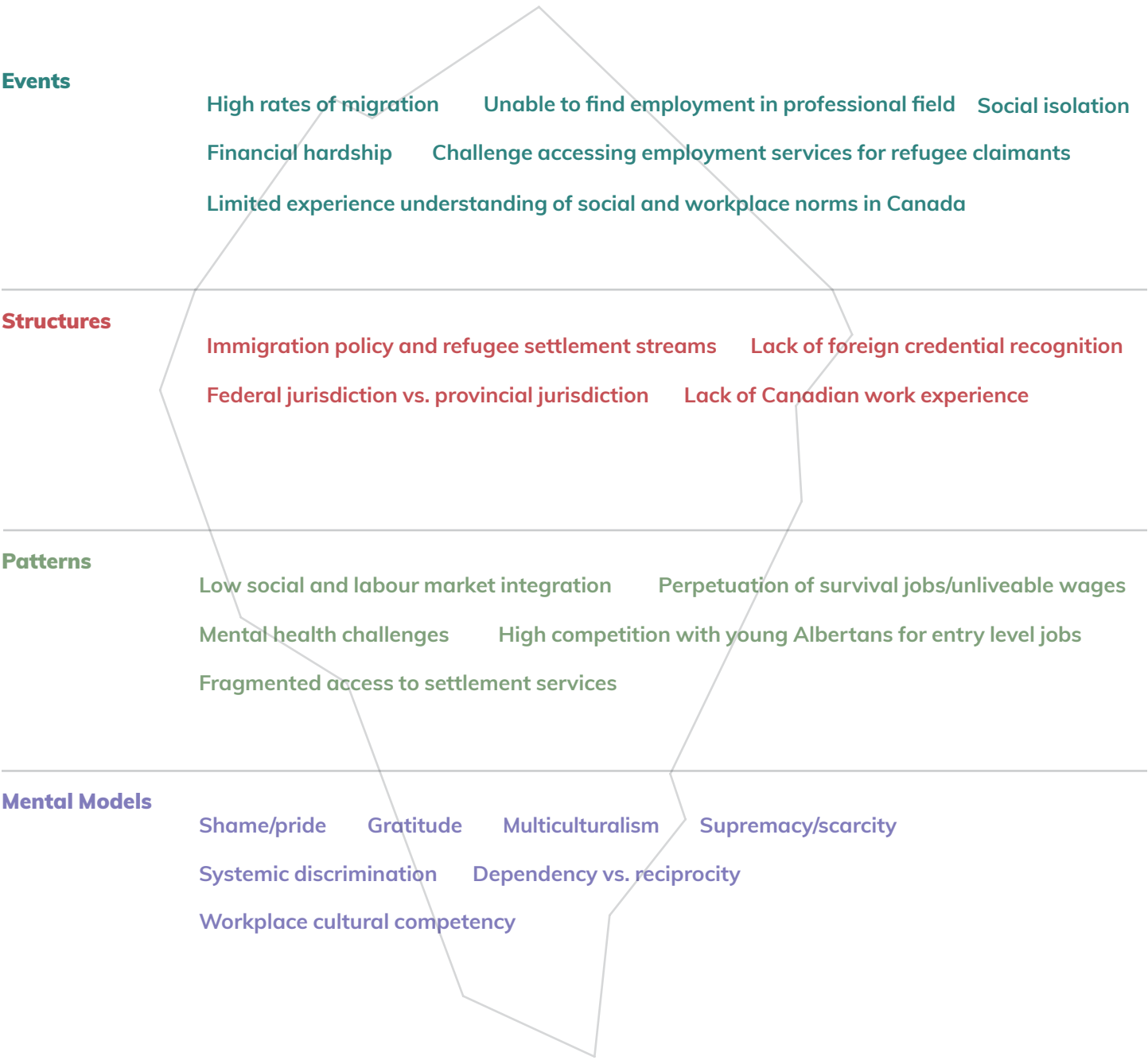
In the case of StartWork, the majority of participants were refugee claimants and had been on Income Support for varying periods of time while continuing to search for employment.

Understanding the Challenge

Understanding the complexity of the problem StartWork was trying to address requires a combination of models, theories, and tools. In social innovation, the “challenge landscape” refers to the broader system of conditions, actors, and dynamics that shape a complex social issue. It is a way of zooming out to understand not just the problem itself, but the environment in which it exists and evolves.

A tool for visualizing the challenge landscape is the Iceberg Model, a framework for making visible the patterns, structures, and underlying assumptions that sustain a complex problem over time.¹² By revealing where change efforts can be most impactful, the Iceberg Model helps map the broader challenge landscape StartWork operated within.

Figure 2.2a Refugees in the Canadian Labour Market Iceberg Model



The diagram above, **Refugees in the Canadian Labour Market**, demonstrates the sophistication of finding employment. From events above the surface to deep systemic mental models, the framework exhibits the layers of complexity surrounding labour market access for refugees.

Refugees in the Canadian labour market navigate a wide range of circumstances that no single framework can fully capture. While the model does not address every nuance, it does illuminate key barriers shaping the employment search.

The private sector, particularly in professional services, has shown limited commitment to integrating highly educated newcomers into the workforce, despite genuine gaps in the labour market. The inability to effectively integrate newcomer professionals can contribute to poor mental health, social isolation, underemployment, and continued reliance on government support among people who are ready, willing, and able to work.¹³ Despite growing recognition that requirements for "Canadian work experience" can be discriminatory, internationally educated professionals continue to face significant barriers entering the labour market.¹⁴ Licensing and accreditation bodies in fields such as medicine, engineering, nursing, law, and teaching play a central role in determining whether foreign-trained professionals can practice in Canada.¹⁵

Lengthy, costly, and complex accreditation pathways often delay workforce participation and force highly skilled individuals into work far below their qualifications. The current approach to integrating refugees and newcomers into the economy remains misaligned with both labour market needs and employer realities, creating unnecessary costs for government, employers, and newcomers alike. The challenge is not a lack of solutions, but a lack of alignment and willingness to implement them at scale.¹⁶

The mental models holding this system in place run deep, represented at the deepest level of the framework. Mental models are implicit—guiding behavior, decision making, and problem solving. Employers cite a scarcity of skilled workers while those skilled workers, many of them refugees, are ready, willing, and able to work yet lack opportunities to gain relevant Canadian work experience in their respective fields.

An additional mental model is the distinction between dependency and reciprocity. Refugee integration is often framed as a transition from initial reliance on state support to eventual labour market participation. More deeply

understood, this represents a shift in relational positioning: from being positioned as dependent recipients of services to becoming reciprocal contributors within both the economy and the broader community.¹⁷

Support programs such as StartWork intervene at a structural level by shaping the conditions that enable this transition. Rather than dependency being a fixed state, it is better understood as a temporary position shaped by access to information, systems navigation, and institutional support.

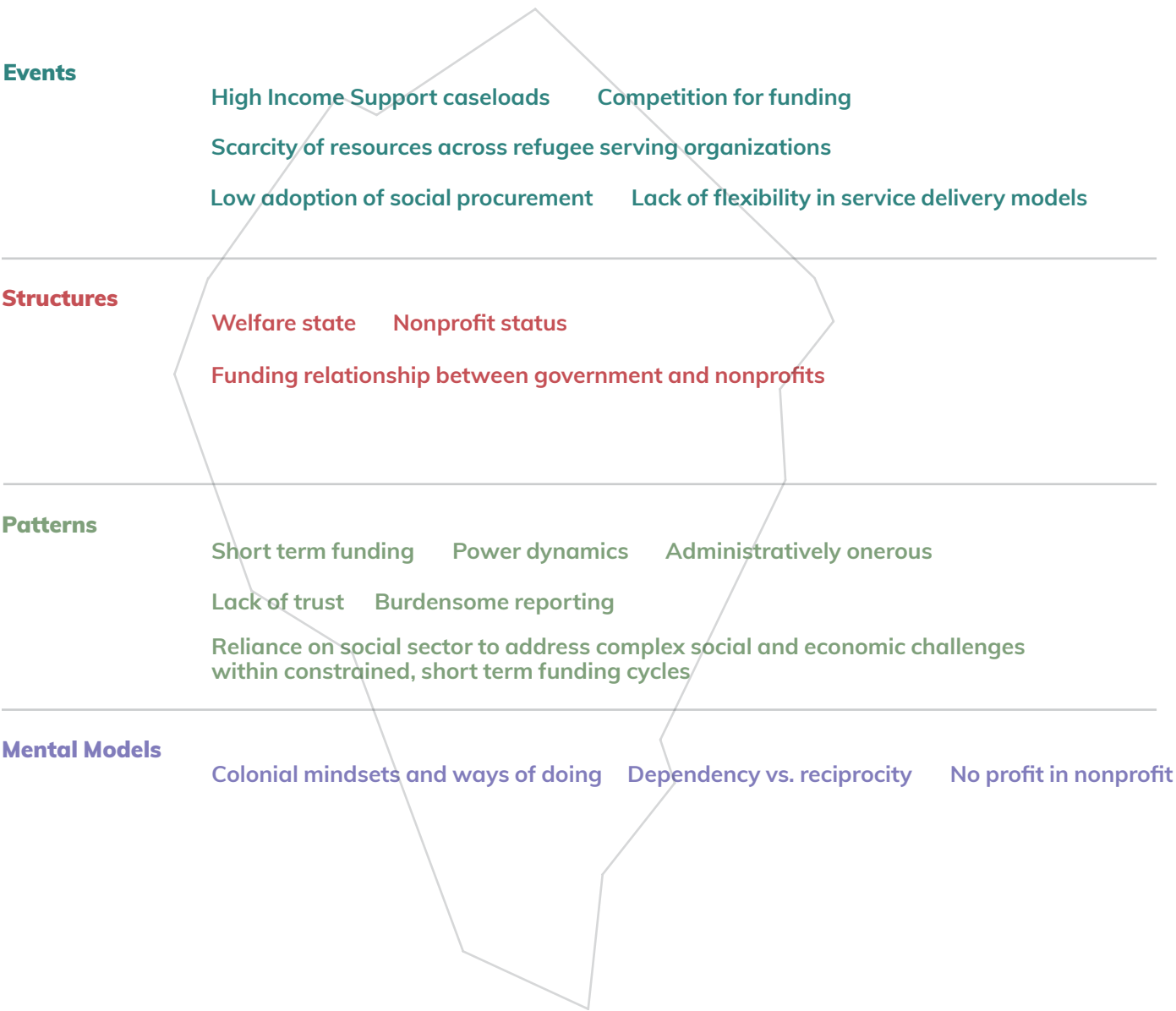
This illustrates how StartWork functions as an enabling mechanism, reducing informational and structural barriers that would otherwise prolong dependency. Reciprocity is not simply the outcome of employment, but is facilitated through earlier access to foundational knowledge and institutional orientation. As one stakeholder observed, the shift could be measured in concrete terms:

“To go from being a cost to the government to actually being a revenue source for the government—because now a newcomer will be paying taxes—is a pretty significant shift in a one-year period.”

Stakeholder Interview

At the deepest level of the model lies systemic discrimination, defined as patterns of behaviour, policies, or practices embedded in organizational structures that create or perpetuate disadvantage for racialized persons.¹⁸ The systemic discrimination of refugees in the workforce hinders the collective capacity to improve equity and community prosperity for all Canadians. These mental models maintain the status quo, where refugees must overcome significant barriers to enter the labour market.

Figure 2.2b Resource Allocation Between the Government and the Social Sector



The diagram above, **Resource Allocation Between the Government and the Social Sector**, identifies the complex resourcing relationship that exists between government and the social sector. This model sits alongside the **Refugees in the Canadian Labour Market** iceberg, demonstrating the interconnected but distinct challenges refugees, government, and the social sector are facing.

A major structure within this iceberg is the Canadian welfare state, which includes legislation and policies that provide Canadians with access to healthcare, education, employment insurance, and other social programs. The welfare state began as a way to support veteran families after World War II, ultimately expanding into other areas deemed essential to Canadian wellbeing.¹⁹ Pointing to the welfare state as a structure within this iceberg helps to understand how the current system developed. The welfare state is not the problem, but rather the means by which we have chosen to support Canadians in need. The challenge is that demand for welfare services has outpaced both resourcing and the innovation needed to address it.

“Canada’s defining issue is our ability to connect the people who most need the work with the work that most needs to be done.”

Stakeholder Interview

Power imbalances shape how government and the nonprofit sector engage with one another. Government holds primary control over granting and resourcing the social sector, often requiring nonprofits to report in detail on how resources have been utilized. These checks and balances, although important, can result in nonprofits being burdened with significant administrative work and competing with one another over a limited pool of resources. Due to high reporting standards, public servants are tasked with evaluating and verifying detailed expenditures, often at the expense of focusing on outcomes and impact.

At the bottom of the iceberg are the mental models that sustain the current relationship between government and the nonprofit sector. While there is clear interdependence, government relies on nonprofits to address complex social and economic needs and nonprofits rely on government for the resources to deliver this work, this dynamic does not value reciprocity. Too often, the exchange is shaped by control rather than partnership. Strengthening the partnership creates reciprocity where the social sector is valued for their services at market rates and rewarded as such.

“With government funding, there is not a lot of negotiation. They just tell you what it is and you say yes. It becomes a very transactional relationship.”

Stakeholder Interview

A key feature of this iceberg is that governments reserve funding as the primary mechanism for engaging the nonprofit sector. This deeply embedded assumption shapes the relationship between government and the nonprofit sector. It reinforces the idea that social outcomes have no market value. As a result, governments primarily engage nonprofits through funding agreements focused on how money is spent rather than through procurement models that value outcomes and impact. Unlike private companies that are paid for goods and services, nonprofits are rarely positioned, or recognized, as suppliers of measurable social and economic value. These dynamics are reinforced by longstanding colonial systems and ways of operating that continue to shape how value is defined, how resources flow, and whose knowledge is prioritized. As one stakeholder described it, this work is fundamentally, “about decolonizing the relationship between governments and nonprofits.” Challenging these assumptions is central to StartWork’s approach.

“We spent a lot of time helping them unlearn the only model they knew, and to see that government and civil servants aren’t evil — they’re just using the wrong tools.”

