Pathways for Mobility

Relocating to small-town communities in Ontario

TWIG TORONTO WORKFORCE INNOVATION GROUP

About the Toronto Workforce Innovation Group

Toronto Workforce Innovation Group (TWIG) is a leading-edge research and partnership organization responding to the diverse needs of local communities and businesses in the area of workforce development. It is one of the 26 similar planning groups tasked by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development to work closely with our local economies. As Toronto's Workforce Planning Board, we conduct dynamic labour market research, disseminate information and convene stakeholders to address workforce development trends, gaps and opportunities. Among similar organizations in Toronto, our multi-stakeholder approach is unique; we work on issues across many sectors and engage stakeholders from a wide range of perspectives including federal government departments, provincial government departments, industry, training institutes, labour groups, and special interest groups to address skills and labour market information needs. Our research is an on-going and continuous process that includes our numerous consultations and focus groups with employment/training service providers and job seekers in addition to the deep data dive that informs our publications. We work to ensure that Toronto's workforce has the skills and talent it needs to meet the demands of a changing economy. TWIG achieves its goals through:

- Researching, analyzing and reporting on workforce development trends, gaps and opportunities in Toronto
- Acting as a resource to inform our stakeholders (community groups, educators and trainers, employers, governments, labour groups and media) about Toronto's workforce development issues

Acknowledgements

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1.0 Executive Summary

In 2018/19, Toronto Workforce Innovation Group (TWIG) led a study[1] to examine the feasibility of connecting newcomer immigrants residing in the metropolitan areas of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with employment opportunities in small-town communities in Ontario. Preliminary assessment suggested that these individuals were willing to explore opportunities outside the GTA conditional upon some factors. In 2019/20, TWIG expanded on this study to include archetype of job seekers who were considered as hard-to-serve in the labour market. The second phase of the study focused on how newcomers, racialized population/visible minority, people on social assistance and people who were once in conflict with the law viewed relocation from a metropolitan area in the GTA to a small-town community in Ontario.

Using a qualitative approach, the second phase of the study collated information on the latest labour market trends in non-metro[2] Ontario with knowledge on the labour market opportunities, priorities, and challenges facing some small-town Ontario communities. In this second phase of the study, TWIG held focus group discussion and one-on-one telephone interviews with the multi-barriered job seekers who resided in the Toronto, CMA. The objective was to get a broader understanding of the perceptions of these hard-to-serve job seekers about the labour market situation of non-metro Ontario, their unique challenges facing the job market in metropolitan cities where they currently resided, how they felt about relocating to smaller communities in Ontario and the main community features they were looking for in order to make a relocation decision.

The following key facts were uncovered:

- Based on the employer one survey[3] findings, a significant number of employers in small-town Ontario had difficulty filling in vacant positions. Most of these businesses identified lack of applicants and lack of qualifications/credentials as the leading reasons for the hard to fill positions.
- Although every small-town community had unique labour market needs, due to an ageing population base, health care and social assistance was the common occupational category that was in demand in almost all small-town regions. Every municipality is expected to see an increase in the demand for registered nurses, personal support workers, and doctors within the region. Some municipalities were already facing acute shortage of qualified workers for these roles.
- Participants from the focus group discussion (FGD) and one-on-one telephone interviews conducted by TWIG, highlighted some major barriers to securing meaningful employment. These were fierce labour market competition in the GTA, poor accessibility of up-to-date labour market information, limited knowledge on employment services and limited scope to develop professional network. For participants who were newcomers, the list of barriers to employment also included unrecognizable credentials and lack of Canadian work experience.
- Participants who have mostly lived in larger cities all their lives had very limited knowledge about the labour market scenario of small-town communities in Ontario. While every small-town community has its own set of challenges and opportunities, it appeared that participants had a generalized opinion for all these communities.
- For the majority of respondents in the FGD, relocation was circumstantial. They emphasized how it's really an array of considerations and not just a high paying job offer that would incentivize them to relocate to a smaller community.
- Many participants noted how specific company policies can play a huge role in incentivizing them to relocate. Such policies may involve flexible work arrangements or work from home policy, more annual vacation days than usual, temporary accommodation facility, employers' education for what's available and waiting for them in the small-town, skills upgrading or any type of job-related training.
- Participants shared anecdotal evidences that made them feel that smaller communities that tend to be homogenous in nature were less inclusive and residents had low acceptance for people of different race and color. Participants emphasized the need to enhance public education initiatives that promotes diversity and helps bring a smaller community closer to being a truly inclusive one.
- Participants mentioned that to ensure a thriving rural Ontario, where residents can pursue meaningful careers and a good living standard, government can enhance current infrastructure investment in these regions.

2.0 Introduction

Rural communities or small-town areas in Canada are an integral part of the national economy contributing nearly 30 percent of the country's total gross domestic product (GDP)[4]. The term rural has many definitions in the literature and people have different ways of understanding what rural means. So, there is no unique statistical definition to capture all the aspects of what makes a place rural. Based on Rural Ontario Institute[5], two of the most fundamental dimensions of rural places are a low population density; or a long distance to a centre with a higher population density; or both. In this report, to keep things simple, any geography that is not urban and that is not considered a part of the census metropolitan area (CMA)[6] will be termed as non-metro areas/small-town communities/ rural communities.

According to the Census 2016, 90 per cent of Canada's municipalities are located outside the CMAs. These municipalities are home to almost one-third of the country's population[7]. While each of these small-town municipalities faces unique economic challenges, a common problem identified by its residents and municipal government is that the average age of their population is increasing and youth out-migration is on the rise. This is affecting job creation, skills retention, and the availability of essential services in the rural areas. The share of Canada's population residing in rural-small town areas declined from 36% in 1971 to 17%[8] in 2016. Given that talent retention and skills development are critical for economic development, the issue of ageing population structure in small-town communities or non-metro areas in Ontario is an ongoing public policy concern at local, provincial and federal level. So much so that on January 2019, Canada appointed its first Minister of Rural Economic Development to advocate rural perspectives, economic opportunity and quality of life in rural Canada by supporting rural communities as a partner in the implementation of the programs and policies affecting rural Canadians.

In the wake of such economic downswing in small town Canada, in 2018-19, the workforce planning board of Toronto, TWIG conducted a study[9] on the dynamics of intra-provincial migration of newcomer immigrants in the context of Ontario. The study examined the extent to which newcomer immigrants currently residing within metropolitan cities in the GTA were willing to relocate to non-metro parts of Ontario for the purpose of better employment opportunities and more affordable living. The report also explored the services, features or cultural support in a community that newcomers deem necessary to consider relocation.

The TWIG 2018-19 study[10] found that newcomer immigrants will respond to economic signals when they become aware of them. Although these newcomers showed interest to relocate outside the GTA, the willingness to do so declined with the level of rurality. In other words, the higher the degree of rurality the less likely the recent immigrants would move in that area. In 2019-20, TWIG expanded on this study by using a qualitative approach. The intent of the second phase of the study was to carry out an in-depth analysis of how multi-barriered job seekers in larger cities view relocation and identifying the services they deem necessary to relocate. The study also involved sketching a labour market overview of Ontario's small-town community by different municipalities to support city residents' relocation decision and in turn allow these communities to thrive.

