

# Adult Languages and Learning: "Women Helping Other Women"

## Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Beta Test Report | February 2023

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## The DWLES Project

Adult Languages and Learning's "Women Helping Other Women" (WHOW) beta test was part of the Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project, which was a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix.

The overall goal of the DWLES project was to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating literacy and essential skills (LES) and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people with disabilities, and others. The project began in 2019 and beta-testing was done in 2021 and 2022.

The project began with 10 literacy organizations in British Columbia (BC) being selected to be part of the data collection phase of the project. This included a literature review, interviews with the BC literacy organizations, focus groups with key stakeholders, and a survey and interviews with displaced workers in each of the 10 communities.

Following the completion of this background research, 11 literacy organizations across Canada—including 7 from the earlier phase—were selected for the beta-test phase of the project, which included implementing and evaluating projects that integrated LES and employment services targeted for displaced workers in their communities.

The purpose of the beta-test phase was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES support, training models, and promising practices to inform development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada. The beta-test projects can be viewed as trial or experimental interventions, and thus were intended to be small in terms of the numbers of learners, with the potential to be scaled up to a full pilot study if deemed successful.

The following report provides an overview of the WHOW beta test that was implemented in Chatham-Kent, Ontario.

## Chatham-Kent, ON

The WHOW project took place in the community of Chatham-Kent, located in southwestern Ontario. Chatham Kent is a smaller/rural municipality comprised of many small towns throughout 2,458 square kilometers. The land that is known as Chatham-Kent today is the traditional land of the Three Fires Confederacy: the Odawa, Potawatami and Ojibwe.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic there has been an increase in the number of women who have been displaced from their employment, which has resulted in a greater disparity in the employment gap between men and women across Canada, including in Chatham-Kent. For example, many women have needed to leave their jobs to look after their children as they are not the primary income earner. Further, a greater number of women work in the retail, hospitality, and the food industries, which have experienced a large decrease in business and in some cases, permanent closures.

Adult Language and Learning (ALL) has been serving the Chatham-Kent community since 1984, providing literacy and essential skills training and immigrant programs and services. Recognizing the need to support women who



have been displaced from employment, ALL developed the WHOW beta test project.

## "Women Helping Other Women" Program

The WHOW beta test project aimed to help displaced women build greater self esteem, self worth, and independence, as well as to increase their ability to make their own decisions. The project focused on helping women to develop the necessary skills to become leaders in the community, to have financial independence, to increase their ability to earn an income, and to enjoy equal access to employment and education through improved LES.

WHOW was delivered to two cohorts of learners between September 2021 and March 2022. The training was delivered virtually using Zoom over a six-week period. Learners were in class every day for three hours. Across the two cohorts, nine learners completed WHOW.



## Highlights from WHOW

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There were several highlights that were identified by learners and staff about WHOW:

\* Some learners started the training feeling discouraged about their digital skills and the impact this had on potential employment opportunities. They lacked confidence in using a computer, which negatively affected their motivation to improve their digital skills. In a safe, comfortable environment, WHOW helped to **reduce learners' fear and build their confidence in using a computer**, which encouraged them to improve their digital skills.

\* The learners expressed how they felt a significant **sense of belonging and connection to each other**, particularly since it was a training specifically for women. This helped them not feel alone in their challenges finding employment and, in general, in terms of their experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

\* Learners described how through their participation in the beta test, the **digital skills they gained were relevant both professionally and personally**. They could use these skills to apply for jobs that required a certain level of digital literacy, as well as to better manage their finances.

## Promising practices from WHOW

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There were several promising practices that emerged from WHOW that strengthened learner recruitment and engagement while supporting learners in their personal growth and building their LES and job search skills.



### Checking in with learners individually during or outside of class.

The facilitator for WHOW would call or send a message to learners if they did not show up for class to check in and identify if there was a way in which the learner could be supported or motivated to attend. This helped the facilitator to better understand the individual needs of each learner and the specific support that they needed to participate and engage in the training. It also was a motivator for learners because they felt valued and cared for as individuals, which increased their accountability and commitment to attending the training.



### Learners applied their IT/digital skills while focusing on development of other skills.

Learners in the program developed their basic digital skills, such as using a computer and online navigation. They then used these skills to search for jobs and develop job applications online, as well as to create budgets and calculate credit scores.



### Developing programs for equity-deserving groups that have been underrepresented in previous LES programming in the community.

The training was designed for women as it was identified that women were particularly impacted by unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus on women not only helped to fill a gap in LES programming in the community, but also to create a sense of belonging among the learners through shared experience.

## What we learned from WHOW

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### **1** It is important that LES programming considers the diversity of learners' experiences and sociocultural backgrounds in program design and delivery.

The content in WHOW was relevant to women from diverse sociocultural backgrounds with a range of life experiences. Learners described how in previous trainings and courses (taken outside of Adult Languages and Learning) they did not feel represented in the content. This made them feel excluded and, therefore, that the training was less relevant to them. This underscores the importance of ensuring that all aspects of program design and delivery address the diverse backgrounds and experiences of learners.

### **2** LES programs can play a significant role in building a sense of belonging and community among learners, which increases learners' social supports.

While improving LES skills is a primary objective of LES programming, there are often other outcomes of LES programming that are beneficial to learners. The majority of learners in WHOW indicated that they felt a sense of belonging and community with the other learners in the beta test due to their shared experiences of being women, displaced workers, and isolated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was identified by learners as one of the more meaningful outcomes of the beta test. This highlights how LES programming is more than just an opportunity to build skills. Learners are provided with a safe space to connect, share, and be supported by learners and facilitators who understand the challenges each other experience.

### Additional project information

This report is part of a series of 11 individual beta test reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project and to access project reports, please visit:

[decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing](https://decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing).