Stakeholder Interview

03 Procuring Outcomes

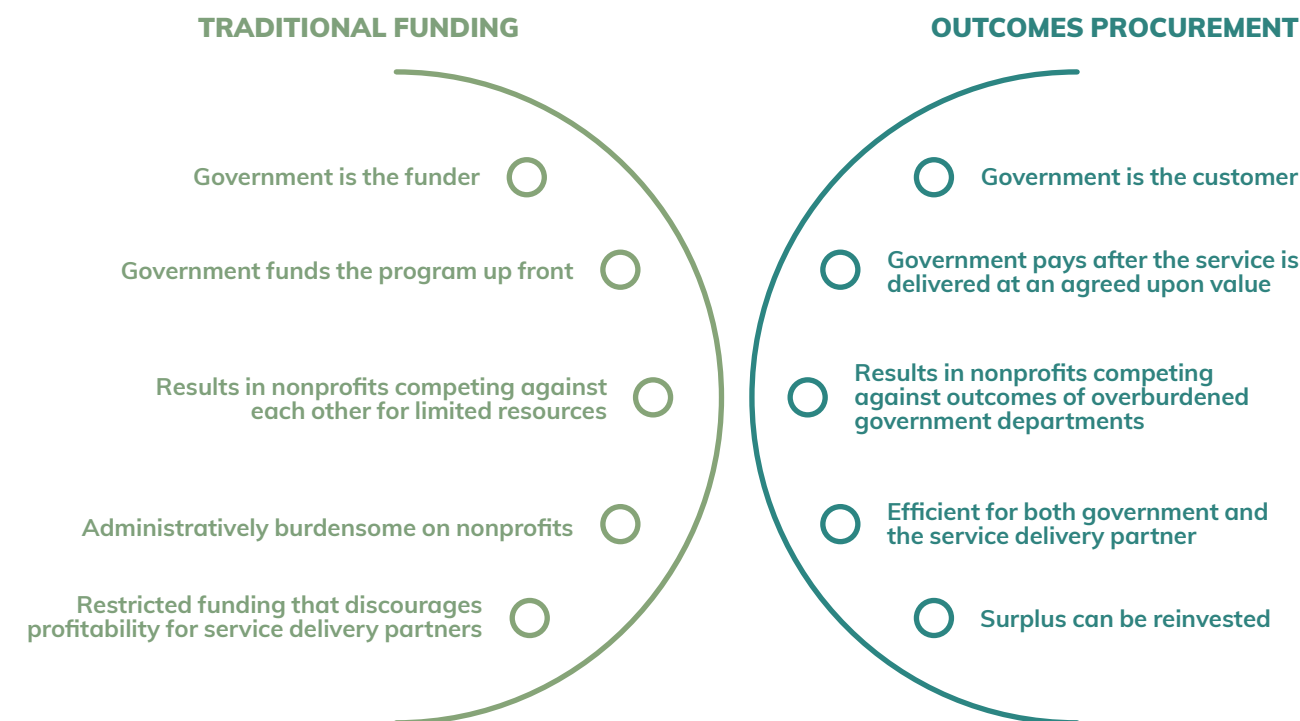
This chapter outlines the outcomes procurement model and the money flow that enabled StartWork. *Doing things differently* was the motto of StartWork, which meant leveraging different stakeholders, resource flows, and ways of working with the primary goal of reducing Alberta Income Support caseloads.

What is Outcomes Procurement?

The Ministry of Assisted Living and Social Services uses procurement to deliver Alberta Income Support.

It purchases the time of civil servants via collective agreements or contracts. It buys office space, desks, computers, photocopiers, and even natural gas and electricity to heat and light the offices. Procurement is also used to build schools and hospitals, transport goods and equipment, repair potholes, and many other things that support our daily lives. Annually, the Government of Alberta spends approximately \$7 billion on the procurement of goods, services, and construction.²⁰ Procurement is not new to the Ministry, nor is [social procurement](#) to other areas of government, but the procurement of outcomes from the social sector is novel.

Figure 3.1 Comparative Visual of Outcomes Procurement and Traditional Funding



The figure above, **A Comparative Visual of Outcomes Procurement and Traditional Funding**, demonstrates the different features and dynamics of outcomes procurement and traditional funding. Outcomes procurement provides both the government and the social sector with greater flexibility to deliver services as needed.

"There is nowhere else on the planet that I am aware of using procurement in this way to engage social enterprises — and that is what has been holding the sector back."

Stakeholder Interview

The first of its kind outcomes procurement contract between the Government of Alberta, Northpine Foundation, and MRU came about in response to a challenge the province was facing in the form of growing Income Support caseloads. As of January 2025, there were 134,994 individuals in receipt of some form of social support including those expected to work, those with barriers to work and those in receipt of AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Disabled).²¹ There was a 15% increase in 2024-2025 in Income Support caseloads with a total of 57,347 cases of which 39,159 cases are for those expected to work.²²

This novel approach became a reality when the Ministry created a "market for solutions" by posting a Notice of Proposed Procurement, issued on March 7, 2024. The figure captured below, **Notice of Proposed Procurement, Outcomes Purchasing Impact Initiative**, provides a description of what the Ministry was proposing to procure by contracting MRU, specifically the labour market attachment of forty refugees over a two year period.

"What no one else in the country has is what Alberta now has. It is entirely unique and a very important, precedent-setting breakthrough."

Stakeholder Interview

Figure 3.2 Notice of Proposed Procurement, Outcomes Purchasing Impact Initiative

Notice of Proposed Procurement

Date of Issue: March 7, 2024
Project Title/Name: Outcomes Purchasing Impact Initiative

Notice is hereby given by **Assisted Living and Social Services (the Ministry)** of its intent to contract with Mount Royal University (MRU).

The Service:
This research and innovation project will pilot an outcomes purchasing model to support labour attachment and sustainment of employment for **two-plus years of 40 refugee clients** with significant barriers to employment and deliver a comprehensive analysis of system cost savings. The objectives of this pilot are:

- To design, implement, and test innovative and transformative approaches to delivering employment solutions including fee per outcome funding model.
- To support Albertans transition towards financial independence through sustained labour market attachment and upskilling.

The figure above, **Notice of Proposed Procurement, Outcomes Purchasing Impact Initiative**, is a snapshot of the Notice of Proposed Procurement highlighting the main outcome MRU is to accomplish, "to support labour market attachment and sustainment of employment for two+ years of 40 refugee clients."

Delivering an outcome as opposed to an output, for example the number of seats in a training program, allowed StartWork to be nimble and responsive to participant needs. Negotiations with the Ministry illustrated what this shift in approach looked like in practice.

When we spoke with the Ministry about applying outcomes procurement as a tool to meet their needs, they asked, "How will you work with community-serving organizations and refugees?" We countered with, "Would you ask a printing company to tell you how their printers are made?" The Ministry then inquired, "Okay, but where will you get the upfront money from?" We replied, "Do you ask the photocopier company where it gets its upfront money from to manufacture their product?" The Ministry then asked, "What happens if it doesn't work?" We responded, "You don't pay!"

MRU leveraged the logic of procurement to encourage the Ministry to consider doing things differently to reduce Income Support caseloads. The Ministry deserves full credit for embracing this shift in relationship between government and the social sector.

"We don't have to say that the government knows best and it has to be a 12-week program with various elements. We just want people to start work, get wraparound support, and if you can do that and demonstrate that you can do it for cheaper than what the government would pay, mission accomplished."

Stakeholder Interview

Repositioning government as a customer rather than a funder allowed community-serving organizations to finally deliver services without the rigidity and scarcity trap of traditional funding. Community partners were empowered to offer individualized support and resources equitably according to those in need, no longer confined by capacity but free to be flexible and entrepreneurial in problem solving and service delivery, all anchored in a shared goal of 24 months off Income Support.



"Funding based on outcomes pushed us even more to really pay attention and focus to ensure the people in StartWork were able to move into employment."

Stakeholder Testimonial

Figure 3.3 The Adaptive Cycle and the Timeline of StartWork

3 REORGANIZATION

Contract #1

- Community partners selected
- 40 people exit Income Support and gain access to the labour market

1 MATURITY

Antiquated Funding Model

4 GROWTH

Work Based Learning RFP

- Momentum awarded contract working with up to 300 Albertans over 3 years as an alternative to Income Support

2 CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

- Notice of procurement
- Investment from Northpine

The figure above, **The Adaptive Cycle and the Timeline of StartWork**, is represented in the shape of an infinity symbol or horizontal 8. The model begins at 1 in the Maturity phase followed by Creative Destruction, Reorganization, and Growth.

The Adaptive Cycle is an ecological framework adopted in systems thinking approaches that models the dynamics of change, resilience and sustainability observed in complex systems.²³ **The Adaptive Cycle and the Timeline of StartWork**, begins at the phase of Maturity identifying an antiquated funding model. Disrupting this system in the "Release" or "Creative Destruction" phase was evident through the Notice of Proposed Procurement and the upfront investment from Northpine Foundation. This disruption in the system created the conditions for reorganization. Reorganization is demonstrated by the bringing together of community partners through the shared goal of supporting 40 refugees to gain access to the labour market. The final phase in this framework is Growth, which is where StartWork is currently positioned, demonstrated by [Momentum](https://momentum.org), a StartWork community partner, being awarded a contract to work with up to 300 Albertans over three years as an alternative to Alberta Income Support. The system will grow until it reaches maturity and repeats another iteration of adaptation.

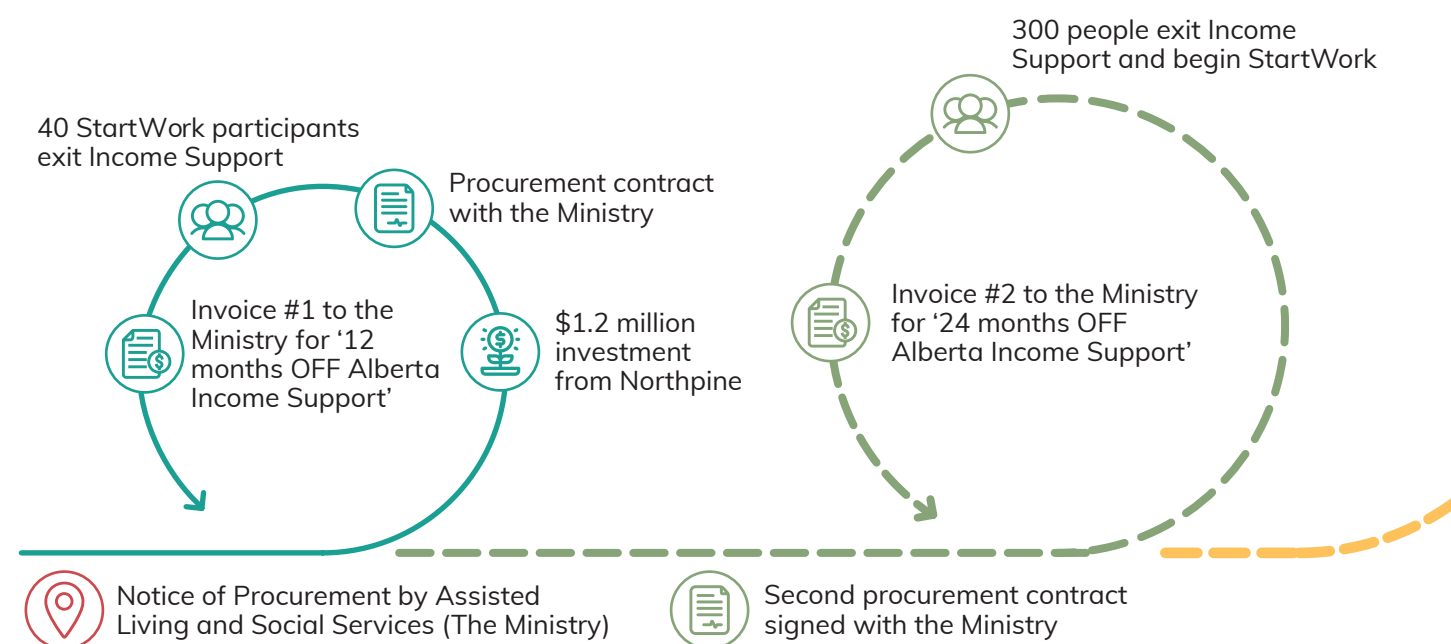
Money Flow

In our existing system, nonprofits compete with each other for scarce funding as governments use funding to support nonprofits and community-serving agencies rather than using procurement to purchase their services.²⁴ A 2025 survey found that most nonprofits would use new resources to strengthen existing programs rather than expand or launch new initiatives, suggesting a sector still operating in a state of chronic under-resourcing.²⁵

Nonprofits continue to deliver services with significant and meaningful outcomes without being appropriately compensated, effectively subsidizing the government in the process. This creates two interconnected challenges: limited revenue capacity within the nonprofit sector and increasing demand for social services including growing Income Support caseloads in Alberta.²⁶

The value that nonprofits generate is not consistently reflected in procurement processes, which in turn limits their capacity to deliver essential services. As a result, 68% of nonprofits report the ability to meet demand for services as a significant challenge.²⁷ Reducing barriers for nonprofits and social enterprises to participate in outcomes procurement would enable government to directly purchase results alongside traditional funding approaches, creating greater potential to reduce caseloads on Income Support. Accessing procurement dollars as a means of increasing resource capacity is what enabled StartWork to be established. The Ministry paid only after outcomes were achieved, at a rate no greater than the projected cost of Income Support that would have been incurred without the intervention. The contract value was then reinvested into StartWork to support continued delivery and scale. This approach reduced financial risk for the government through upfront investment provided by Northpine Foundation.

Figure 3.4 Sustainability Embedded in Outcomes Procurement



The visual above, **Sustainability Embedded in Outcomes Procurement**, illustrates the upfront investment from Northpine Foundation which enabled StartWork including sub-contracting community partners to provide training and work experience. Payment from the Ministry is then re-invested in a second contract for StartWork as depicted by the loop on the right of the visual. The scaling loops are a representation of the sustainability of an outcomes procurement approach.

The Role of MRU as an Intermediary

Thus far, we have introduced two critical actors in this system: the Government of Alberta as customer rather than funder, and Northpine Foundation as catalytic investor rather than grantor. Together they enabled the application of this unique procurement approach to a complex issue impacting refugees.

So, why was MRU, a post-secondary institution, involved and what was their role? Nestled within MRU, the [Institute for Community Prosperity](#) serves as a social innovation hub that experiments with new ideas and approaches through creative collaborations, social labs, and pilot initiatives that provoke new ways of thinking and working. For StartWork, that meant piloting an outcomes procurement approach for the first time in Alberta.

Our role in StartWork, at the Institute for Community Prosperity, was to serve as a liaison between the Ministry and community-serving organizations that have demonstrated experience supporting refugees and newcomers to Canada in gaining access to the labour market. In doing so, we sought ways to integrate StartWork across MRU. Over the course of two years, we built relationships with potential employers on campus and met with faculty to explore how StartWork could be integrated into teaching and research through case studies, class presentations, and student internships at the Institute for Community Prosperity.