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Pain Points of the GTA Metropolitan Areas, Rising Precarity

According to a 2019 Metcalf report[11], the number of working poor[12] in the Toronto region and across the country has been increasing at an alarming rate. In 2016, 7% of Toronto CMA's working-age population were in the working poor category. Another 8% were poor but not working. This included individuals on social assistance, or individuals who were working but were part of a non-standard work group/informal economy making a modest income only. Although minimum wages in Ontario have almost doubled since 2005, skyrocketing rental cost in most of the neighbourhoods of the Toronto region and the cost of other necessities have made day to day living very challenging for the working poor.

Findings from the same Metcalf report suggested that between 2006 to 2016, the working poor population increased by 27% in the Toronto region. By 2016 working poverty had increased to levels over 5% in many census tracts throughout the outer suburbs of the Toronto CMA, including Mississauga, Brampton, Richmond Hill, Markham, Pickering, and Ajax. These were communities that had not experienced working poor populations of over 5% in the past.

A critical reason[13] because of a rise in the working poor is that knowledge work (higher paid jobs) and entry level service jobs (lower paid jobs) have been experiencing a disproportionate amount of growth relative to middle working jobs. As a result, majority of workers are clustered at the upper and lower ends and a smaller proportion occupy the middle entry level thereby causing pronounced working poverty condition in the Toronto region. In other words, over the years, GTA has seen a significant rise in precarious employment. New jobs were increasingly entry level, temporary and limited-term contracts. This has made stability and career advancement extremely difficult.

In 2016, in Toronto, CMA the highest percentage of working poverty was among South Asian males, Black males, and Black females. The racialization of working poverty in the Toronto CMA among both the immigrant population and those born in Canada was very striking. From 2006 to 2016[14], working poverty within the Black immigrant community increased from 9.4% to 10.4% and within the Black non-immigrant community increased even more from 9.1% to 10.8%.

A report by Southern Ontario (PEPSO)[15] research group came up with similar findings. According to this report, although Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) as a whole experienced improved labour market outcomes, not all types of workers had access to secure employment. There were evidence that precarious employment in the region grew faster than secure employment. In the Toronto-Hamilton, Oshawa labour market, permanent employment grew 10.4% while temporary employment grew 18.8%, self-employment grew 17.2%, and self-employment without paid help grew 18.3%. This report also noted that the group of workers who were disproportionately impacted by employment precarity were women, racialized groups, and those without a university education.

Despite rising precarity in the Toronto region, more and more people continue to crowd the metropolitan areas in the hope of securing standard employment. The scenario is different in small-town Ontario. Information collected through the Employer One Survey and stakeholder consultations by the workforce planning boards covering the small town, non-metro areas of the province suggested that more and more employers over a period of time are facing long-term challenges filling in vacant positions. On the face of such findings, a potential match between the skills demanded by employers in the small-town communities and the skills and experiences that can be offered by the multi-barriered individuals from the metropolitan cities could generate economic and social benefits for both the parties.

3.0 Literature Review

3.2 Facts on Non-Metro Ontario

While every small-town community in the province has it's unique labour market challenges and opportunities, some key commonalities among most of these communities are discussed in this section to get an overview of the labour market characteristics of non-metro Ontario.

3.2.1 Population and migration

According to Census 2016, there were 2.5 million residents in non-metro Ontario which comprised of 19% of Ontario's population. The share of Ontario's population classified as non-metro is declining over time due to slower growth than metro; and reclassification of some non-metro areas to metro areas in each intercensal period. Unlike non-metro communities, communities that are theoretically defined as rural and small-town area is characterized by higher level of rurality compared to the non-metro areas and is comprised of an even lesser share of Ontario's population. In 1986, the share of Ontario's population in rural/small-town Ontario were 16% which decline to has declined to 10% in 2016. In other words, the higher the level of rurality, the lesser the size of the population in a particular community.

According to a latest report by the Rural Ontario Institute[16], the small-town communities are experiencing a significant out migration of the prime working age category (25-44 years). This decline in the settlements of the prime-working age category can undermine the economic and social viability of these communities in the long run. Between 2011 and 2016, the rural census divisions in Ontario that faced a net out-migration of 2% or more of the total population in the age category 25-44 years were[17]: Huron (8.5%), Prince Edward (8.1%), Sudbury (7.3%), Rainy River (5.3%), Algoma (4%), Cochrane (3.5%), Timiskaming (3.3%), Lambton (3.3%), Chatham-Kent (2.8%), Parry Sound (2%) and Manitoulin (2%).

Below are some of the non-metro census divisions in Ontario with the lowest average 5-year percent change in population between 1996 to 2016[18]:

1. Kent County (Ontario) – Howard and Raleigh
2. Renfrew County-Brudenell and Lyndoch
3. Perth County – Fullarton, Hibbert
4. Timiskaming District – Armstrong, Haileybury, McGarry
5. Cochrane District – Cochrane, Unorg., North Part, Iroquois Falls, Black River-Matheson
6. Huron County – Hullett, Grey
7. Algoma District – north part
8. Lambton County – Brooke and Dawn
9. Rainy River District – La Vallee, Chapple and Atwood

According to the same report by the Rural Ontario Institute, between 2011-16, non-metro census divisions (17 of 27) were also able to attract more in-migrants from other census divisions in Canada, compared to the number of out-migrants. However, the demographic reality of the migrants was concerning as the in-migrants who generally contributed to this outcome fell in the age category 45-64 years whereas out-migration were driven by young adults aged 18-24 years.

3.0 Literature Review

3.2.2 Labour market overview

Labour market data analysis by the Ontario Ministry of Finance[19] suggested that although there had been employment growth in the province, this has not been experienced by all regions in Ontario. In fact, 93% of the 915,100 net jobs created in the province between 2003 and 2017, were in the GTA and Central Ontario (area around the GTA). In contrast, Eastern Ontario and Southwestern Ontario gained 84,400 and 100 net new jobs respectively, while Northern Ontario saw employment decline by 23,600 net jobs.

In non-metro census divisions (CDs), total employment declined by 3% from 2006 to 2016, compared to a growth of 8% for Ontario as a whole[20]. This was due to a 10% decline in employment in goods producing sector and none in the service producing sector in the non-metro areas. At the same time, based on the Census 2016 data, some small-town communities in the province have experienced exceptionally low unemployment rates as their pool of workers shrinks and the employment demand increased. There are pockets where unemployment rates were reported under 2%, as in Bruce and Wellington Counties.

Given that the non-metro areas in Ontario have an aging workforce and rising out-migration, the participation rates in these areas were lower and employment levels have fallen. Counties with participation rates 55% or lower were: Haliburton (49%), Manitoulin (52.5%); Prince Edward (54.2%), Algoma (54.8%) and Parry Sound (55%). According to a report by Statistics Canada[21], in 2017, the ratio of the number of people in the labour force to support each person not in the labour force aged 65 were 2.7. It is concerning that by 2036, this ratio will fall to 1.9. In such a situation, employers in these areas compete for the scarce talents and a sustainable pathway to increase the labour pool is to identify how to attract and retain labour.