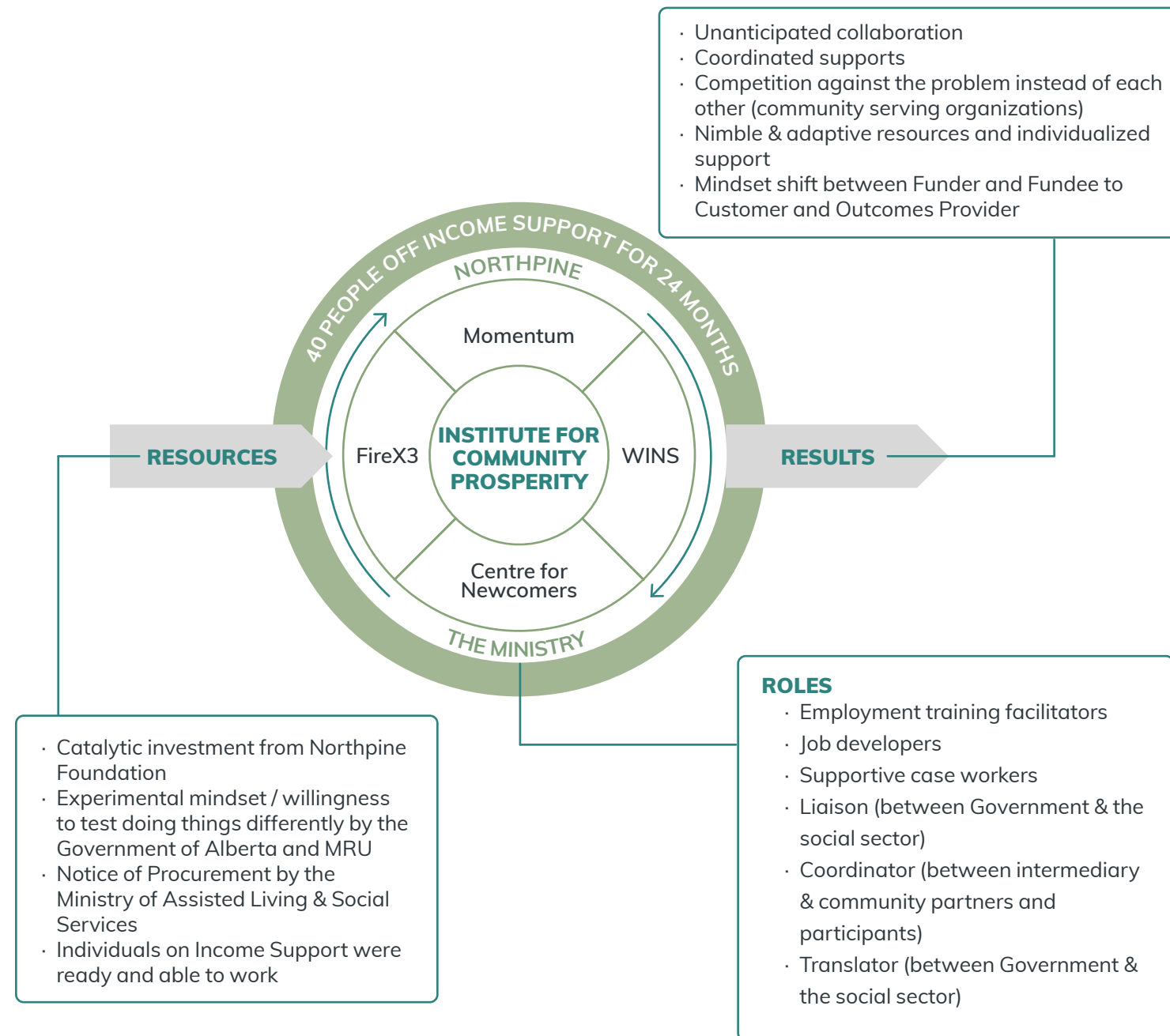
“The role of a post-secondary institution matters because we are not the one competing in the field—nonprofits are. A post-secondary institution is a neutral body. From what I observe, all the community partners see this pilot as very research-based and are willing to join because of that.”

Stakeholder Interview

As StartWork got underway in the summer of 2024, we engaged several community-serving organizations, introducing the concept of outcomes procurement and assessing their readiness to participate as potential community partners. This engagement coincided with significant funding cuts to the social sector, specifically employment-serving organizations, both federally and provincially due to a \$625M cut in Labour Market Transfer Agreements (LMTAs). This represented an approximate 20% reduction in funding for adult education and employment programs, lowering funding to pre-2017 levels.²⁸

Four community partners were selected, [WINS \(Women in Need Society\)](#), [Momentum](#), [FireX3](#) (and its affiliates, SAFEblu and Leave No Trace) and [Centre for Newcomers](#). Each community partner offered employment support including training in a specified sector, certifications where appropriate, job readiness training including support with resume writing, interview preparation, and valuable Canadian work experience. During this time, participants received a living allowance equivalent to what they had been receiving on Alberta Income Support. A StartWork Coordinator, employed by the Institute, provided customized one-on-one support to participants and liaised with community partners as needed over the two-year period. Together, the community partners and StartWork Coordinator secured employment for StartWork participants, offered a driver's training program, as well as English literacy resources and short-term emergency financial support when needed. Community gatherings were held to foster a sense of belonging and connection between participants and community partners.

Figure 3.5 StartWork 5R's Framework



The figure above, **StartWork 5R's Framework**, aims to illustrate the various organizations involved in StartWork including their roles and accompanying results. The framework demonstrates the connectivity of StartWork in its entirety from a broad perspective as it highlights the resources that were required to enact StartWork, the rules that aligned individual priorities into collaborative relationships, the roles that were assigned to actors within the system, and the results of these connections in action.²⁹ The model, originally used to understand local development issues, lends itself well to visualizing StartWork's local and regional boundaries within Calgary, Alberta.



The photograph above is taken from the WINS Warehouse Classroom where StartWork participants are being trained in forklift handling, resume and cover letter writing, and labour laws. There are 7 StartWork participants sitting at desks with an individual in a safety vest standing and teaching.

04 StartWork in Practice

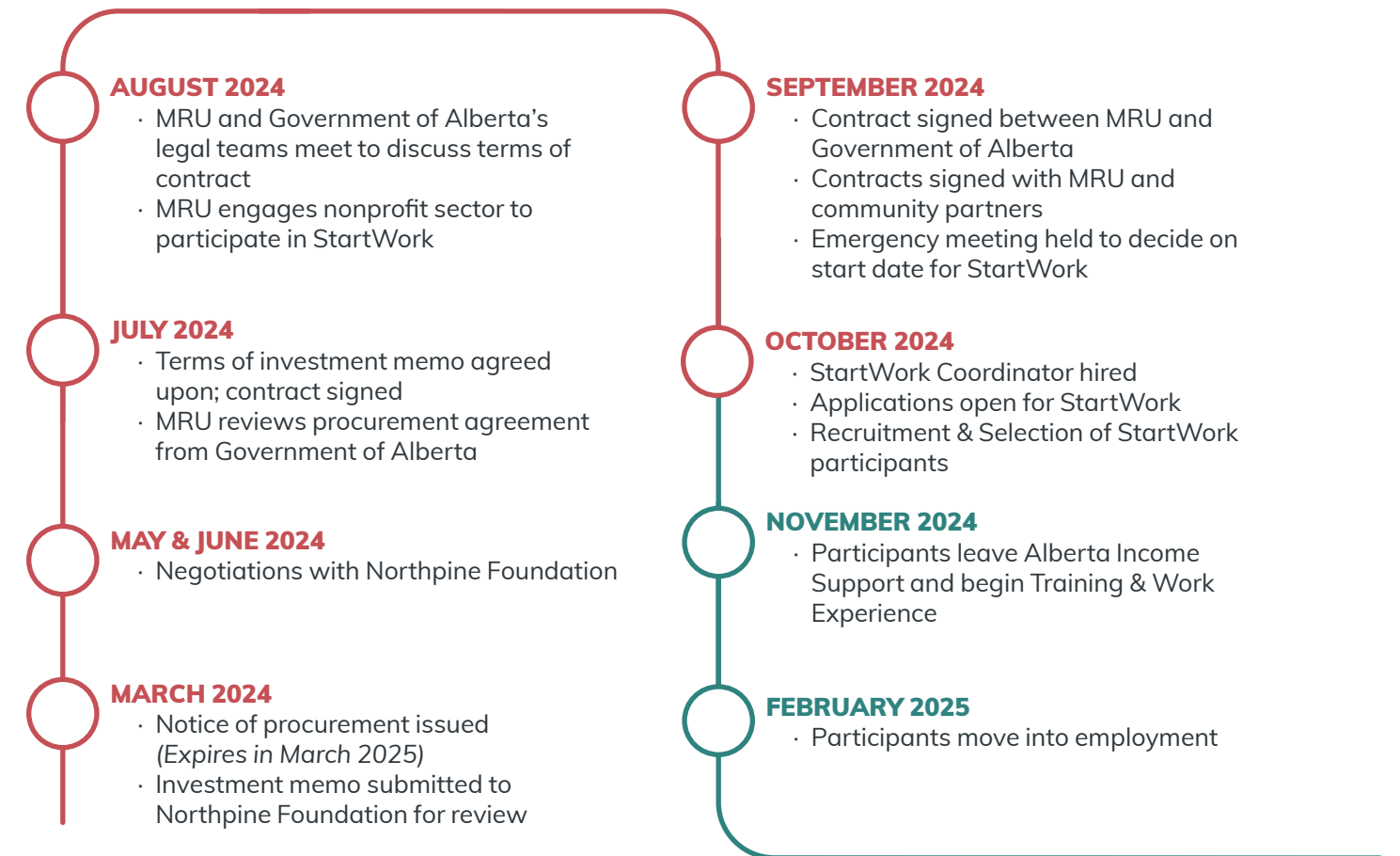
With an understanding of those involved, this chapter shows how an outcomes procurement model was applied working alongside four community partners and a cohort of forty refugees. Over the course of two years, participants were engaged at three stages: **Recruitment & Selection**, **Training & Work Experience**, and **Employment**.

Recruitment & Selection

This was the first opportunity to engage refugees and learn about their hopes and challenges in gaining work. The process was rushed on account of the time it took for MRU to engage and sign agreements with Northpine Foundation and the Government of Alberta, which had considerable impacts on everyone involved.

This compressed timeline helps to situate two features of the procurement contract in this context. The Notice of Proposed Procurement issued on March 7, 2024 required the contract to be underway within that fiscal year. In addition, all forty Income Support recipients were obligated to terminate their Income Support on the same day. By the time the contract was signed with the Province, investment capital was secured from Northpine Foundation, community partners were selected, and a recruitment process was in place, a choice had to be made. Should StartWork stakeholders rush the Recruitment & Selection process so Training & Work Experience could get underway before the end of the year, or wait until the new year and further delay the start date for participants?

Figure 4.1 Preparatory Phase (Pre-participant intake) Journey Map

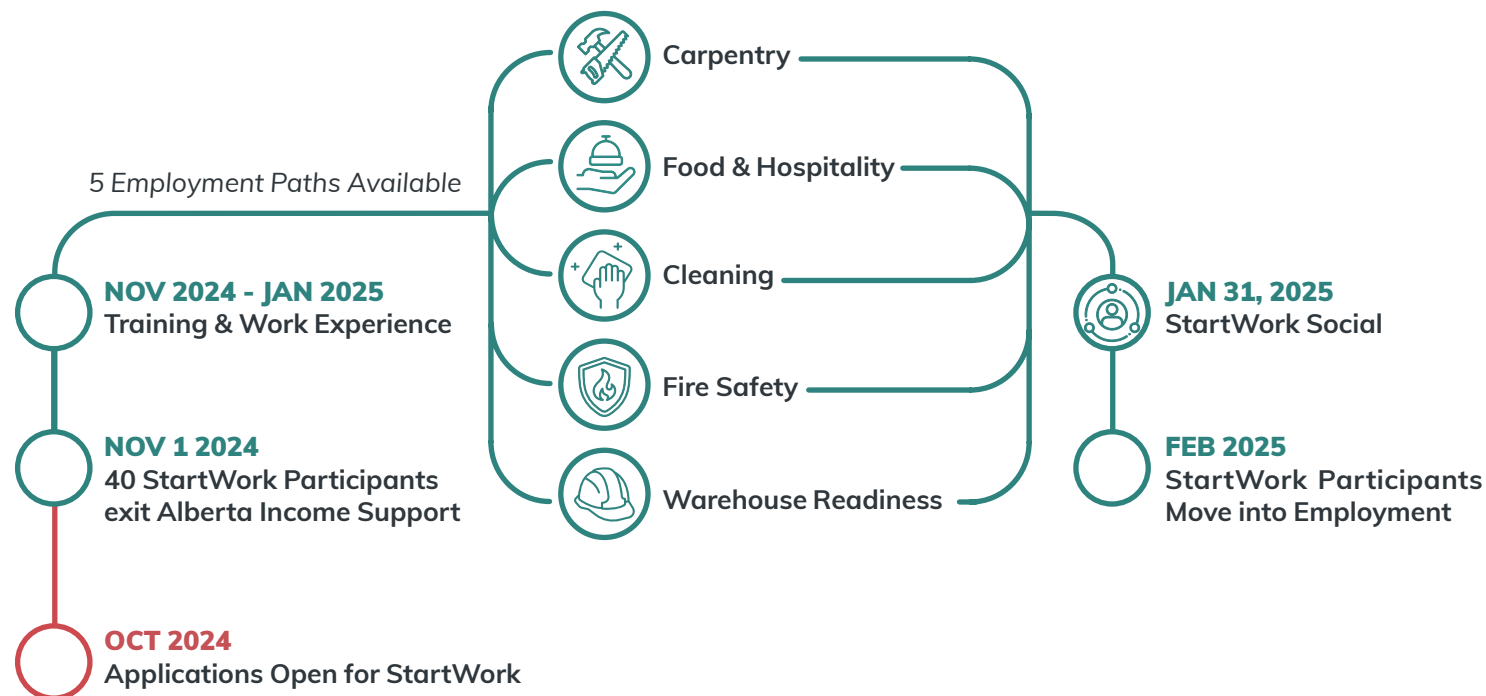


The **Preparatory Phase (Pre-participant intake) Journey Map** above illustrates the competing timelines as StartWork got underway, including the condensed stage for Recruitment & Selection, as well as the Training & Employment stage provided by community partners.

On November 1, 2024, all 40 participants left Alberta Income Support and began StartWork

As a collective, the community partners and MRU agreed to proceed with a November 1 start date, despite reservations. Referrals came through the Ministry as well as participating organizations. **Over a 28-day period, 279 applications were received, 110 candidates were shortlisted, two information sessions were held, 79 interviews were completed, and 40 candidates were selected.**

Figure 4.2 StartWork Participant Journey Map



The **StartWork Participant Journey Map** above details the various pathways to employment offered by community partners. 40 participants were selected and all exited Income Support on November 1, 2024 to begin their journey to employment. Pathways included carpentry, food and hospitality, cleaning, fire safety inspection, and warehouse readiness. The pathways and social engagements are explained later in this chapter.

We quickly learned that the “one price fits all” approach in the contract had its limitations. During Recruitment & Selection, we met individuals who needed minimal support to gain access to the labour market but were not a fit for the employment pathways identified. We also met highly motivated individuals who were a fit for available pathways but whose family size was too large for the resources available to pay a living allowance during Training & Work Experience. For others, English benchmarks were below the specified minimum and required additional upfront support before Training & Work Experience could begin.*

*This has been addressed in Phase Two of StartWork with a tiered pricing model that recognizes different levels of costs depending on the degree of barriers an individual is experiencing to access the labour market.



“The StartWork Info Session offered an eye-opening glimpse into the overwhelming demand for opportunities like this. Arriving to see a long line of eager applicants—many waiting over an hour before the session even began—was surprising. Even after registering everyone in line, new visitors continued to arrive, having only just heard about the initiative, yet eager for the opportunity to work.

The relentless interest demonstrated just how deeply people craved this chance for something better. The enthusiasm was contagious, making it clear that StartWork was filling an important gap in providing not only training but a direct path to employable skills and meaningful work experience.

What stood out most was the affirming quality of StartWork as an initiative that truly makes a difference. Unlike other programs that may offer vague promises of future employment, StartWork guarantees employable skills, solid job opportunities, and a chance at sustained work—while, at minimum, matching the level of support provided by Alberta Income Support, a critical lifeline for many. The dignity and empowerment embedded in StartWork is clear, especially when considering the circumstances of many applicants. Most of them, surviving on just \$824 a month from Alberta Income Support, displayed remarkable ingenuity in their ability to make ends meet. Yet, their eagerness to trade that lifeline for the opportunity to work reflected a deep desire for self-sufficiency and personal growth. These individuals, clearly self-starters, were so eager for a real chance to prove themselves.”

Stakeholder Testimonial



The image above is a photograph of community partner employees from WINS, Momentum, Centre for Newcomers, FireX3, and MRU. The photograph was taken at the initial Information Session at the Centre for Newcomers in October 2024.

Training & Work Experience

As participants joined StartWork, they selected their top two employment paths and were matched with the appropriate partner organization to access training and work experience. Employment paths included carpentry, food service and hospitality, cleaning and fire safety inspection, and warehouse readiness. Over six to eight weeks, participants completed training specific to their chosen path and attained certifications where appropriate. They also learned about job readiness and Canadian workplace culture, refined their resumes, developed interview skills, and built social capital within their employment cohorts. Participants then transitioned to work experience, some of which was internal to the organization and in the case of Momentum, through their employment partners.

During this time a living allowance was paid to participants equivalent or better than what they were receiving on Alberta Income Support. Data collected at the onset of StartWork found that on average individuals were receiving \$1,072 monthly in Alberta Income Support, with the lowest amount at \$459 and the highest at \$2,202.** Partner organizations, alongside the StartWork Coordinator, played a critical role in understanding participant barriers to employment. Support was provided wherever possible, including assistance with housing applications, access to the food bank, childcare coordination, and access to clothing and equipment for the job including work boots, safety equipment, and winter gear.



The image above is a photograph taken on the last day of English Training for StartWork participants. The English Training class was an additional program offered to StartWork participants who were wanting to enhance their English speaking and writing skills. The image shows six StartWork participants with their certificates of completion as well as the English teacher and MRU staff.

** Alberta Income Support is calculated based on an individual's housing, number of dependents, and ability to work full-time.³⁰

ENGLISH TRAINING

Adjacent to Training & Work Experience, StartWork offered resources to enhance English literacy. Over the two-year period, a variety of approaches were piloted, including a dedicated cohort participating in a 12-week, 60-hour English training program to enhance workplace English literacy. Alongside this, participants had access to an English literacy coach to practice conversational English. Enunciation training was offered to a dedicated cohort with higher educational backgrounds to support their pursuit of employment in their field of study.

The outcomes procurement approach was particularly valuable here, enabling dedicated and responsive resources at a time when significant cuts were being made to LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada), a federally funded program in operation since 1992. Waiting times to access language classes in Calgary had reached twelve to eighteen months.³¹ Between 2019 and 2024, funding for language services in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan dropped from \$562 million to \$335 million.³²

“StartWork taught us that you should learn and accept to learn from anybody, maybe younger than you or bigger than you. Don’t worry, just go and show yourself and learn.”

Participant Interview

None of this was perfect. There was a significant investment of time and resources needed for participants to learn a new language alongside their Training & Work Experience. Despite this, participants were grateful for the opportunity. The English literacy resources also supported the building of social capital and a sense of community among StartWork participants.

"The English classes were not only about language — the instructor also told us how to do interviews and guided us on finding jobs. Every time he supported us."

Participant Interview

Community Partner	Training	Work Experience
WINS (Warehouse) 8 participants	→ Warehouse Readiness (4-weeks) → Certifications: · Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) · Counterbalance Forklift Certification	WINS warehouse location (2+-weeks)
Momentum (Carpentry) 15 participants	→ Pre-employment training (4-weeks) → Carpentry training at SAIT (4-weeks) → Certifications: · WHMIS · Construction Safety Training System · SAIT Certificate of Completion	Work experience with a designated employment partner (4-weeks)
FireX3 (Fire Safety Inspection and Cleaning) 10 participants	→ On-site residential cleaning developing inter-personal and employment skills (16 - 24-weeks) → Potential to transition into fire safety inspection based on merit → Certifications: · FireX3 Mentee Development · SAIT Fire Extinguisher Certification · Phil Ackland Fire Extinguisher Cleaning	On-site residential cleaning
Centre for Newcomers (Food Service and Hospitality) 7 participants	→ In-class food sector training (2.5-weeks) → Certifications: · AHS Food Handling (provided by AHS)	Work experience with EthniCity Catering and EthniCity Cafe (9.5-weeks)

Moving into Employment

For some partner organizations, the timing for the completion of Training & Work Experience did not align with the seasonality of employment opportunities. Warehouse and food service roles were less available in the first months of the year, just as Training & Work Experience was wrapping up. This created challenges in supporting participants to move into employment.

There was urgency to transition participants into work as partner organizations had limited budgets to extend the living allowance beyond the term of work experience. This was a highly collaborative period for MRU and its partners. Every available resource was leveraged to support forty people to gain employment within a few weeks. The capacity of the social sector to deliver results under pressure was remarkable.

For StartWork participants, this was a significant transition. Most had arrived in Canada within twelve months of joining StartWork. Their average duration in receipt of Income

Support prior to joining was eight months, with the longest being thirty-eight months. Employment brought stability, new opportunities, improved mental health, and increased confidence, along with the promise of a paycheque and a new beginning for themselves and their families.

For the majority of StartWork participants, employment meant a significant increase in income relative to Alberta Income Support. The investment in Training & Work Experience resulted in half of the participants gaining employment in their field of training. Others gained employment in different fields using the transferable skills they had developed.

“When we had more than 50% of our participants employed right at graduation, I honestly did not know up until that point what was going to happen. There was just so much unknown, but we just kept going.”

Stakeholder Interview



When I first saw the StartWork flyer, I knew FireX3 was the right fit for me. It wasn't just about getting a job—it was about building a career in the fire suppression and safety industry. I committed myself to leading by example and focusing on quality work, aligning with the core vision of the FireX3 President. His belief that 'the best way to predict the future is to create it' deeply resonated with me.

My journey began with hands-on experience in various cleaning assignments, particularly hood cleaning—a critical aspect of fire safety and suppression. I quickly realized how precision and efficiency could make a real impact. While working alongside technicians at SAFEblu Fire & Safety and Leave No Trace Cleaning, I noticed inefficiencies in task delegation, workflow, and tracking. Drawing on my project management background, I took the initiative to streamline operations, implement structured processes, and enhance communication.

What started as hands-on work soon evolved into problem-solving and leadership. This experience proved that structured mentorship and real-world exposure can unlock incredible potential. FireX3 provided me with the foundation, mentorship, and leadership training to reach my full potential. Today, I'm not just working a job—I'm building a long-term career in fire suppression, equipped with the skills and confidence to grow. I am now on a path to creating a better future for myself and my family.

Participant Testimonial



The image above is a photograph taken at Momentum's Carpentry Training Graduation Ceremony. Photos of 15 StartWork participants are being projected onto a screen with two large Momentum banners to the right.

Planning for Uncertainty

Despite these positive outcomes, persistent challenges remained, including immigration status uncertainty, the loss of family and community from back home, the physical demands of labour-based positions, transportation, and hope for increased hours or a better employment fit. Some participants experienced a turbulent path to employment. The cycle of applying, waiting, interviewing, and starting over amid financial pressure and diminishing hope was real. These individuals needed a more relational and supportive form of employment through social enterprise, one that met employees where they were and provided the sustained support needed to remain employed.

In recognition that unexpected events could arise, a contingency fund was available to participants after employment to support emergency financial needs. This included costs for additional certification, transportation to interviews and job sites, short-term childcare support, and bridge financing between periods of employment. As of the time of writing, \$48,000 has been drawn from this fund.

“I have a steady job, I just bought a car, I am looking for an apartment. It feels good that I am starting over a new life and it is so bright.”
Participant Interview

As participants attained employment, they began accumulating insurable hours toward Employment Insurance, an important safeguard for those who experienced periods of job instability. For those facing barriers to employment, building eligibility for Employment Insurance provided a critical layer of income security during transitions. Future design considerations could explore ways to accumulate insurable hours during the Training & Work Experience period. This also highlights the role of social enterprise in offering a more sustained and supportive pathway into employment for individuals who needed a longer or more flexible transition after extended periods of unemployment.

”When I see participants who are still sustainably employed a year later, still moving through different stages — that is when it all sets in. The way we allocated resources, the way we pivoted when we needed to, got us to this point.”
Stakeholder Interview

DRIVER’S TRAINING

Another significant feature of the outcomes procurement approach was driver's training. In a city like Calgary with limited public transportation, a driver's license was a meaningful pathway to both employment and prosperity.

Research on the impact of driver's licensing on employment access in Canada is limited, and what exists focuses on specific geographic regions. A 2023 study examining the labour market integration experiences of newcomers in Regina, Saskatchewan found that lack of access to transportation had a strong relationship with labour market integration, alongside language barriers, lack of Canadian work experience, and credential recognition.³³ While focused on a smaller urban centre, the findings speak to broader patterns that were visible in the StartWork cohort as well. Through interviews with StartWork participants, the importance of a driver's license on both employment and sense of belonging was clear.

At the onset of StartWork, ten participants already held a Class 5 driver's license, seven of whom owned their own vehicle. Eighteen participants had previously attained their Class 7 license as part of their settlement process, and nine had no license. Some participants with a Class 7 had prior driving experience from their home country. Despite limited social capital and no access to a vehicle to practice, they worked through 10 hours of in-class training and more than 15 hours of in-car training before attempting their road test. Only one person passed on the first attempt. Each attempt carried real cost, with the exam fee at \$175 and the car rental at \$100.

The cost of driver's training, the exam fee, and the rental car were covered by StartWork for the first attempt. On subsequent attempts, StartWork provided cost-sharing with participants for additional in-car training, exam, and rental car fees.

70% of participants have secured their Class 5 licenses

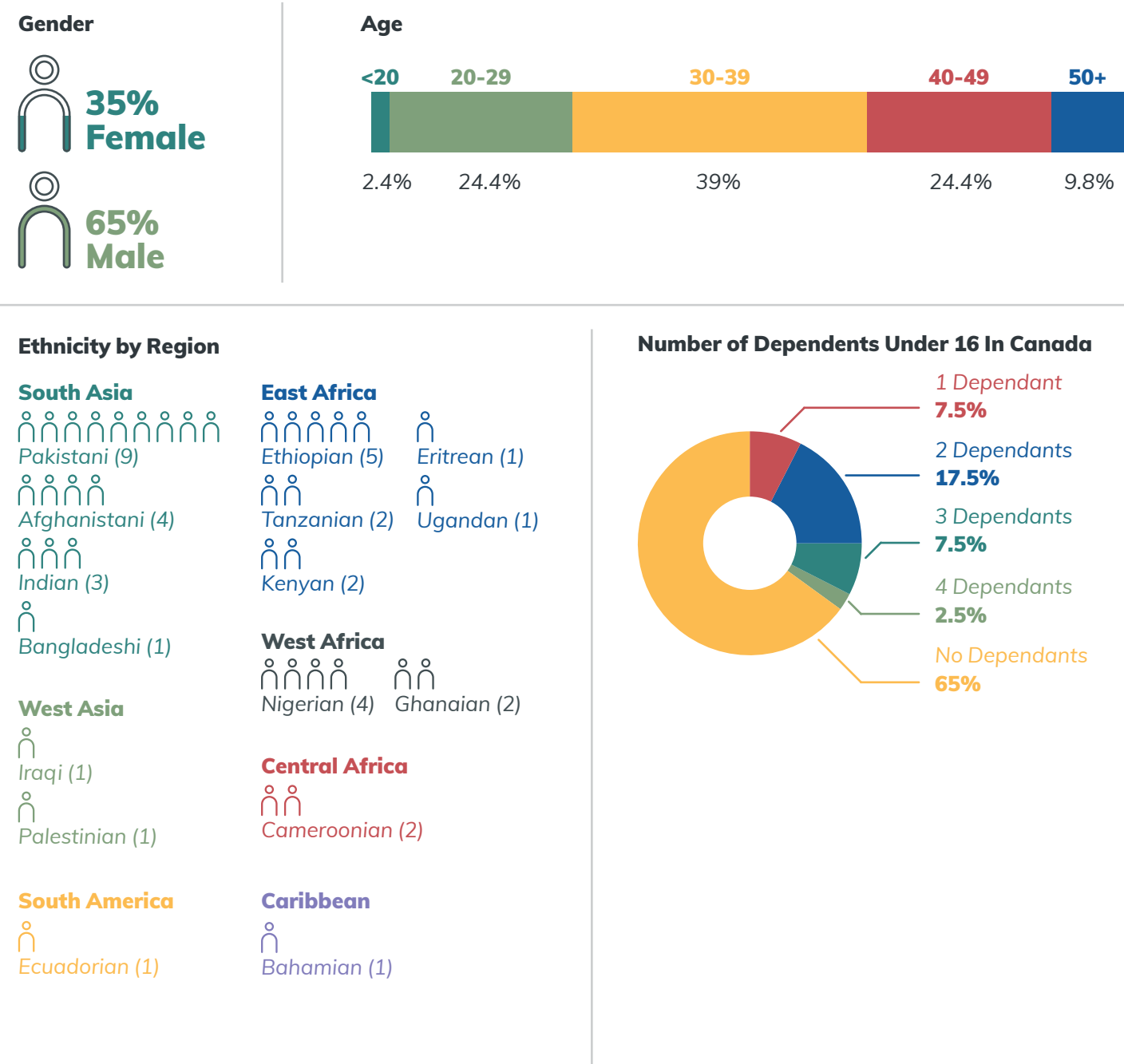


Participants who needed both their Class 7 and Class 5 license required the largest investment. The StartWork Coordinator played a critical role in supporting digital literacy for several participants as they prepared for their Class 7 test. The twelve-month waiting period between attaining the Class 7 and completing the Class 5 exam gave participants time to save toward additional in-car training and exam costs, as they all required several attempts at the exam. The courage and persistence these individuals demonstrated, learning to drive in a new country often in challenging winter road conditions, was extraordinary.

The investment paid off. Twenty-three of the forty participants had access to a vehicle, either through ownership or a family member. Of these twenty-three participants, fifteen saved enough through employment to purchase their own vehicle. Vehicle ownership provided more than transportation; it increased independence and expanded access to work and other opportunities.