3.0 Literature Review

The information below uses Census 2016 data to offer an outlook of the industry and occupational in non-metro Ontario. Figure-1 reports the top 10 industries in non-metro Ontario with the highest share of employment[22]:

Between 2006 to 2016 in non-metro CDs, the three sectors with the largest percent increase in employment were[23]:

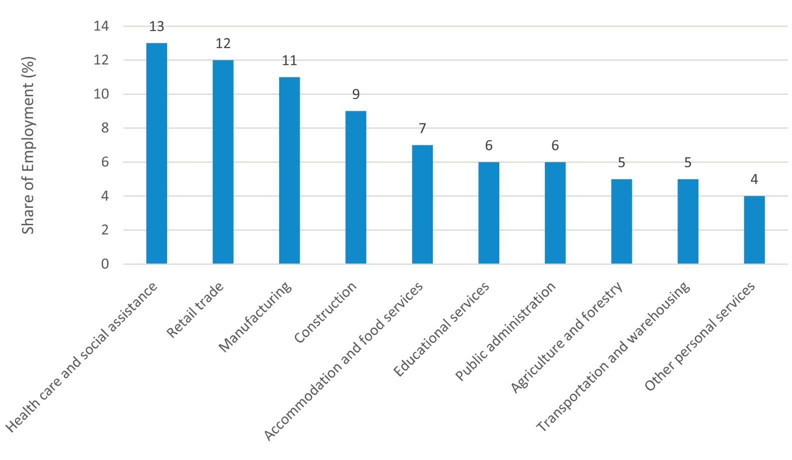
1. Mining and oil and gas extraction (55%)
2. Construction (20%)
3. Health care and social assistance (14%)

The largest declines in employment were in:

1. Manufacturing (30%)
2. Information and cultural industries (14%)
3. Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (13%)

In general, most of the occupations in rural small-town Ontario fell into skill category A, B and D[24]. Occupations requiring skill category A requires a university degree, skill category B requires college or skilled trades training and skill category D requires only on-the-job training. Skill group A has grown the most, with close to 25% growth between 2001 and 2018. Skill category C that requires high school and/or job specific training has remained fairly steady since 2009. However, some occupations under skill category C remained high in demand. They are industrial butchers, long-haul truck drivers, food and beverage servers. On the other hand, skill category O representing management occupations has declined over time and is projected to maintain this trend.

Figure 1: Share of Employment in Non-Metro Ontario by Industry



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2016

3.0 Literature Review

3.3 Labour Market Trend and Employer Challenges in Small-Town Ontario Regions

This section provides a snapshot of the labour market trends and some of the latest findings on challenges faced by employers in different small-town municipalities/non-metro communities in Ontario. This information is collated from existing studies, stakeholder consultations, the Employer One survey and the local labour market planning reports of multiple workforce planning boards of the province that covers these non-metro areas. The Employer One survey engages local employers from a variety of industries to get their feedback on hard to fill positions, skills shortages, hiring plans, training practices etc.

Indicators that are reported to get a better understanding of the employment demand in these regions are – the top Industries by employee count, top industries by job postings and the top occupations[25]. These findings are highlighted, so that the multi-barriered job seekers currently residing in the metropolitan cities of the GTA are aware of the employment needs in the non-metro areas of the province. On several occasions during TWIG's engagement sessions with hard-to-serve job seekers, many were willing to relocate to a smaller community for a better employment opportunity. However, having lived in large cities almost all their lives, participants had very limited knowledge about what was available beyond the GTA. Similarly, employment service providers located within the GTA often do not have information they need, to confidently refer a city resident to a small-town community job opportunity. Given that awareness is a significant gap both for the job seekers and the employment service providers, the information presented below around the labour market trend, workforce challenges in the small-town community can paint some picture of the the labour market scenario in these regions.

Lanark and Renfrew[26]

According to the latest Employer One Survey, at Renfrew and Lanark County 63% of business had difficulty filling positions. Employers have expressed concern that the three leading reasons for hard to fill positions were lack of applicants, lack work ethic and lack of experience. The top five occupations that these businesses expressed interest in hiring were: Sales and service (29.4%); Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations (15.3%); Manufacturing and utilities (14.1%); Health (11.5%) and Management (10.2%).

Table 1: Top Industries and Occupations in Lanark and Renfrew

	Lanark	Renfrew
Top Industry by Job Count	1. Health care and social assistance 2. Retail Trade 3. Accommodation and food services	1. Public administration 2. Health care and social assistance 3. Retail Trade
Top Occupational Category	1. Sales and service 2. Business, finance and administration 3. Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations	1. Sales and service 2. Business, finance and administration 3. Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations

Based on the 2019-20 local labour market planning report[27] healthcare, manufacturing and trades workers are also in high demand. For example, there is an acute shortage of registered (practical) nurses, personal support workers, and doctors within the region.

3.0 Literature Review

Hastings, Prince Edward and Lennox and Addington Counties[28]

According to the 2019 Employer One Survey[29] the hard to fill occupations have continued to trend upwards in Hastings, Prince Edward and Lennox and Addington Counties. In 2019, 71% of employers in these counties reported concerns on hard to fill positions, up from 58% in 2018. The top three reasons because of which employers found it difficult to fill in job vacancies were: lack of applicants in general, lack of experience, lack of technical skills and educational qualifications.

Employers in these counties have identified a variety of health care occupations they struggle to fill. These were personal support worker (especially in remote areas), dietary food service worker, registered nurse, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech & language therapists and nurse practitioners.

Increasing expansion/restructuring of businesses, rising retirement and turnover were driving the recruitment needs of these counties. The sectors that reported the most retirements in these counties were: Manufacturing, Public administration and Healthcare and social assistance. Anticipated occupation areas by openings were Sales and service, Manufacturing and utilities, Business, finance and administration, Trades, transport and equipment operators, Management and Education, law and social, community and government services.

Table 2: Top Industries and Occupations in Hastings, Prince Edward, Lennox and Addington

	Hastings	Prince Edward	Lennox and Addington
Top Industry by Job Count	1. Retail Trade 2. Manufacturing 3. Health care and social assistance	1. Health care and social assistance 2. Accommodation and food services 3. Retail trade	1. Manufacturing 2. Retail trade 3. Health care and social assistance
Top Occupational Category	According to the 2019 Vicinity Inc data, the top three occupation categories in the three counties based on the maximum percentage of advertised jobs were: 1. Sales and service 2. Management 3. Health		

3.0 Literature Review

The 1000 Islands Region

The 1000 Islands Region includes the counties of Leeds & Grenville, Frontenac and the Township of Loyalist. Key trends identified in the local labour market planning report of the 1000 Islands Region was an increase in the no of older workers working – delaying retirement or re-entering the workforce from retirement, increase of mental health issues of job seekers, lack of affordable housing and transportation in rural area. Based on the availability of data, information reported below will be at the county level only.

Table 3: Top Industries and Occupations in the 1000 Islands Region

	Frontenac	Leeds and Grenville
Top Industry by Employee Count[30]	1. Health care 2. Education and services 3. Public administration	1. Health care 2. Retail 3. Construction
Top Occupational Category[31]	1. Sales & service 2. Education, law & social, community and government services 3. Business, finance and administration	1. Sales and service 2. Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations 3. Business, finance and administration

Bruce, Grey, Huron and Perth

Findings from the Employer One survey[32] conducted in January 2019 by the Four County planning board consisting of Bruce, Grey, Huron and Perth suggested that employers were experiencing increasing and long-term challenges meeting their labour force needs. 72% of surveyed employers reported that they had hard-to-fill positions in 2018. The percentage of employers reporting long-term hard-to-fill-positions – those who spent, on average, more than a year trying to fill vacancies – was 37% in 2018 which represented an increase of 8% compared to the previous year 2017. Employers identified lack of qualifications, lack of motivation, attitude, or interpersonal abilities as the top reasons for not being able to fill in vacant positions.

Top five anticipated hires by type of work were: managers and executives, professionals, technical, trades (journeyperson) and apprentices. Over the past five years with a rise in the hiring challenges, employers in Bruce, Grey, Huron and Perth were more likely to recruit workers from beyond the immediate geographical region. In 2018, 31% of employers reported expanding their search for workers to elsewhere in Ontario. This represented a 4% increase compared to 2017.

3.0 Literature Review

According to the latest labour market planning report[33], two features define the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Economic Region labour market – significant growth in full-time employment, and an exceedingly low unemployment rate. However, the region is experiencing a substantial shrinking of its available workforce. The table below presents the top three industry by employee count in Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Economic Region.[34]

Table 4: Top Industries and Occupations in Stratford Bruce Peninsula Economic Region

	Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Economic Region
Top Industry by Employee Count	1. Wholesale and retail trade 2. Manufacturing 3. Health care and social assistance
Top Occupational Category[35]	1. Retail sales persons/supervisors, cashiers 2. In manufacturing and utilities-welders and related machine operators, Supervisors, electrical products manufacturing 3. Registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses, social and community service workers, nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates

According to a 2019 TVO article[36], Huron County is short more than 1,000 workers, as per its economic-development department. The executive director of the Four County Labour Market Planning Board, which covers the economic region that includes Huron County reported that the population growth required to match the need for works were not there for Huron County. But the rural housing crunch made it challenging for employers to attract people. The limited rental properties available was a barrier too as people from larger cities willing to relocate will be looking to rent and not purchase anything right away.

3.0 Literature Review

Chatham-Kent[37]

Chatham-Kent is a large municipality and statistics for this municipality has been based on nine different community. Seven of the communities (Blenheim, Chatham, Dresden, Ridgetown, Tilbury, Wallaceburg and Wheatley) are defined by Statistics Canada as population centres[38] and two smaller communities, Bothwell and Thamesville, are defined as 'designated places.' The workforce of Chatham-Kent has high concentrations of workers in agriculture, manufacturing and utilities and trades, transport and equipment occupations. The municipality also has a very high concentration of workers in the utilities sector, mainly because of the head office of a large natural gas distribution firm.

Table 5: Top Industries in Chatham-Kent

	Chatham-Kent
Top share of Employment by Industry	1. Health care, Manufacturing 2. Retail trade 3. Agriculture and forestry

Within the municipality, the breakdown of employment by industry varies widely.

Wheatley, for example, has the highest concentration of workers in the construction sector and the largest finance and insurance employment as a share of total employment.

Blenheim has the highest concentration of workers in the agriculture, manufacturing and transportation sector and the second highest in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector.

Wallaceburg, the second largest community in Chatham-Kent is a traditional centre for tool, die and mould activity and has a very high concentration of employment in manufacturing. It also has the highest concentration of workers in the accommodation and food services sector.

Tilbury, the third largest community, has a high concentration of manufacturing, retail, utilities and agriculture employment.

Ridgetown has a high share of workers in agriculture, manufacturing, retail and health care.

Of 282 completed Employer One surveys,[39] 117 employers reported experiencing hard to fill positions in 2018 with 170 unique positions. Sectors with the highest percentage of reported hires in 2018 were Manufacturing and Healthcare and social assistance. Manufacturing sector hires accounted for the majority of reported hires in the general labour and skilled labour categories as well as management category. The healthcare and social assistance sector accounted for the majority of reported hires in the professional category.

Based on an employment forecast for the period 2016-2046, in Chatham-Kent[40], primary industries like agriculture and other resource-based industries was not anticipated to experience significant employment growth within the near term or longer term. Industrial employment is anticipated to grow by 35% and be concentrated in construction, wholesale trade, food processing and transportation and warehousing. Commercial employment which includes office and retail sector is forecasted to increase by 27%. Due to increase in aging population base, the municipality is expected to see an increase in seniors' health facilities/services, including retirement homes and assisted living facilities, as well as other institutional services thereby creating some employment demand in these sectors.

3.0 Literature Review

Sarnia/Lambton[41]

According to the latest Employer One survey, around 43% of participating businesses had a difficult time filling at least one position. The top reasons why jobs were hard to fill were due to not enough applicants for the position, lack of qualifications (e.g., education or credentials), and lack of work experience. Identified hard-to-fill positions were jobs related to health care, community and social services, and trades.

Based on the number of employers by industry and the number of employees on payroll, dominant local employers operated in the following industries: agriculture, construction trades, educational services, health care and social assistance, manufacturing, professional services, public administration, and retail trade. The local workforce has a high proportion of people employed in sales and service jobs and trades-related jobs.

Northwestern

The region Northwestern Ontario is made up of three districts: Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay District. According to a latest report[42] by the Northern Policy Institute, this region has been experiencing declining labour supply and labour productivity. The human capital index (the stock of knowledge, skills, and abilities embodied in individuals that directly affects their productivity) in Northwestern Ontario was below the provincial and national level. Based on the 2016 census data, the skill levels of the prime working-age population lagged behind current and future job requirements. So, the district is expected to face the challenges to find qualified workers that will match existing vacancy requirement.

According to a report by the North Superior Workforce Planning Board[43], the Thunder Bay District would need 50,000 new “in-migrants” within 25 years just to sustain the existing economy. It also warned that the region was on track to see retirees outnumber workers two to one in the same period of time. In Kenora district, the occupations most impacted by aging population were: accounting techs & book-keepers, retail and wholesale trade managers and transport truck drivers. The situation was similar for the Rainy River District but replaced the occupation retail and wholesale trade managers with administrative assistance.