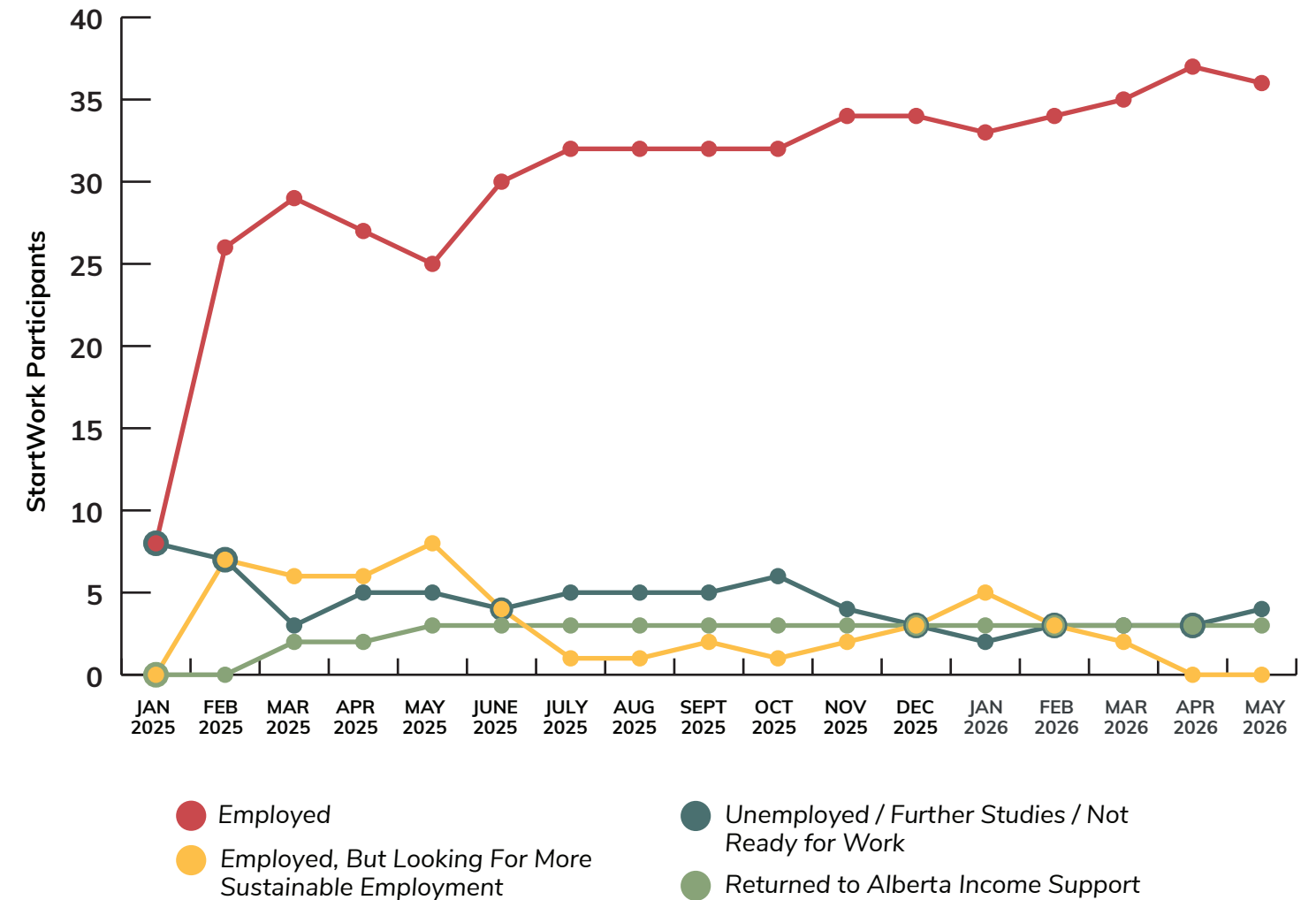
"For us as refugees to go for a driving class, we need to pay a lot. StartWork provided that opportunity...we really appreciate that."
Participant Interview

Figure 4.3 Participant Demographics



Participant Demographics, highlights the diversity of StartWork participants ranging from gender, age, ethnicity by region, and number of dependents under 16. Gender is divided amongst StartWork participants with 35% of participants identifying as women and 65% identifying as men. The largest age-based cohort in StartWork is between 30-39 with 39% of StartWork participants identifying as within this cohort. Ethnicity by region is illustrated through people icons and number of dependents under 16 represented in a pie chart with 17.5% of StartWork participants with 2 dependents under 16 years of age. This figure is to help build an understanding of the StartWork participants' identity.

Figure 4.4 Employment Graphics



The figure above, **Employment Graphics**, is a line graph with StartWork Participants on the y-axis and various status of employment on the x-axis. The **Employed** line is represented by the highest line on the y-axis followed by **Employed, But Looking For More Sustainable Employment** peaking in May 2025 and reaching zero as of April 2026. Participants in the **Unemployed/Further Studies/Not Ready for Work** are demonstrated by the line peaking in October 2025. StartWork participants that **Returned to Alberta Income Support** is demonstrated by the line initially rising in March 2025 and again in May 2025 and staying consistent at 3 participants up until April 2026.

05 Voices From the Field

The findings in this chapter offer two perspectives. The first captures participant voices and the StartWork experience. The second uses stakeholder responses to explore the structural conditions that shaped the pilot: how the model changed organizational behaviour, how collaboration emerged and where it remained fragile, and what StartWork could and could not achieve. Read together, these findings show both what StartWork meant in everyday life and what it offers as a lesson for future efforts to reduce those seeking Income Support.

During the final few months of the contract, 18 semi-structured interviews were completed with individuals involved in StartWork from a variety of perspectives, including organizational stakeholders and StartWork participants. We conducted the interviews for this case study the same way we approached the partnership itself: as learners rather than experts, trying to understand what happened and why, including the parts that proved harder than expected. Details on our approach are included in Appendix A.

Quotes appear throughout this chapter and elsewhere in the case study. They are drawn directly from transcripts and lightly edited for readability only. To protect confidentiality in a small and interconnected community, people are described generally and sometimes by role rather than by name, credential, or other identifying detail. This was the commitment made to the people who trusted us with their stories.

Participant Findings

Five people who completed the first StartWork cohort agreed to be interviewed. All had arrived in Canada as refugees, enrolled in StartWork in November 2024, and after an initial training period, later secured employment. These were not people new to work. Across their responses, five consistent themes emerged about the value of StartWork.

THEME 1 → Building a Foundation of Recognition and Stability

THEME 2 → Removing Barriers with Adaptive Support

THEME 3 → Restoring Confidence & Granting Hope

THEME 4 → Creating Community

THEME 5 → Beyond Case Management

THEME 1 Building a Foundation of Recognition and Stability

The experiences of those who participated in StartWork were both distinctive and meaningful, shaping what it felt like to take part and what StartWork came to represent during early resettlement. What participants described was not a lack of capability, but a gap between prior experience and labour market response.

"When you are in the desert, alone and very thirsty, who can give you water? That is StartWork."

A desert is not simply an uncomfortable place. It is a place without landmarks, without the infrastructure that makes movement possible. The question at the heart of the metaphor is not rhetorical. It is an account of who showed up during a period defined by uncertainty and the absence of response.

That gap was compounded by financial pressure and personal strain:

"I have a family to maintain. I was on Income Support, and I did not like that. It was a matter of dignity and self-respect. My self-confidence was going down."

Early work experiences were often marked by adjustment to unfamiliar roles rather than continuity with prior professional identities. For some, the shift extended beyond the professional. One participant described attending a social event organized through StartWork as the moment of feeling like a person who matters. Practical supports mattered, but so did being seen.

Taken together, these accounts reflect the gradual re-establishment of direction, recognition, and confidence after disruption.

THEME 2 Removing Barriers with Adaptive Support

StartWork addressed practical settlement and employment barriers through a responsive support model that adapted to participant needs as they emerged. Rather than following a fixed curriculum, StartWork provided a range of supports activated in relation to individual circumstances. These included assistance with driver's licensing, childcare navigation, resume development, interview preparation, tax filing, food bank referrals, and workplace safety certifications.

Driver's license support functioned as an enabling intervention, increasing access to mobility required for employment and daily life. As one participant explained, this support addressed both practical and financial constraints at a critical moment of transition:

"I was not working at the time and they fronted the ten-hour driving lessons and online course. That gave me the confidence to actually go and get it. I had been telling myself I needed to get my license but could not see a way to pay for the lessons."

Childcare support involved practical, hands-on guidance, including visiting childcare sites, assessing fit, and adjusting arrangements when housing or personal circumstances changed. This support extended beyond referral, accompanying participants through decision-making and implementation in real time, as was noted:

“The biggest challenge after getting hired was arranging childcare. We had no car, we were on public transit. The StartWork Coordinator called different daycares with me, came with me to visit them, and helped us find the right one.”

StartWork also supported participants in navigating unfamiliar employment systems, including documentation, communication norms, and workplace processes that are often assumed but not explicitly taught. When one participant could not interpret their first Canadian pay stub, they sent a photograph to the coordinator:

“She started to let me know: this is your payment, how many hours you worked, this is the tax. Without that, I cannot go to ask anyone.”

Across these examples, StartWork operated as an adaptive and holistic support system that responded directly to emerging barriers. Practical settlement needs and employment preparation were addressed as interconnected rather than separate domains of programming.

THEME 3

Restoring Confidence & Granting Hope

Those interviewed had arrived in Canada with substantial professional credentials. What they described in the months before StartWork was not rejection but silence: applications sent, no response received. That pattern, sustained over weeks and months, wore down confidence in ways that were difficult to separate from a broader sense of displacement. One participant captured the cumulative effect of that silence on his sense of himself:

"I was at zero actually when I started. I always had self-belief and I thought I could work in any place, but when I was looking and not getting anything, I was going down all the time. After StartWork, I am at least in the middle."

StartWork's response was not to fill a skills gap but to help participants translate what they already had in ways the labour market could recognize. That distinction mattered. For some, the shift extended beyond job searching into the workplace itself. One participant articulated how StartWork changed the way he advocated for himself once he was employed:

"StartWork taught us: you should show yourself and ask about anything you want in the company. After six months I started to ask, I want to go alone, I want my own van. And I got it. I learned that from StartWork."

Among StartWork's specific interventions, the mock interview stood out. Several participants named it as the moment StartWork's intent became clear: not an assessment of what was lacking, but a deliberate acknowledgement of what was already there. One participant recalled how the experience reframed StartWork's purpose for him:

"That was when I realized StartWork was not only about training. It was about recognizing the skills you already have. They told each participant: you have these skills, you can do this. After that, most of us got hired. That moment set out for me. It gave me motivation and encouragement."

For others, that recognition prompted a quieter but equally significant reassessment. One participant put it simply, with a note of careful self-possession:

"I have learned that I am an organized person, that I overcome obstacles, and that I am a pretty strong person, if I may say so myself."

Confidence, once restored, opened into something larger. When asked where they saw themselves in a year, participants did not offer cautious answers. Some aimed to return to their field in a lab or research position. Others spoke about contributing their experience to a team and building something stable for their families. One participant laid out his goals with quiet precision:

"I want to settle down. My permanent residency process is underway. Once I get that, I want to be at a senior level in a company, get my own house, and have things go smoothly."

These were not vague aspirations. Specific, grounded, and forward-looking, they were the kind of plans that require a stable enough footing to imagine them in the first place.

THEME 4

Creating Community

A sense of community emerged as training and work experience concluded. This was a key element in StartWork's design and it appeared consistently in participants' accounts of what followed after the training and work experience. For individuals whose immediate family networks remained outside Canada and whose existing relationships were geographically dispersed, the cohort formed through StartWork functioned as a sustained point of connection in everyday life. One participant described this ongoing network:

“We built this community. Every couple of months we meet again, with our families. Everyone, we want to build a small family, a small community, just to talk about what happened with us, what we want to do. I found this in the StartWork community.”

A messaging group maintained contact between participants, while informal and formal gatherings extended these relationships into family and social settings. Over time, these connections also took on practical functions, supporting everyday decision-making and problem-solving, as was noted:

“This community helped me a lot, and really helped my family also. Even when I want to buy a car, I ask StartWork. If I want auto insurance, I ask the participants around me. Without this community, I do not know anything about that.”

Gatherings and events also shaped how these relationships were experienced. Social moments, graduation activities, and informal meetups contributed to the consolidation of ties formed over the two years. For some participants, these interactions marked a shift from temporary cohort membership to ongoing social connection.

What emerged was not only a support group, but a durable social infrastructure that continued to inform everyday decisions. Its reach extended beyond the cohort itself. Participants described passing knowledge on to friends and family members who had not been a part of StartWork, helping others navigate systems they had recently learned themselves. One participant described actively recommending StartWork to every newcomer they encountered. Another recounted transferring what they had learned to their children, and watching that understanding take hold. The community StartWork created did not stay within its own boundaries.

THEME 5

Beyond Case Management

Across all accounts, staff members were characterized in ways that extended beyond routine professional roles. The coordinator and program director connected consistently as individuals familiar with participants’ circumstances and engaged with them over time. Participants described this engagement in direct terms:

“I do not have any problem because the StartWork Coordinator was the one person I was contacting every day.”

“The coordinator pinpoints what you really need before you know what you need yourself.”

These accounts reflect anticipatory engagement, where support was provided in advance of a fully articulated need. This type of connection depends on sustained attention to individual circumstances rather than procedural interaction alone.

In several cases, engagement extended into practical contexts beyond training, including accompaniment to childcare arrangements, continued follow-up across the cohort, and ongoing guidance over the two years. External introductions facilitated over time also contributed to subsequent employment and professional opportunities.

Engagement continued in informal but consequential ways. When one participant could not interpret their first Canadian pay stub, they sent a photograph to the coordinator. The explanation that followed gave them the knowledge to understand their workplace conditions, and later, the basis on which to ask for more. These interactions functioned as points of practical translation at moments that mattered.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that staff engagement functioned as part of how StartWork operated in practice rather than as an external layer of support.

Stakeholder Findings

While the participant findings describe what StartWork felt like from the inside, the stakeholder findings explain how it was built. Thirteen stakeholder interviews were completed, drawing from government, participating community partners, Mount Royal University, and Northpine Foundation. Six themes emerged.

- THEME 1

→ Revenue Model Shift
- THEME 2

→ Better Collaboration
- THEME 3

→ Flexible Support Works
- THEME 4

→ Bureaucratic Constraints
- THEME 5

→ A Trusted Intermediary
- THEME 6

→ Beyond Job Placement

THEME 1

Revenue Model Shift

The most consistent theme across stakeholder accounts was the shift away from traditional cost-reimbursement funding and its implications for program design and delivery.

In conventional social service contracts, government oversight is typically exercised through detailed monitoring of expenditure. Stakeholders noted that this structure prioritizes compliance with process requirements alongside responsiveness to participant needs. Organizational effort is therefore often directed toward documenting activity and justifying expenditure, with outcomes mediated through reporting structures.

StartWork introduced a different revenue arrangement, where payment was linked not to employment itself, but to “Months Off Income Support.” While employment was understood as the intended pathway, the formal metric of success was time spent off Income Support. Stakeholders described more variable trajectories than this metric implies, with movement in and out of employment occurring alongside longer-term stabilisation. This shaped how outcomes were defined and operationalised.

As one stakeholder in the interviews specified:

“You are flipping from a funder into a customer. When the government is a customer of a result rather than a manager of a process, the entire energy of the work changes.”

Within this arrangement, partners described increased flexibility in resource use, including responsiveness to immediate participant needs such as transportation, certification costs, or basic support. This was captured in another account of day-to-day implementation:

“No one was telling us where our money needed to go or how we needed to spend it. They said: “Here is the money, spend it to get the job done.”

This flexibility was enabled by Northpine’s upfront investment and embedded within a structure in which financial risk was distributed across Northpine, MRU as an intermediary and delivery partners. Northpine functioned as a stabilising mechanism during implementation, supporting continuity where required. Because payments were tied to “Months Off Income Support” after participants were selected, organizations required bridging capital to operate in the interim, shaping how liquidity and timing were managed across the model.

A further feature of the model was the reinvestment of government outcome payments into subsequent contracting cycles. This created a revenue loop where outcomes payments were redeployed to support upfront investment and contingency capacity, enabling a rare degree of unrestricted revenue within the social sector and increasing adaptability during implementation.

Taken together, these responses indicate that changes in procurement structure shape how programs are organised and delivered, particularly in relation to flexibility, timing, and coordination across partners. Implementation continued through the structure of the funding model, even where interpretations of its logic differed across organizations.

When the government changes what it buys, it transforms how organizations behave. In this case, those changes were produced through the structure of the revenue model itself: how payments were timed, how risk was distributed, and how resources were deployed in practice. The effects were not dependent on uniform interpretation across partners, but were carried through the design of the system as it operated on the ground.

THEME 2

Better Collaboration

Stakeholders also consistently noted a shift in how organizations worked together under the outcomes procurement model, particularly in relation to coordination, information sharing, and shared responsibility for outcomes.

In conventional funding environments, collaboration between nonprofits is structured by competitive constraints for limited resources. This competition is not a failure of values but a rational response to resource scarcity. Stakeholders described how this shapes organizational behaviour, including the protection of employer relationships, referral pathways, and program visibility. Information sharing is therefore mediated by incentives that reward organizational differentiation rather than collective delivery.

The outcomes procurement model reconfigured these conditions by defining success at the level of shared participants across all delivery partners. With outcomes tied to a common cohort, organizational performance became interdependent, shifting what was rational to share and coordinate. Collaboration became the rational choice because success was collective.

This transformation was reflected in more integrated forms of collaboration during implementation. Stakeholders discussed sustained coordination across organizations, including the redistribution of employer contacts, training opportunities, and material support in response to participant needs. These practices reflect a move from parallel service delivery toward coordinated problem-solving across the system.

In one instance, a participant requiring urgent dental care was supported through a cost-sharing arrangement between two organizations. One respondent described the coordination in practical terms:

“I have a fund, we have an emergency backstop fund, but I can only be authorized to \$1,000. Do you want to split it?”

The cost was shared.

Across these interviews, stakeholders articulated a consistent shift in relational orientation between organizations. As one response noted:

“They began to work with each other in a non-defensive way. They were able to help each other because they could see the end goal was to get all 40 people off of Income Support.”

This change was also captured in a phrase that circulated across organizations:

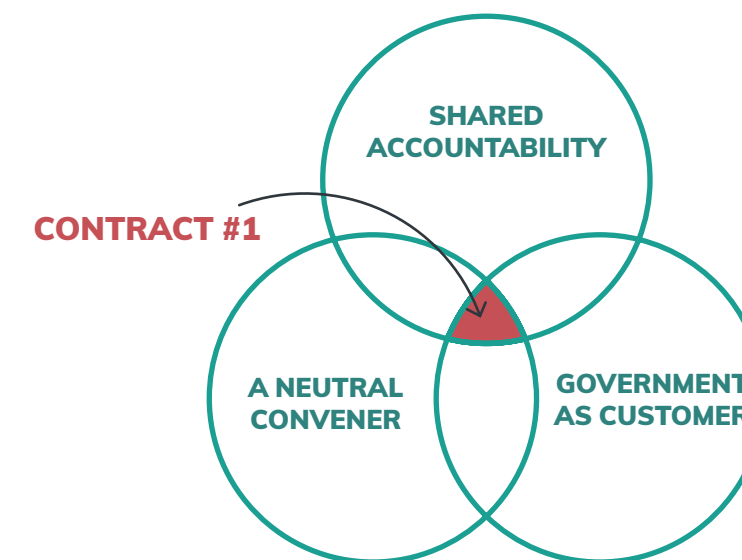
“We are here to complete, not to compete.”

Together, these accounts reflect how shared outcome definitions reshaped collaboration as a functional requirement of delivery rather than a discretionary practice.

Stakeholders emphasised that coordination remained stable across implementation but depended on shared accountability mechanisms and a clearly defined coordinating function across partners. Where these conditions were present, collaboration was consistent rather than ad hoc.

Overall, these accounts suggest that collaboration through outcomes procurement is structurally produced. It emerges when incentives, accountability, and shared outcomes are aligned across organizations, making coordination a rational response to system design. This coordination forms the organizational layer of a wider system designed around shared participant outcomes.

Figure 5.1 Interdependence Model



The figure above, **Interdependence Model**, illustrates a three circle venn diagram demonstrating the relational aspects of StartWork. Shared Accountability (between actors), a Neutral Convener (MRU), and Government as Customer (paradigm shift) created the environment for Contract #1 to take place.

THEME 3

Flexible Support Works

Stakeholders consistently identified responsiveness as a defining feature of StartWork’s service delivery. This reflects how outcomes procurement enables resources to be directed toward barriers to employment rather than predefined service categories.

One stakeholder described the underlying shift in approach:

“It is not the [government’s] business how each budget line gets spent. [Governments] are purchasing an outcome. If a participant cannot get to work because of a toothache, we pay for the dentist. In a regular program, that participant might have just dropped out.”

In practice, this enabled support across a wide range of needs, including driver’s training, emergency dental care, childcare navigation, food support, mental health services, and housing-related assistance. Program records indicate that some participants were managing immigration-related costs exceeding \$10,000, which would typically fall outside employment-focused programming.

This flexibility allowed resources to follow barriers rather than service categories. However, stakeholders also stated that flexibility alone was not sufficient to ensure smooth transition into employment. Accounts suggest that partners with embedded employer relationships were better positioned to support participants moving directly from training into work. The transition point as a period of uncertainty was well captured in this stakeholder comment:

“I was met by participants who were scared. What are we doing now? Employment training is done and we do not have jobs.”

Another stakeholder articulated the operational pressure at this stage:

“After training we had to get participants a job immediately, zero days. I have never seen a program that expects a hundred percent employment rate, and so aggressively and so quickly.”

The implication is that flexibility in resource use, while necessary, was not sufficient on its own. Employment placement needed to be integrated into program logic from the outset rather than treated as a downstream consequence of training completion. Where employer relationships and work experience were embedded within delivery models, transitions out of training were more direct and supported. Where they were not, participants encountered a structural gap between training and employment that flexibility alone could not resolve. The distinction between a training program and an employment program is structural, not semantic, and it directly shaped outcomes.

Within this system, sustained employment depends on whether labour market pathways are structurally embedded within program design, rather than relying on flexible responses at the point of transition.

THEME 4

Bureaucratic Constraints

Across interviews, the intake process emerged as the most significant structural constraint of the pilot, with clear implications for program design and outcomes. The requirement that all forty participants begin simultaneously, combined with a compressed implementation window, limited the ability of partners to screen participants or match them to appropriate streams.

The consequences were visible across multiple stakeholders. Participants were placed in trades training despite physical conditions that made labour-intensive work difficult. English language benchmarks were included as eligibility criteria but were not consistently verified in practice.

As one community partner suggested,

“different community partners were doing intake together and we did not require participants to provide their certificates. Some participants slipped through the cracks.”

Another stakeholder reflected on timing pressures at entry, stating that

“we knew right from the start that the timing of participants finishing right before the holiday season was going to not work in anybody’s favour.”

What surfaced was a picture of constrained intake conditions. The requirement for simultaneous entry shaped what was possible at the point of participant selection, limiting the system’s capacity to align individuals with appropriate pathways before training began.

This reframes intake as a system design issue rather than an implementation issue alone. It is shaped by what procurement processes and delivery timelines allow, not only by how programs are delivered.

A further insight concerns the relationship between training performance and employment readiness. One delivery organization described participants who showed limited engagement during training but transitioned into strong performance once employed:

“The second they went from training to employment, the difference was dramatic. They showed up, their work ethic completely changed.”

Another observed similar patterns, noting that some participants who struggled in training later performed well in employment. If training performance is a weak proxy for employment potential, then intake screening and exit decisions based on training conduct may systematically exclude individuals who would succeed in employment.

THEME 5

A Trusted Intermediary

MRU was repeatedly identified by stakeholders across sectors as essential to enabling cross-sector collaboration. Its role was explained less in terms of program management and more in terms of institutional neutrality, a quality that is difficult to design into contracts.

One delivery organization articulated the function of that neutrality:

“The university was probably the most engaged we had. If we were having significant issues to problem-solve, they were the first call. They would problem-solve with us or bring others into the conversation if needed. They were also just the glue, creating the networking events and community events that brought everybody together.”

In practice, this positioned MRU as a relational anchor across organizations that would otherwise be operating in parallel or, in other funding contexts, in competition. Nonprofits experienced MRU as non-threatening, the government described MRU as credible and stable, and the foundation recognised MRU as a trusted intermediary with established sector relationships.

At the same time, stakeholders emphasized that this capacity was not created for the pilot itself. It emerged from sustained relationship-building over more than a decade across government, nonprofit, and foundation sectors. This has direct implications for replication: the intermediary function cannot simply be assigned through contract design, but depends on pre-existing institutional legitimacy and trust.

Senior university leadership also noted tensions around this role, asking, “If we’re taking on a project like this that is very community facing, how is this creating any value to students?” The convening function was therefore not institutionally uncontested. It required internal justification and ongoing advocacy, and its continuation in future phases cannot be assumed, even where it demonstrated value in Phase One.

One stakeholder raised a forward-looking concern:

“If the university is not the one to take the lead, I worry that competition will come back among the other partners. A post-secondary institution can convene without being seen as a competitor. If a nonprofit takes the lead, that changes.”

This reality is already reflected in Phase Two, which has seen a shift in lead partner responsibilities. It highlights the importance of understanding how collaborative conditions are supported under different convening arrangements as the model scales. Trust is not an emergent property of collaboration. It is a precondition for it, and it cannot be assumed into existence.

THEME 6

Beyond Job Placement

Stakeholders consistently raised questions about how success is defined in the model, and whether current metrics capture what StartWork is intended to achieve.

StartWork’s primary success metric was “Months Off Income Support,” sustained over two-years. By this measure, Phase One produced strong outcomes: all forty participants moved into employment, the vast majority sustained it, and most increased their income relative to prior support levels. One partner described the fiscal logic directly:

“To go from being a cost to the government to actually being a revenue source for the government—because now a newcomer will be paying taxes—is a pretty significant shift in a one-year period.”

This framing is accurate and important. It captures a clear and measurable shift in economic status. At the same time, stakeholders noted that it does not fully reflect the range of what employment represents across different participant contexts.

Across interviews, examples surfaced of participants who became gainfully employed while their longer-term trajectories remained in transition. One participant with extensive international experience entered training outside their field of prior expertise. Another moved through multiple job placements before achieving greater stability. As one organization noted:

“They should be working in their field of choice, but we are still working with them on how to get there.”

This distinction becomes most visible at the structural level. What the model cannot do alone is resolve the labour market conditions that shape newcomer integration, including credential non-recognition, licensing barriers, and employer expectations that require Canadian experience to obtain Canadian experience.

This structural constraint was reinforced by how StartWork itself framed participation to clients. As communicated to participants:

“StartWork is the start of your work in Canada. This job, whatever that will be, is the stepping stone to your next role and then the next role. We never promised jobs in your field of training.”

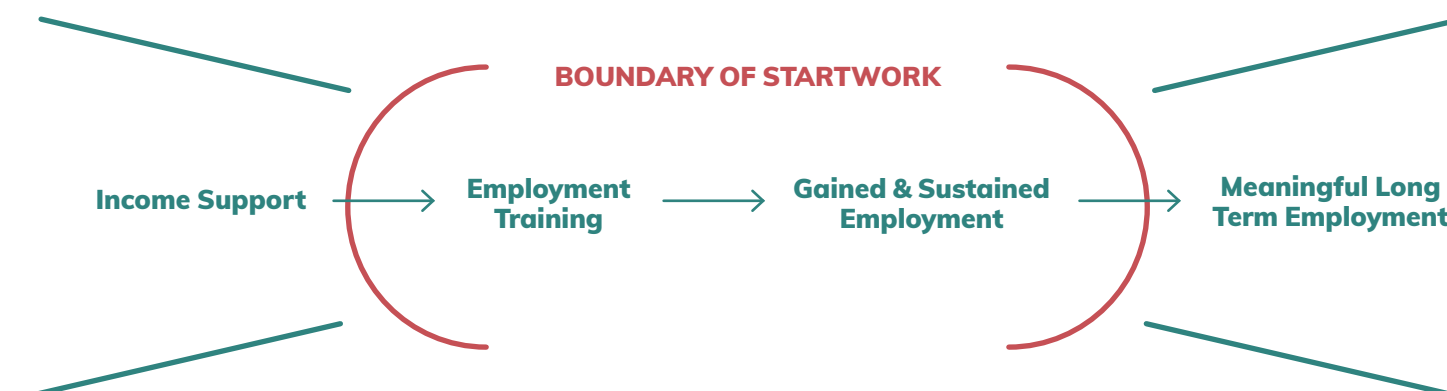
This framing positioned early employment as part of a sequenced transition rather than an endpoint of professional alignment.

Within this broader context, the distinction between immediate labour market attachment and longer-term professional reintegration remains central. Stakeholders emphasized that early employment can function as a necessary and meaningful first step, particularly for newcomers navigating unfamiliar labour markets, even when it does not immediately reflect prior skills or experience.

A participant also questioned whether current employment metrics fully capture what “meaningful employment” represents in practice, highlighting the gap between job placement outcomes and longer-term professional alignment. A suggestion was also raised to broaden success metrics to include financial wellbeing, professional dignity, and community integration alongside employment status.

These are not critiques of StartWork. They define the limits of what any single outcomes-based intervention can measure or resolve. StartWork successfully moved participants off Income Support and into employment. Whether this constitutes full labour market integration depends on broader structural conditions and policy environments that extend beyond the scope of StartWork itself.

Figure 5.2 From Income Support to Sustained Employment



The figure above, **From Income Support to Sustained Employment**, illustrates the transition from Income Support to Meaningful and Long Term Employment. The boundary of StartWork’s intervention throughout the transition is to provide Employment Training and supporting Gained and Sustained Employment.

The participant and stakeholder findings reflect two views of the same reality. One describes what StartWork felt like from the inside. The other describes how it was built. Read together, they show that the outcomes were not incidental. They were produced by specific conditions: how funding was structured, how organizations were held accountable, and how people showed up for each other within that structure. What those conditions made possible, and where they fell short, is what the analysis that follows takes up.

06 What Became Possible

StartWork started with a simple and somewhat radical proposition: what if the government paid for people no longer on Income Support rather than reimbursed costs for the activities designed to get them there? This shift sounds modest but in practice it changed almost everything including how the people delivering it related to each other. It also gave the Ministry a meaningful alternative to reducing Income Support caseloads.

What the findings in the previous chapter described is a system that worked differently than most. What follows is an attempt to explain why.

What the Contract Actually Did

In conventional social services contracting, upfront resources are provided before results are known. Organizations are funded to deliver defined activities and are required to adhere to an agreed upon budget. There is little flexibility to optimize spending in response to emerging real world conditions. The unintended consequence is that the activity itself can become the goal: training hours are completed and participants graduated. Whether anyone actually secures employment, and sustains it, can become a secondary concern.

StartWork transformed employment outcomes into a shared responsibility. Because payment was contingent on refugees obtaining and sustaining employment, decisions about where to allocate resources, how to respond when challenges emerged, and what participants genuinely needed were all oriented toward a common objective. The participant findings contain many examples of this dynamic in practice: resources provided to get a driver's licence, an

emergency dental bill being shared or a pay stub explained line by line. None of these supports were explicitly built into the original program design. Rather, they occurred because the contract structure made responsiveness to the needs of participants the most rational course of action.