Table 6: Top Industries and Occupations in Kenora District and Rainy River

	Kenora District	Rainy River
Top Occupations[44]	1. Social and community service workers 2. Janitors, caretakers and building superintendents 3. Retail salesperson and wholesale trade managers	1. Retail salesperson, retail and wholesale trade managers 2. Social and community service workers 3. Elementary school and kindergarten teachers
Leading industries by the size of the workforce[45]	For both districts 1. Health care and social assistance 2. Retail trade 3. Public administration	4. Educational services 5. Accommodation and food services

3.0 Literature Review

Due to an aging population, services associated with the elderly such as long-term care, complex continuing care, and in-patient rehabilitation are expected to experience the highest growth rates. Based on the Ministry of Finance population projections and census data, forecast also suggested an increase in demand for educators – university professors and postsecondary assistants, college and other vocational instructors, secondary and elementary school teachers and educational counsellors.

Northwestern Ontario is also expected to experience an increase in the demand for trade occupations[46]. There will be a need for 3,825 trades workers to replace the retiring tradespeople between 2011 and 2020. Transport and heavy equipment operators (1,300) represent the largest number of potential retirees between 2011 and 2020, followed by industrial, electrical, and construction trades workers (1,100) and maintenance and equipment operators (1,055). The number of trades workers required to replace potential retirees is projected to increase significantly when the projection period is extended to 2030.

The Francophone community in Northwestern Ontario has recently identified the importance of French in recent job offers[47]. Areas where there was a constant lack of qualified bilingual candidates were health care, early childhood education, mining, and administration. More of these bilingual positions required post-secondary training. French appeared to be less important as a skill in sales and service, manufacturing and utilities, and natural and applied sciences.

Employer One Survey of the region reported that 40% of employers found it difficult to hire a suitable candidate among professional occupations. Other occupations where employers also expressed recruitment challenges included managers and executives, as well as journeypersons/tradespersons.

3.0 Literature Review

Greater Sudbury Manitoulin District Sudbury District[48]

In a latest interview with the TVO[49], president of the Northern Policy Institute, an independent think-tank, reported that northeastern Ontario will need 110,000 more workers within the next 25 years: Sudbury alone will require around 35,000. According to officials from the Far Northeast Training Board, employment-planning council, 43 per cent of the Timmins-area labour force will have reached retirement age by 2036.

61 out of the 110 employers who participated in the latest Employer One Survey[50] done by Greater Sudbury Manitoulin District Sudbury District reported having difficulties to fill in positions. Between 2014 and 2017, the occupations that involved high frequency hiring were all health-care related occupations. They were registered nurse, registered practical nurse, personal support worker, health care aide, PSW.

The latest Vicinity Jobs findings reported by the workforce planning board of Sudbury and Manitoulin showed that employment categories for jobs posted online, varied across the area. For District of Sudbury, the highest number of jobs were in sales and services whereas for the Manitoulin it was health care and social services occupations.

Algoma District[51]

Based on Census 2016 data, the top industries by employment share and top occupational categories in Algoma district have been reported in the table below.

Table 7: Top Industries and Occupations in Algoma District

	Employment by Industry	Top Occupational Category
Algoma	1. Health care and social assistance 2. Retail trade 3. Manufacturing	1. Sales and service 2. Trades, transport and equipment operators 3. Business, finance and administration; Education, law social, community and government services
Leading industries by the size of the workforce[45]	For both districts 1. Health care and social assistance 2. Retail trade 3. Public administration	4. Educational services 5. Accommodation and food services

Overall, 70% of employers participating in the Employer One Survey[52] said that they had difficulty finding suitable candidates for hard-to-fill positions in 2018. Nearly one-half (47%) of respondents said they plan to hire over the next 12 months. Employers were further asked to name the top three occupations for which they planned to hire. Occupations that were cited several times by different employers included cashier, housekeeping, labourer, server, cook and retail salesperson.

3.0 Literature Review

Nipissing and Parry Sound[53]

Based on Census 2016 data, the top industries by employment share and top occupational categories in Nipissing and Parry Sound district have been reported in the table below.

Table 8: Top Industries and Occupations in Nipissing and Parry Sound

	Nipissing	Parry Sound
Employment by Industry	1. Educational services 2. Health care & social assistance 3. Public administration	1. Health care & social assistance 2. Retail trade 3. Construction
Top Occupational Category	1. Sales and service 2. Trades, transport, equipment operators 3. Business, finance, administration	

Between 2011 and 2016, in Nipissing, only eight industries registered an increase in employment, with the largest gains in accommodation and food services, and arts, entertainment & recreation.

4.0 Qualitative Analysis

4.1 Types of Engagement and Participant Profile

The first phase of data collection consisted of focus group discussion (FGD) with 10 participants who were either Canadian citizen (born outside Canada), permanent resident (residing in Canada for 5-10 years) or landed immigrant/newcomer (residing in Canada for less than a year). FGD participants were recruited through Center for Education and Training that delivers employment, settlement and language services in various communities in the GTA.

All FGD participants were visible minorities/racialized population, many were newcomer immigrants or persons on social assistance for long periods of time. The second phase of data collection involved, five one-on-one telephone interviews that comprised of all Canadian citizens of which four were born in Canada and one outside Canada. The participants were clients to the organization Lifted by Purpose and were once in conflict with the law. The research team's pre-existing contacts of professional networks and research partners were used to initiate inquiries, with the aim of identifying service providers and their clients who might be interested to participate as key informants.

The sampling of racialized participants was based on analytical grounds and emerging evidence that the working poor in Toronto region are predominantly racial. According to a Metcalf report[54], in 2016, the highest percentage of working poverty in Toronto, CMA was among South Asian males, Black males, and Black females. From 2006 to 2016, working poverty within the Black immigrant community increased from 9.4% to 10.4% and within the Black non-immigrant community, it increased even more from 9.1% to 10.8%. Another report by PEPSO[55] also noted that the group of workers who are disproportionately impacted by employment precarity were women, racialized groups.

The above archetypes of participants in FGD and telephone interviews were selected based on the criteria of hard to serve individuals or multi-barriered job seekers in the Toronto, CMA. The reason for targeting and engaging the hard-to-serve individuals is because when they are left behind, this costs us all. So, considering an option of connecting multi-barriered urban dwellers in Toronto, CMA to opportunities in small town communities in Ontario have the potential to generate benefit for all.

The intent of both types of engagement sessions (FGD and in-depth telephone interviews) were to hear and document information about the participants' experiences and challenges facing labour market within the GTA, how they feel about relocating to non-metro areas in Ontario, how they determine their relocation decision and what can be done to attract talents in smaller communities in Ontario. This would help all levels of government to build a case of what needs to be done to achieve a better system of services and attract more job seekers in the smaller communities.

Participants belonged to the following two age categories: 25-34 years and 18-24 years except for one participant who fell in the age range 45-54 years. The distribution of gender was quite balanced with a share of 60% female and 40% male participant. Participants had a varying level of academic qualification – post-graduate degree (33%), university degree (33%), some college/university (20%) and high-school graduate (13%). Of all the participants, almost half of them (47%) completed their highest level of education from Canada while the rest of the participants obtained their last educational degree from outside the country. There was a huge diversity in the major field of study of the participants ranging from Psychology, Kinesiology, Cosmetics – management course/beauty and makeup to Commerce/ Business Administration, Computer Science Engineering, Accounting, Finance and Marketing, Materials Engineering, Information Systems Management/ Information Technology, Electronics and Communications Engineering.

4.0 Qualitative Analysis

Every participant who identified themselves as landed immigrants reported to have acquired some professional experience in their field of study from their country of origin. 47% of the participants were unemployed and looking for work, the rest were either employed and still looking to move to a better role or employed and not looking for work. All participants could speak English well enough to conduct a conversation and had used English as the first language in their most recent job.

Prior to the engagement sessions, all potential participants received a study information letter explaining the details of the study along with privacy and confidentiality information and a consent form. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of the interview. Focus group participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that their identity would be confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time. The FGD was held in a private room in the CET and lasted 90 minutes. The telephone interviews lasted approximately 40-45 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded. Facilitators from TWIG were present to answer questions about the study and the consent form.

4.2 Summarizing Findings

A series of semi-structured interview questions were developed based on the study objectives. This section summarizes the main issues and findings derived from consultations held with 15 participants through one focus group discussion involving ten participants and five one-on-one interviews.

Barriers to securing meaningful employment

Since all participants employed or not were looking for a better employment opportunity, and given that these archetype of job seekers has been facing systematic barriers to meaningful employment, it was critical to identify what according to them was the major barrier to secure an employment of their choice. Below is a list of the possible reasons discussed by the participants because of which they found it challenging to land up in their dream job role.

- There was consensus among all participants that the competition in the GTA job market was fierce and this was a critical barrier to securing a job of their choice. Some of the participants (Canadian citizen or permanent resident) mentioned that they either lack the academic qualification or relevant work experience needed to build the career of their choice. However, soaring tuition fees and unfavorable student loan policies were making it increasingly challenging for them to go back to school and they felt trapped in a vicious cycle of meeting ends meet through precarious employment only.
- Participants mentioned that they often lacked the local industry knowledge that is paramount to competitively position themselves in the job market. Participants had a unanimous opinion about the poor accessibility of updated labour market information and limited knowledge on the availability of employment services. They said that the information on employment services were so scattered that it became challenging to navigate and locate the right information needed to make an informed labour market decision.
- Newcomers reported limited opportunity to develop professional network, unrecognizable credentials and lack of Canadian experience as the major obstacles to secure an employment of their choice. They highlighted that even entry level positions required work experience and a vast array of skills. They expressed concerns that often the job opportunities they were offered were short term and not very meaningful, with few prospects, limited training or mentorship to build transferable skills.

4.0 Qualitative Analysis

Is financial incentive enough to encourage relocation?

Participants were then asked, if there was an opportunity to have added job security, earn higher wages or work in an occupation more related to their filed of training/ education, would they consider relocating to a non-metro area in Ontario. For the majority of respondents in the FGD, relocation was circumstantial. They remarked that a lot would depend on what community they were moving to. Where that community was? What was around there? The idea of moving to a smaller community may have some appeal but a lot would depend on what's going on in that community. They emphasized how it's really an array of considerations and not necessarily just a high paying job offer that would incentivize them to relocate to a smaller community. On the contrary, except for one participant, the rest of the participants in the telephone interviews reported that they were likely to relocate to a smaller community in Ontario as long as there were economic incentives like added job security and increased income.

Barriers to relocation

Discussions were also made in the FGD and the telephone interviews to identify the main reasons because of which participants living in metropolitan areas would not want to relocate to a small-town community in Ontario. Two responses that stood out in the FGD as well as the telephone interviews irrespective of the participants length of stay in Canada were:

- **Social and family ties**: Participants emphasized how social and family ties were not just critical to their mental well-being but such ties were also linked to the accessibility of many other resources. Even newcomers had some relatives or friends living in the city whom they considered as a major support system to help them navigate life in Canada. Participants feared the idea of living in a small-town community without any existing social or family ties.
- **Charm of city life:** Participants were vocal that in reality, the very nature and characteristics of a small-town community may not allow it to offer everything that a city can offer. At the end of the day, there are some unique attributes of a city life that makes it more attractive than a smaller community.

Participants also highlighted the following as some of the reasons that may discourage them to move to a smaller community:

- **Professional network** – One participant in the telephone interview mentioned that he believed it'll be difficult to make business connections and do networking for someone living in a rural community. This individual had a small business in music and he felt that the city allowed him to associate himself with prominent individuals in the music industry and also get his music out to people easily. Cities boasts the reputation of a hub for various types of music that makes it easy to network with people and make business grow better compared to a smaller community where networking wouldn't be easier.
- **Local amenities** – Given everything else constant, participants found it desirable to live near local amenities like super markets, malls, cafes, banks, recreational centers etc. They had concerns that in non-metro areas, businesses are likely to operate fewer hours, close down earlier on the day and could remain closed during weekends. So, participants felt that they might be hard-pressed to avail all services whenever needed.
- **Educational Institutions** – While most large cities have a conductive learning environment and offers a myriad of activities for students, participants were skeptical about the small-town educational institutions in terms of quality teaching and limited quantity. One participant mentioned how she would only relocate to a small community that can offer a French emersion school. Availability and accessibility of good educational institutions to further enhance knowledge and skills were considered as critical to making a relocation decision.
- **Medical facilities** – Participants remarked that they would evaluate their relocation decision to a smaller community based on the availability of specialized services in health care and how lengthy or short the waiting time was to access these medical services.

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- **Transportation/Transit-**Lack of accessible transit in small town communities was another area of significant concern for participants. They said moving into a non-metro area would require them to factor in the cost of purchasing a vehicle right away. This can be especially challenging for the newcomers. Participants feared that relocating to a small town may mean losing a viable choice of getting around without needing to drive.
- **Diversity/Multiculturism** – Participants showed apprehension about the lack of diversity in rural Ontario. Unlike the large metropolitan cities that consisted of people of different race, color, gender orientation, religious belief etc., the participants feared the social implications of becoming a minority population in a small community. Some participants shared experiences in which they or their friends have faced racism in non-metro areas. They suggested that in order to attract talents of all race and color from the metropolitan cities to relocate into smaller communities, a key initiative should lie in preparing the rural residents to welcome, co-exist and manage a diverse population. Some participants also emphasized that multiculturism in big cities that offer smallest things like cuisines from a participant's home country actually had a huge impact on their well-being.
- **Local government and specialized services** – One participant in the FGD highlighted the importance of governance in smaller communities. He raised doubts about the competence of the local government in smaller communities. He also highlighted how some low-income group living in the city have to rely on food bank which in small communities may not be conveniently located for people to access it.
- **Information on smaller communities –** Almost all participants were in agreement that their knowledge on small town/rural life was very limited as they have lived in larger cities all their life. They discussed how they do not have a clear and comprehensive information about the range of jobs and services available in smaller communities. They considered this as a major barrier to relocation. Newcomers also remarked that upon arrival, the flyers and information package they receive from the airport officials or settlement agencies mainly contain details about the major metropolitan cities in Canada.