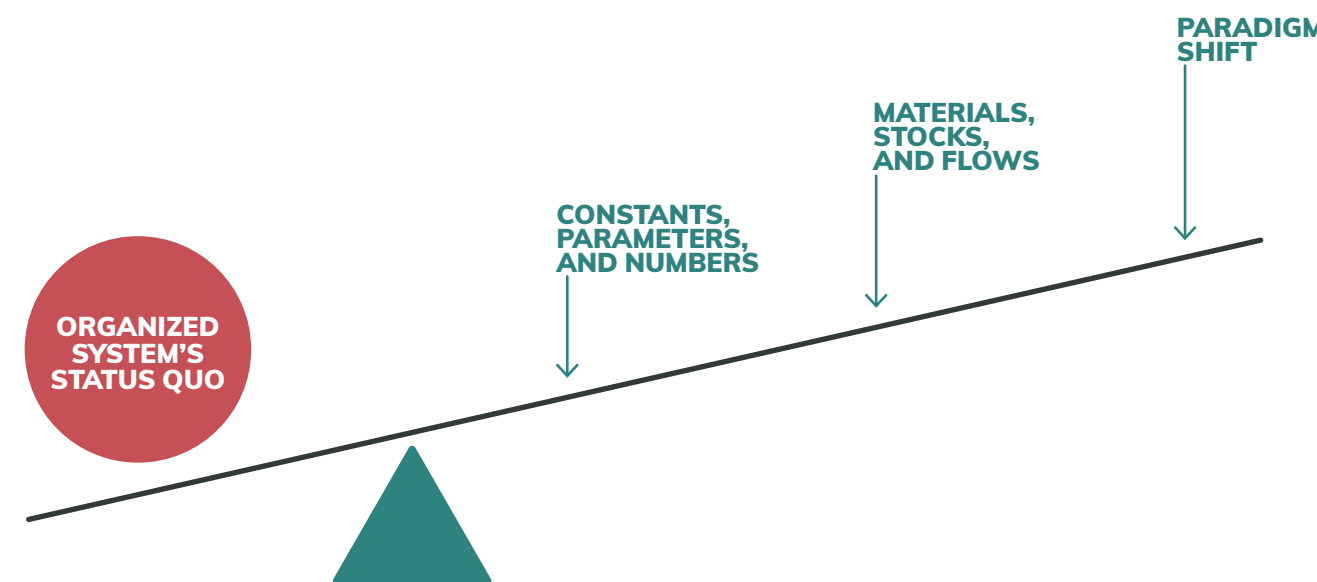
One stakeholder captured this logic clearly: "When the government is a customer of a result rather than a manager of a process, the entire energy of the work changes." That shift in energy is what the participant findings describe from the inside. Resources followed need rather than budget lines. Support arrived before it was asked for. The structure made responsiveness the rational choice, and participants experienced the difference directly.

The government, importantly, was still providing the financial resources. This point is worth stating directly, as it is sometimes misunderstood. The Ministry still issued the payment; what changed was the basis for that payment and the timing of its release. This sequencing shift did not require new funding or new legislation. It required a willingness to hold providers accountable for outcomes, rather than activities, with payments tied to 'Months Off Income Support.'

What the contract did not change, at least in Phase One, was the broader administrative machinery surrounding it. Intake requirements, procurement timelines, and seasonal misalignment between training completion and labour market demand were constraints generated by government systems designed to administer funding agreements rather than by the delivery model itself. The outcome-based logic was genuine, but the institutional infrastructure around it had not yet adapted. That gap produced some of StartWork's most significant early challenges and remains the most important design consideration for those contemplating replication.

StartWork did not change everything. But it changed the right things. The Levers of Change Model helps explain where and why. Levers are the places within a complex system where a small shift produces larger changes across everything else.³⁴ The diagram below identifies where StartWork found those places: reducing the number of Income Support recipients, changing the stock and flow of resources available to participants, and shifting the fundamental relationship between government and the social sector from funder to customer.

Figure 6.1 Changes Leveraged by StartWork within the System



The **Levers of Change Model** above is used to help understand the impact of change on organized systems. StartWork's approach utilizes many of the levers in the model in collaborative efforts of challenging the system's status quo.

Why Each Partner Said Yes and What It Took

The Ministry partner who championed StartWork was not a typical procurement officer. He reflected the kind of entrepreneurial civil servant present in many departments but rarely given the latitude to act on those instincts. The relationship between MRU and the Ministry had been developing for years before StartWork launched through workshops, events, and repeated engagement with ideas related to using procurement to engage the social sector. When the opportunity emerged, the necessary groundwork was already in place.

What made the government's approval possible was a structure that removed financial risk from its side entirely. Philanthropic capital covered upfront costs, meaning the government paid nothing until outcomes were achieved.

The proposal was not based solely on trust; it was built on a guarantee. After Phase One delivered results, the Ministry returned before the first cohort had even completed training to request a larger second contract. The government moved quickly once it experienced the shift.

The Ministry's motivation was fiscal as much as philosophical. Outcomes procurement offered a way to address a growing Income Support caseload at a lower cost than the status quo. Income Support is expensive, and the longer someone remains on it, the greater the cost to the government. Paying for the outcome of moving someone off it, at a price below what continued Income Support would have cost, made straightforward financial sense. The innovation was not generosity. It was a better use of the same public dollar.

The administrative constraints that created friction in Phase One did not stem from the delivery model itself. They arose from existing government administrative systems operating unchanged within a redesigned framework. The Ministry's willingness to identify those constraints and address them in Phase Two is itself a finding: the model works, and the government is adjusting to make it work better.

Community partners agreed to participate, in part, because of the unmet demands for their services which were exacerbated by a recent round of funding cuts. New models often gain traction when existing ones no longer provide sufficient support. What few anticipated, however, was what would occur once partners began working together. Organizations that had spent years operating in isolation from each other began sharing resources and working together: job leads, employer relationships, and emergency funds. The phrase that circulated through the partnership, "here to complete, not to compete," was not imposed from above. It emerged because it captured something partners were genuinely experiencing.

This development was not the product of goodwill alone. It occurred because the contract made collaboration the rational choice. When the same forty participants became a shared accountability, withholding information or opportunities no longer made sense. The scarcity logic that shapes much nonprofit sector behaviour was interrupted by new ways of working that made success collective.

For many partners, the most valuable outcome was the experience of collaboration itself. Organizations that entered with practical motivations found themselves doing things they had not expected: sharing employer networks, transferring participants between community partner services, and maintaining relationships long after the formal training and work experience ended. Referral pathways formed during StartWork remain active, and partners who had never previously met continue to work together.

Not every partner reached the same depth of understanding. Some fully grasped the procurement logic, while others experienced StartWork primarily as a better-funded program without fully internalizing what distinguished it. The model appears strongest when those delivering it understand why it is structured as it is, not simply what it requires them to do. This cannot be written into a contract or conveyed through a single orientation session. It is cultivated through sustained engagement with the underlying ideas over time. MRU had been undertaking this work for more than a decade before StartWork launched.

Northpine was not simply funding a single program; it was investing in a demonstration of what was possible. The goal was to prove that this kind of cross-sector collaboration could work in Canada, that government could be persuaded to adopt outcomes procurement, and that the results would be compelling enough to build momentum beyond a single cohort.

The Role of The Intermediary

One of the least visible yet most important elements of StartWork was the role played by MRU as a neutral convener. It is easy to underestimate this function and genuinely difficult to replicate.

What MRU offered was not primarily administrative capacity, but an institutional position. Nonprofits experienced it as non-threatening because MRU was not competing for the same funding streams or employer relationships. The government experienced it as credible because of its institutional stability. Northpine Foundation viewed it as trustworthy because of its long history of sector engagement. This combination of neutrality, credibility, and relational depth is what made cross-sector coordination possible.

That trust was not created for StartWork itself. It was the product of more than a decade of sustained relationship-building, bringing people together around ideas long before there was a contract to sign or a program to deliver.

The Role of Social Enterprise

A social enterprise is often defined as a nonprofit business, with emphasis on both words. The nonprofit dimension matters because the mission exists independently of profit and is anchored in community. The business dimension matters because these organizations still generate revenue and offer employment.

When the organization supporting a participant and the organization employing them are one and the same and oriented toward the same goal, something different can occur. Participants described feeling followed rather than handed off, and known rather than merely placed. Social enterprises can provide that first chance because their hiring decisions are not governed solely by market logic.

This experience is consistent with broader findings on work integrated social enterprises. A 2022 Federal study found that full-time employment among social enterprise employees nearly doubled within a year, with over 80% reporting improvements in mental health and self-esteem.³⁵ A parallel five-year study in rural BC reported similar results.³⁶ StartWork was built on this premise and what participants described confirms it.

What The Model Could and Could Not Do

Individuals who arrived with substantial professional credentials saw those credentials go unrecognized, and then experienced through StartWork a meaningful shift from survival to direction. One participant described early resettlement as feeling alone and thirsty in a desert, not because of a lack of skills but because of the absence of recognition. In this framing, StartWork addressed precisely that absence. The recovery of professional identity, rendered invisible by the Canadian labour market, is not a training outcome. It is something harder to measure.

Several participants whose confidence was restored were simultaneously placed in roles that did not reflect their qualifications. As one stakeholder observed: "If we take a chemist and put them in a leadership role at a thrift store, we have met the government's metric, but have we actually restored that person?"

This gap between metric success and meaningful restoration captures both what StartWork can achieve and where its limits become visible. It can support movement into employment and rebuild confidence, but it cannot, on its own, resolve the structural conditions that leave highly qualified newcomers unrecognized in the Canadian labour market: discounted credentials, inaccessible licensing pathways, and hiring norms that treat Canadian experience as a prerequisite for acquiring it. The next design question is not whether to use outcomes procurement, but which outcomes to procure. If professional restoration is the goal, what would it mean to purchase it? StartWork has earned the right to ask that question.

What This All Points To

StartWork was not a fortunate accident. It was the result of deliberate decisions about how relationships between partners were structured, how relationships were built across sectors, and what organizations were held accountable for. These decisions can be made again in other places, with other populations, by other partners willing to experiment without the certainty of success.

The vast majority of participants in StartWork are working. They are paying taxes, supporting their families, building careers, owning and driving cars, and contributing to communities made stronger by their presence. The cohort formed through StartWork continues to meet and remains a community and resource for one another long after the formal support period ended. That is what a serious beginning looks like, and it is a genuinely good one.

07 Lessons & Recommendations

What StartWork revealed matters. What comes next is what to do with that insight. This chapter turns our findings and analysis into guidance, organized first around the conditions that made the model possible, and then around concrete recommendations for the people best positioned to act on them.

Before You Begin

StartWork did not begin on the day forty participants enrolled. It began years earlier, in workshops and conversations that built relationships across sectors before anyone had a contract to sign. That context matters for anyone considering replication, because the conditions that made this work are not features you can write into a program design document. They have to exist before the program starts.

Three things had to be true before StartWork could happen. First, there had to be a government partner willing to think differently about what procurement could be used for, with enough institutional support to act on that instinct.

Second, there had to be an intermediary with genuine credibility across sectors: trusted by nonprofits because it did not compete with them, trusted by the government because it was stable and accountable, and trusted by Northpine because of a long track record of serious engagement. That trust was not created for StartWork. It was already there. MRU was able to find, mentor and support nonprofits that were ready to think entrepreneurially.

Finally, there had to be an investor willing to absorb upfront risk on behalf of everyone else, not as a grant but as an investment in a demonstration. Without that capital, the government would not have moved. Community partners

received staged payments including an upfront payment at the start of training and work experience, a second payment when participants transitioned into employment, and a third at the twelve-month mark. Northpine's capital made those staged payments possible before government outcomes payments began.

None of these preconditions are impossible to create elsewhere. But they are not quick to develop, and mistaking StartWork for the thing worth replicating, rather than the conditions that made it possible, is the most common way this kind of initiative fails to gain traction. If you are reading this as someone who wants to try something similar, the first question is not what StartWork looked like. The question is which of these three conditions do you already have, which can you build, and how long will that honestly take.

Having reached the conclusion of this pilot, there is a lot that has been learned. StartWork has entered a second phase working with an additional and much larger cohort of up to 300 Alberta Income Support recipients over a longer period, three to five years. Adjustments have been made where Phase One identified constraints. The most significant change is that the lead contract holder is now one of the community-serving organizations. MRU's role has shifted toward supporting increased capacity for social enterprise and supporting research, while continuing to hold the vision and advocate for what is possible through a procurement relationship between government and the social sector.

Recommendations

What follows are recommendations drawn directly from Phase One. From participants who lived it, from the organizations that delivered it, and from the partners who designed and invested in it, each recommendation is grounded in something that was observed, experienced, or identified as a gap.

Policymakers

Support Intrapreneurs in Your System.

Intrapreneurs are civil servants who know things need to be done differently and are willing to navigate new territory. Invest in their capacity to do so: the tools, training, and institutional permission to prototype, fail, and try again.

Become a Customer.

Position yourself as a customer of the nonprofit sector, in addition to being a funder. As a customer you are creating a marketplace for solutions through procurement. This does not mean eliminating grants where they are appropriate. That would be counterproductive and both tools have their place.

Know Your Costs.

Be transparent about the cost of the status quo. Procurement is frequently less expensive than adding government capacity to address a problem. That comparison should be made explicitly, not assumed. All stakeholders would benefit from knowing about who receives Income Support and the likely duration. This helps to determine the cost that the government can reasonably expect to incur without interventions.

Negotiate Directly.

Negotiate directly with a trusted intermediary or nonprofit at market rates. Tendering is an option but is not required. A direct relationship often produces better outcomes faster and builds the trust the model depends on.

Start Small.

The system is ready for disruption, but innovation works best when it is not required to succeed at full scale from the beginning. Pilot small shifts with trusted partners before scaling. Outcomes procurement is very conducive for starting small. Phase One started with forty people. That was the right size to learn.

Bring in Other Customers.

Often, people who are struggling are in regular contact with other government departments such as Health and Public Safety. These departments may also be financially benefiting from StartWork when it comes to cohorts that are shared. All parties can get more benefits by working together.

Close the Gap for Refugee Claimants.

Refugee Claimants are more likely than other groups to be on Income Support because they are among the most in need and the least served. They are not eligible for federal resettlement assistance and have no dedicated pathway to pre-employment support. It is currently unclear how many Income Support recipients are Refugee Claimants or how they are being referred. Collecting that data is a precondition for designing a response that actually reaches them.

Expect Less than Perfect.

Resist the assumption that employment is the right path for everyone at the same moment. Build in a clear mechanism for participants to return to Income Support when life circumstances require it. An 80% success target is more realistic than 100% and allows for health emergencies, family crises, and the genuine complexity of people's lives.

Offer Flexible Intake Processes.

Requirements for simultaneous intake prevented careful matching, created seasonal misalignment, and forced partners to accept participants who were not ready. Flexible intake should be treated as a baseline requirement.

Stage the Payments.

Milestone-based payments should be tied to program stages, rather than a single outcome payment at the end. This improves cash flow for delivery partners and keeps accountability tied to progress throughout. This can be thought of as a Pay-As-You-Save approach.

Make Standing Offers.

If a model is working, the next question is whether it can work again, and at greater scale. Standing offers provide a mechanism for continuity, allowing governments to re-engage proven partners without restarting procurement from scratch each time.

Nonprofits

Think Like an Enterprise.

Approach the government as a customer in addition to a funder. Understand the pain points the government is trying to solve and be honest about which of those you have genuine expertise to address. The procurement relationship requires you to think like a supplier, not just a service provider.

Negotiate on Price.

Ask the government to be transparent about the cost of the status quo. If you can demonstrate a more effective intervention at equal or lower cost, that is a compelling case. Be willing to make it. Milestone payments improve cash flow, and tiered pricing based on barrier levels helps facilitate a broad range of context-specific supports.