4.0 Qualitative Analysis

Community size preference

The FGD and one-on-one interviews held also attempted to explore if the participants were inclined to a particular community size i.e. were participants comfortable living in a community size of a few thousands or were they looking for something relatively bigger in terms of the population. Participants were asked, given that they relocate to a non-metro area in Ontario for better employment opportunities, what size of a community would they consider? Half of the participants were ready to move to any community size given that they had secured an excellent employment opportunity. This implied that for these participants, the community size/population size was not a significant determinant of relocation. However, this must be interpreted with caution. This response does not necessarily mean that a better employment opportunity regardless of a community size is the only factor determining the participants relocation decision. Consultations with participants suggested that other community features also played an important role in shaping the relocation decision.

20% of all the participants said that they'll be less inclined to move to a community where there is a couple of thousand inhabitants only. These participants expressed preference for a moderately larger community sizes that ranged from a population size of at least 10,000-24,999 while some choose 50,000-999,999. Some other participants (13%) said that they would only consider a community size of over 100,000 expressing their inclination towards metropolitan areas. Few other participants mentioned that they felt skeptical about the job market in a community where the population is too small. One participant said that she believed the non-metro areas do not offer job opportunities for certain positions like software developer. However, these participants did not pick any specific population size mentioned in the questionnaire.

Employment-related services

Participants were asked about the kind of employment-related services employers could offer to attract potential job seekers to relocate to a smaller community. Throughout the FGD and conversations held during telephone interviews, participants' most common suggestion were a better pay and benefit packages compared to what they were already making or could potentially make in a metropolitan city. In other words, participants pointed out that the pay should be reflective of not just their role in the company but also a compensation for leaving behind the city life. This indicated that financial incentive is a critical priority to make a relocation decision. However, it was not the only criteria.

Many participants noted how specific company policies can play a huge role in incentivizing them to relocate. This included flexible work arrangements like work from home policy once or twice a week or during harsh weather conditions, more annual vacation days than usual. Many participants strongly advocated for employers' education for what's available and waiting for them in the small-town community. Participants reported that a significant way to incentivize job seekers would be to offer temporary accommodation facility at least for the short-term.

Participants also suggested that significant skills upgrading or any type of job-related training offered by the small community employer can be very attractive. They highlighted that relocating to a non-metro area leaving behind the social and family ties will have a huge impact on their well-being. During this time, if employers are supporting them to improve and learn new skills, it will make them feel motivated and positive about their relocation decision.

Housing-related services

Participants were invited to share feedback on the type of housing-related services they deem necessary to make a relocation decision from a metropolitan city to a non-metro community. Every participant acknowledged that one of the most important services that a community or an employer can offer to a relocating candidate is assistance with finding accommodation in the new destination.

Majority of the participants highlighted that given their limited knowledge about non-metro areas, it would be highly beneficial to have a centralized system for housing-

4.0 Qualitative Analysis

related information showcased by the community or the employer. This system can offer information on different categories of accommodation available in the community (for example apartments, condos, houses etc.), price range for these accommodations, how to access the mandatory services related to housing (for example plumber, electrician, carpenters etc.). Some general information on the cost of living in a particular community i.e. the portion of income spent on accommodation, food, recreational activities can guide the potential candidate of relocation to compare the living expense of that small community versus the larger city.

One participant mentioned how more websites like the walkescore.com that offers cost on accommodation, and rates a neighborhood in terms of accessibility to transit, local amenities, neighborhood safety and security etc. could allow people to better evaluate their relocation decision. Few participants mentioned about internet accessibility as an important housing related service.

Some participants felt that the cost of purchasing a house in most of the metropolitan city was challenging. So, one incentive to relocate to a smaller community could be determined by the extent to which an individual stands a chance to become a home owner. Availability of information on this, through good real estate agents in the community could add perks to relocation.

Community-integration related services

Developing a network of community support is key to settling in a new community. So, participants were asked what were the community-integration related services they prioritize while making that relocation decision. Most of the participants noted that living in the larger metropolitan cities that consisted of people of different race, culture and religious beliefs gave them a sense of belonging and a sense of safety and security. Participants shared anecdotal evidences that made them feel that smaller communities that tend to be homogenous in nature were less inclusive and residents had low acceptance for people of different race and color. One participant expressed disappointment mentioning how one of her friend's school going child living in a small-town community in Ontario received racial remarks from few other children in the school. Participants expressed concerns about getting racially profiled in small communities. So, they recommended that a newbie can only integrate when there is acceptance of all race and culture in a community. A small-town community local government that is attempting to attract diversified talents of different race and culture from the metropolitan cities should create awareness on inclusion and anti-discrimination practices. Other community-integration services recommended by participants included – cultural meet-ups, drop-in programs like cooking classes, networking events.

Overall Community features

Participants were asked to identify that one community feature they consider the most critical in shaping their relocation decision. Responses on the participants' top priority reflected how every relocation case is unique. While participants who had children considered the availability of quality schools, library system and extra-curricular services an essential element in relocation decision, for some other participants it was the mere availability of getting the right job in the right field.

Many participants strongly advocated for the importance of an inclusive community and multiculturalism as their first priority. Other community features that were discussed by the participants were availability of public transportation, affordable housing and home ownership, favorable weather conditions, availability and accessibility of local amenities, opportunities for self-improvement, scope of religious practice etc.

5.0 Key Insights

The following key insights are based on the findings from the environmental scan, focus group discussion, and one-on-one telephone interviews with the key informants.

Awareness is the biggest gap

Participants' opinions relating to several issues during the course of the FGD and one-on-one telephone interviews suggested that awareness is the biggest gap. Participants who have mostly lived in larger cities all their lives had very limited knowledge about small town communities in Ontario. It appeared that participants' opinions were generalized for all small-town communities. For example, one participant mentioned that he believed small-town communities were characterized by higher crime rates, more opioid crisis and lesser accountability of resource use by the local government. This type of generalized perception about rural Ontario can be an obstacle to relocation. It is important for authorities at all levels of government and employers in the smaller communities to work together to inform city residents that every community is unique and they do not necessarily experience similar drawbacks and challenges.

Especially landed immigrants commented that they choose to settle down in metropolitan cities largely because they did not have much information about life beyond the GTA. Even participants who were born in Canada mentioned that they did not have clear and comprehensive information about the range of industries, jobs and services available in small communities. To address this fundamental challenge, we require a more centralized and coordinated approach, enhance existing platforms to better inform the potential candidates of relocation (especially those facing multiple barriers to employment in the larger cities) about employment opportunities in the non-metro areas. In other words, a broader platform connecting the labour market supply and demand is critical to attracting talents from the larger cities to the smaller towns.

Employers, professional associations and all levels of government can work as a team to collect and feed this centralized system with data on labour market trends for every small-town community in the province. Information like booming industries, job vacancies, in-demand skills, wages, mentorship opportunities, entrepreneurship opportunities etc. are crucial to make a relocation decision. A centralized system would make it easy for the potential candidates of relocation to navigate and access the information needed to make a choice. Apart from the labour market information, the centralized online platforms can also showcase information on local amenities, housing, education and training services, health care facilities and all other type of community services needed by residents daily.

5.0 Key Insights

According to a 2019 TVO article[56] since launching a rural-employment initiative in 2015, the Newcomer Centre of Peel has been working with counties, including Huron, to match skilled and semi-skilled newcomers to the GTA — where 77 percent of the province's immigrants land. Yet, to date, not a significant number of newcomers have been placed. Part of the problem, is because many immigrants have professional experience that simply isn't a match for the kinds of jobs typically posted in rural areas.

On the contrary, a community improvement plan initiated in 2017 by Smooth Rock Falls, a town in northeastern Ontario has already seen 43 residential and six commercial properties change hands, and two dozen new families move into town[57]. The benefits included tax incentives, new home construction rebates and selling lots for $500. In the fall of 2019, TWIG had a conversation with the Protective Services & Economic Development Officer from the town of Smooth Rock Falls and came to know that the town's hospital is currently understaffed. The hospital is looking to fill in positions like nurses, PSW, janitors, kitchen staff. Part-time positions of 20hours a week is immediately guaranteed with high chances of the work hours increasing to 40 hours per week. The town is also in need for technicians like plumbers, people doing furnace or coolant work.

To attract more talents, the town is now looking to build housing complexes for seniors so that houses currently occupied by this age demographic could be used as an additional supply of housing for others already living in the community or planning to relocate there. The town is using plenty of business incentives available funding opportunities to attract new businesses. The town is also building a new industrial park in 2020 and currently working with businesses about investing and locating in that industrial park.

Like Smooth Rock Falls, every small community needs to identify how to sell themselves in a competitive marketplace to attract and retain talents. As a province, we need to do a better job of promoting the opportunities and benefits of employment and lifestyles of living in smaller communities. Essentially, plans can be sketched out in advance to remove or offer a counterbalance to any challenge that faces the community.

5.0 Key Insights

Incentives beyond a higher salary

Based on the feedback received from the participants, it can be confirmed that sometimes non-monetary benefits can outweigh the pull of a high salary. Employers must understand that it can be difficult to compete with the large multinational companies of the metropolitan cities in terms of the salary they can offer. So, businesses in small town communities who can instead focus in offering the non-monetary facilities can have an edge in attracting talents from the city. These non-monetary benefits listed below could be an array of progressive and innovative polices that can make the employee feel more empowered and valuable:

- flexible work hours
- work from home opportunities
- more paid vacation days than regular
- letting the employee define some parameters of how their role is to be defined
- generous health care packages and wellness programs tailored to employees' needs
- tuition subsidies or subsidies for professional accreditation
- upskilling and training services for continuous personal growth and career development

Given that every potential candidate of relocation explores a unique set of considerations to make a relocation choice, and provided that every small-town community has its own set of characteristics and challenges and opportunities, employers can offer information on how life may look like in a specific community. Employers in partnership with the local government could arrange for day tours introducing the candidate and their family to the community. For example, a project called The Rural Employment Initiative (REI) in partnership between the Ontario Association for Community Futures Development Corporation (OACFDC) and the Newcomer Center of Peel (NCP) funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation connected talented internationally trained professionals with the employment opportunities in rural areas of Ontario. As a part of this project initiative they arrange for employment focused bus tour into rural areas.

Other services like the New to Grey Job Fair Bus Tour also provides a social opportunity for individuals either looking to move to a rural community or those who are new to the area to learn about the opportunities that exist. Expanding on the current offerings for such bus tours that showcase the benefits and challenges of living and working in smaller communities can create more openness and allow individuals to make a guided decision. This provides an opportunity for job seekers and employers to network with each other directly. While job seekers are able to demonstrate their qualification, employers are able to learn about the candidate's skill sets in details. Most importantly job seekers can get an up-close experience about living and working in these small communities.

5.0 Key Insights

Acceptance in the community

Participants highlighted that rural areas or small-town communities in Ontario often don't reflect a lot of diversity for which reason residents living in these areas can find it challenging to understand and accept multiculturalism. Many other participants shared anecdotal evidences of systemic racism as a serious barrier that can discourage them to relocate in a smaller community that tend to be predominantly white.

Although it may be naïve to think that racial tension is zero in all small communities, a rigid mindset that defines rurality as racist is flawed and would only discourage city residents from exploring the option to relocate into smaller communities. The concept that diversity is rooted only in the urban areas and being held back by the pre conceived notion that a small town is made up of a homogeneous group of people who resents diversity needs to be changed.

The process of relocating and settling of the multi-barriered job seekers from the larger cities to small-town Ontario can be done in social harmony. Sometimes, residents may fear cultural takeover but this can be worked on by all levels of government especially the local government. With the right mix of resources, government can step in and foster intercultural understanding between the existing residents and the new residents. There has to be more and more public education initiatives that promotes diversity and helps bring a community closer to being a truly inclusive one. Everyone needs to understand that without the injection of skilled talent and their families, the long-term prospect of smaller communities in the province is dire. Local government can communicate the successful aspects of bringing in talents from cities to the small community stakeholders to gain greater support for these new residents.

Continuous infrastructure support for small-town Ontario

Every participant in the FGD and one-on-one telephone interviews advocated for a variety of local services they deem necessary to relocate to a small community. The only answer to the availability of these services is a modern and reliable infrastructure. In other words, to distribute the population all over Ontario, to solve the growth pains for the urban centres we need to create real opportunities. While residents rely on infrastructure to access the day to day services, businesses too depend on it to remain competitive. To ensure a thriving rural Ontario, where residents can pursue meaningful careers and a good living standard, government can enhance current investment and continue to take real action. Also, given the nature of the rural communities, they may have unique infrastructure needs that can require a more targeted approach.

One example of enhanced rural investment may include, access to affordable, high-speed internet which is critical to the continued vibrancy and success of rural Ontario. It is essential to grow businesses, for personal and professional communications, to apply to jobs etc. Other types of continuous investment need may involve investments in modern public transit infrastructure, affordable housing, early learning and childcare, educational and training centres, medical facilities and recreational centres. All these can attract new businesses and support the wellbeing of the rural communities. For example, according to a TVO article[58], a lack of affordable housing is just one of the challenges facing employers and municipalities in rural southwestern Ontario who are trying to address a regional labour shortage by attracting recently landed immigrants. Only a comprehensive long-term growth plan can support the sustainability and viability of small-town communities in Ontario.

End Notes

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2 Any geography that is not urban and that is not considered a part of the census metropolitan area has been termed as non-metro.

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10 ibid

11 Stapelton, J., James, C. & Hope, K. (2019). *The Working Poor in the Toronto Region: A closer look at the increasing numbers.* Retrieved from Metcalf Foundation https://metcalffoundation.com/site/uploads/2019/11/Working-Poor-2019-NEW.pdf

12 The Metcalf defines working poor as someone who has an after-tax income below the Low-Income Measure (LIM),has earnings of at least $3,000 a year, is between the ages of 18–64, is not a student, and lives independently.

13 Stapelton, J., James, C. & Hope, K. (2019). *The Working Poor in the Toronto Region: A closer look at the increasing numbers.* Retrieved from Metcalf Foundation https://metcalffoundation.com/site/uploads/2019/11/Working-Poor-2019-NEW.pdf

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