Price Transparently.

In an outcomes procurement model, organizations that undercut each other on price undermine the shared goal of unlocking genuine new resources for the nonprofit sector. A common pricing framework protects everyone and keeps the focus on outcomes rather than competition. Establish it before contracts are signed.

Build Enterprising Leadership.

Procurement thinking is not common in the social sector and needs to be cultivated deliberately. Leadership teams that combine nonprofit experience with enterprising instincts are better positioned to navigate this model and unlock the resources it makes available.

Leverage Multiple Outreach Channels.

At least one participant found StartWork through a social media posting. Community-specific digital outreach reaches people that formal referral pathways do not. Use the channels your participants already use.

Screen Rigorously.

Comprehensive assessment at entry is one of the highest-leverage investments for success. This is not about choosing the easiest participants but about matching the right people with the right interventions. In Phase One, English benchmark certificates were not verified at intake and some participants who did not meet criteria slipped through. Require certificates, not self-declaration.

Create Communities, Not Programs.

The relationships formed through StartWork outlasted the program itself. Participants continued meeting, sharing knowledge, and supporting each other long after formal support ended. Program design that intentionally builds community, through shared cohorts, social events, and peer networks, produces outcomes that employment metrics alone will never capture.

Plan for Mental Health.

Refugees and newcomers carry experiences of displacement, loss, and trauma that do not disappear upon arrival. Several participants presented with significant mental health challenges that were not apparent at intake and surfaced later on. Add mental health screening to intake. Build a clear referral pathway to appropriate support before the program starts. The program cannot be expected to address clinical mental health needs, but it can be designed to identify them early and connect people to the right help before a crisis emerges.

Support the Employed.

One participant described their spouse being employed but unhappy in a role far below their qualifications, wanting to move toward more fulfilling work. The need for support does not end at job placement. Build in structured check-ins and progression pathways for participants who are employed but underemployed. Clarify who is responsible for supporting someone who loses employment after leaving the training organization. That accountability gap was identified in Phase One and will inform future design.

Think in Family Units.

Some participants described spouses also participating, children benefiting from parental stability, and knowledge being transferred across generations. Program design that accounts for this, including spousal inclusion, childcare support, and family-oriented community events, amplifies impact in ways that individual employment metrics do not capture.

Orient Clearly.

One participant missed the kickoff event entirely and spent weeks uncertain about what StartWork actually was. Another described directing all questions to the coordinator because they could not identify who else to contact. Visual, plain-language orientation materials in multiple formats, with clear role mapping, are a design requirement for programs serving people navigating new systems in a new language.

Embed Employment.

There is a structural difference between a training program and an employment program. Partners with embedded employer relationships and external work experience integrated into their delivery model produced better transition outcomes. Exploring whether training and work experience hours can be recognized as insurable would provide a critical layer of income security during transitions and strengthen the model's long-term impact. Employment placement needs to be part of the program logic from day one, not treated as what happens after training ends. Advertise access to jobs, rather than access to training.

Sequence the Supports.

Soft skills training, Canadian workplace culture preparation, driver's training, and English literacy all matter. Stagger them so participants are not overwhelmed at the same moment they are beginning employment. The order in which supports are delivered shapes whether they land.

Build Employer Pipelines.

Leverage partner networks to build a committed pool of employers who agree to prioritize graduates. Wage subsidies work for some employers. Flagged job openings work for others. Both are more effective than placing participants into a cold labour market at the end of training. Match training completion to hiring seasons rather than procurement calendars. These are design requirements, not operational details.

Promote Dignified Exits.

Not every participant will thrive or meet the requirements. Build a formal exit planning process for those who do not, so they can leave with their dignity intact and a clear sense of what comes next. Exiting from a program without support is its own harm.

Foundations

Use Your Position.

Foundations have a unique ability to influence government that most nonprofits do not. Partnering with nonprofits to demonstrate what is possible is one of the highest-leverage things a foundation can do. The relationship matters as much as the money.

Back Innovation.

Small pilots with the potential for systems-level impact are worth investing in even when the evidence base is still being built. The upfront philanthropic capital in StartWork was not a grant to a program. It was the risk-absorbing mechanism that made government participation possible. That distinction matters for how foundations think about what they are buying when they invest.

Think Big.

Phase Two of StartWork is over seven times larger than Phase One. Resource flow is one way to shift systems. This includes examining how money moves to enable replication and scaling.

Fund Social Enterprises.

Nonprofits with revenue-generating capacity, particularly social enterprises, need start-up capital and early-stage resources that traditional business funding mechanisms do not provide. A dedicated portion of granting toward this gap addresses a persistent structural constraint. Without that capacity, social enterprises cannot absorb the employment commitments the model depends on.

Champion Procurement.

Encourage and support government efforts to use procurement for social outcomes and provide the upfront capital that makes it possible. Without philanthropic risk absorption, governments will not move. That is not a criticism; it is a structural reality that the foundation sector is well positioned to change.

Lead by Example.

Outcomes procurement will make impact investing easier. Where your endowment can be invested in mission-aligned initiatives, do it. The credibility that comes from putting your own assets behind the outcomes you fund is not incidental. It is part of the demonstration.

Refugees and Newcomers

Ask What Is Available.

Support is often broader than what is advertised. Ask for what you need, not only what you are offered. A coordinator, a program, an employer: most people will help if you ask directly.

Remember Your Experience Has Value.

The Canadian labour market may not have recognized it yet. That is a system problem, not a skills problem. Find people who will help you translate what you already know into forms the market can act on.

Use Your Community.

The people around you know things you need to know. Ask them. Those connections carry practical value long after any program ends, from job leads to everyday navigation of a new country.

Take Your Time.

Building something in a new country takes longer. Use your first role to build stability and learn how things work. Direction follows from that foundation.

Know Your First Job Is Not Your Last.

The role you start in is a starting point, not a ceiling. Keep your longer-term goals in view. Ask for more when you are ready. The first job is just the beginning.

Researchers

Map the Pathways.

How refugees enter and move through social assistance support systems is poorly understood. Tracing those pathways, including referral sources, duration, and exit routes, would generate the foundational evidence that policy and program design currently lack and that no single pilot can produce on its own.

Investigate Newcomer Labour Market Integration.

Refugees and newcomers arrive with substantial professional experience that the Canadian labour market consistently fails to recognize. What actually changes that failure, at the level of employers, policy, and practice, remains one of the most consequential open questions in Canadian social policy.

Surface the Mental Models.

The assumptions governing how employers assess foreign credentials and how newcomers are expected to demonstrate belonging are rarely made explicit. Closer examination of what sustains these mental models and what disrupts them is some of the most important work available.

Reframe Dependency.

The framing of refugees as dependent on government support obscures the reciprocity that follows after employment is attained. A fuller accounting of newcomer contributions over time would shift both policy and public understanding.

Examine Power in Cross-Sector Partnerships.

Who holds decision-making authority, whose knowledge counts, and whose outcomes are measured shape every partnership whether or not they are named. Closer investigation of power dynamics within outcomes-based models would strengthen both evidence and practice.

Define Meaningful Work.

Employment status is measurable. Professional dignity, economic mobility, and the alignment between a person's qualifications and their role are not yet. Developing participant-centered measures of meaningful work would strengthen both what research can assess and what programs can claim. Asking participants directly, and at multiple points over time, would produce a more honest account of what employment actually means across different stages of a settlement journey.

08 What Comes Next?

StartWork began with a question: what if the government paid for outcomes instead of activities? This conclusion reflects on what that question produced, and what comes next.

Permission to Do Things Differently

This case study is not a blueprint. It is an account of what happened when a small group of people decided to test a different approach and had the conditions to do it.

The most useful thing it offers is not a program designed to replicate but a set of questions to ask. What if the government paid for outcomes instead of reimbursing the cost of activities? What if nonprofits were held to outcomes rather than reports? What if resources flowed incentivizing collaboration rather than competition?

When the government buys what it wants, it changes how organizations behave. Partners who had spent years competing for the same limited resources began sharing job leads, employer contacts, and emergency funds. A \$2,000 emergency dental bill was split between two organizations over a phone call. A phrase circulated: here to complete, not to compete. None of that was asked for. It followed from the structure of the contract. That is a replicable insight, and it is available to anyone willing to redesign the structure.

What Work Means

Everyone has a right to work. Not survival work, not work that ignores what a person knows and what they have spent years building, but work that recognizes them. That principle is easy to state and hard to act on. The labour market does not organize itself around it. The existing funding structures that govern employment programs often do not either.

Work is how people establish themselves in a community. It is how they contribute, how they build relationships, how they provide for their families, and how they understand their own place in the world around them. When that is taken away, or when it is withheld by a labour market that does not recognize what someone brings, the effect is not only financial. It is a loss of direction, identity, and belonging.

Employment is an economic outcome. It is also something the metric of, “Months Off Income Support” does not fully capture. Participants described returning to a sense of professional identity that the Canadian labour market had not recognized. One described the months before StartWork as a period of silence: applications sent, nothing returned, confidence going down. Another described attending a StartWork social event as the moment they felt like a person who matters.

“Even if you are a doctor or a construction worker back home, nobody here knows you. StartWork makes you known.”

Participant Interview

Many of the participants we interviewed arrived with professional experience. StartWork created conditions in which what they already knew could be recognized and acted on. As one stakeholder observed, the goal is not just getting someone a job. Meaningful employment means a job that matches a person’s skills and education. StartWork was designed for the first year of Canadian employment. What it takes to build on that foundation is the next design question.

What Happened During StartWork

Forty people moved off Alberta Income Support and into employment through an outcomes procurement contract, a first in Canada, in which the government paid only after results were achieved and philanthropic capital covered the upfront cost.

Partners collaborated across organizational lines in ways that conventional funding does not produce. A coordinator stayed alongside participants through training, employment, and beyond, navigating childcare, pay stubs, salary negotiations, and housing alongside the formal employment support. The community formed through the cohort that continued meeting after formal training and work experience ended, sharing knowledge, job leads, and practical support with one another and with newcomers they later encountered.

These outcomes were produced by specific design choices. The findings show both what those choices made possible and where the limits were. Training performance turned out to be a weak proxy for employment potential. Intake was rushed. Some participants were placed in streams that did not match their qualifications. The gap between completing training and finding work was the hardest moment. Naming those things is part of what makes this account useful.

What the Findings Show

The model changed how organizations related to each other. The convening role made cross-sector trust possible in ways that could not have been contracted for directly. The university held that role not because it was assigned to it, but because it was not competing with any of the delivery organizations for funding or employer relationships. That neutrality was structural, and it is one of the hardest things to replicate. Finding an equivalent body is one of the first questions anyone trying to adapt this model will need to answer.

The wraparound support responded to barriers as they emerged rather than as they were predicted. The relational quality of delivery, such as the coordinator who accompanied a participant to visit daycares and called every participant individually, was not peripheral to outcomes. It was how outcomes were produced.

The findings also demonstrate what StartWork could not do. It could not resolve credential recognition issues, licensing barriers, or employer hiring norms that treat Canadian experience as a prerequisite for acquiring it. It could not fully address the gap between a job that met the outcome metric (Months Off Income Support) and a job that reflects a participant’s qualifications. Those are structural conditions that extend beyond the scope of any single employment program. StartWork named them clearly rather than implying they had been solved.

Phase Two

Momentum, a Phase One partner, now holds the lead contract. The university has moved into a supporting role focused on social enterprise capacity. The target is up to 300 participants over three to five years, drawn from a broader range of Calgarians on Income Support across a wider range of employment pathways including skilled trades, service work, and roles designed around specific participant circumstances.

Rolling intake replaces the simultaneous start that constrained Phase One. Employer relationships are being established before training begins rather than after it ends. The wraparound supports and contingency fund that proved their value in Phase One are features of the contract. The lessons from Phase One shaped the design of Phase Two directly.

Phase One participants are working. Some are even in positions to refer others into StartWork or into employment. The community formed through the first cohort is part of what Phase Two inherits.

Forty people found their footing. Three hundred more are on their way.

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Appendix A: Research Methods & Instruments

Between February and April 2026, during the pilot's final months, we conducted eighteen interviews with people involved in StartWork from different perspectives. Thirteen were organizational stakeholders: community partners, government representatives, an impact investor, university staff, a program coordinator, and an independent consultant with extensive experience in social enterprise and outcomes procurement. Five were StartWork participants.

We used purposive sampling, selecting participants intentionally to represent the pilot's key groups and roles. Recruitment was later expanded through referral sampling, where interviewees suggested additional participants. All forty StartWork participants were invited and five responded. Those five represented all four training

pathways and brought varied professional backgrounds, family situations, and countries of origin. Because engagement was voluntary, the sample may not reflect the full range of experiences within the cohort. We have tried not to write as though it does.

Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and were conducted by phone or video, depending on what worked best for each person. They were audio-recorded, transcribed, and de-identified before analysis. We then used thematic analysis to examine recurring patterns and the conditions shaping what was possible or difficult for participants and partners. Separate interview guides were developed for stakeholders and participants and are included on the following page.

Stakeholder Interview Questions

Your Story with StartWork

1. Tell me the story of how your organization got involved with StartWork.
2. Walk me through what your organization actually does in relation to StartWork.

Understanding the Model

3. How would you describe StartWork?
4. Tell me about a participant whose journey through StartWork really stuck with you.
5. What's different about StartWork compared to other partnerships related to your work? Do you see it as innovative? Why or why not?

Working Together

6. Think about how you communicate with other partners. What does that actually look like?
7. How have you interacted or engaged with other community partners throughout the course of StartWork?
8. How have you interacted or engaged with MRU?

What's Working and What's Not

9. Think about a moment when you felt like, "Yes, this is really working." Tell me about that.
10. What have been the challenges related to StartWork from your perspective?
11. How do you know if what you're doing with StartWork is making a difference?

Looking Ahead

12. When you imagine StartWork three years from now, what do you see?
13. If another province wanted to create something like StartWork, what would you tell them?

Final Reflections

14. If you could change one thing about StartWork tomorrow, what would it be?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed?
16. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about this within your organization that might offer additional insight?

Participant Interview Questions

Your Story

1. What was your work or education background before coming to StartWork?
2. What did you hope to gain from StartWork?
3. Tell me about your experience during the first few months of StartWork when you were in training.

Day-to-Day Experience

4. Think of a moment in StartWork that really stands out to you. Tell me that story.

Changes and Growth

5. When you think about work now, what comes to mind? Has that changed since you joined StartWork?

Connections and Belonging

6. Tell me about the people you've met through StartWork.
7. How does it feel to be in Calgary now compared to when you first arrived?
8. What has StartWork taught you about working in Canada?
9. What has StartWork taught you about yourself?

Challenges and Support

10. Tell me about a time when things were difficult since joining StartWork.
11. If you could change one thing about StartWork to make it better, what would you change?

Looking Forward

12. When you imagine your life a year from now, what do you see?
13. If a friend who just arrived in Canada asked you about StartWork, what would you tell them?
14. Is there anything else about your experience with StartWork that you'd like to share?

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The background features abstract geometric shapes. On the left, there are two overlapping orange trapezoidal shapes pointing towards the top right. A small teal diamond is positioned between them. At the bottom, a large teal triangle points upwards, serving as a base for the text.

StartWork

JOBS FOR REFUGEES