

# Autumn Services Society: "YOU Program"

## Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

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## The DWLES Project

Autumn Service's "YOU Program" 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 June 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 beta test "YOU Program" that was implemented in Fraser Lake, British Columbia by Autumn Services Society.

## Fraser Lake, BC

Fraser Lake is a community which sits geographically in the centre of BC on the traditional lands of the Nadleh Whut'en and the Stelat'en First Nations. The village has approximately 1,000 residents, with an additional 2,000 residents from the surrounding area. It is a two-hour drive from Prince George, which is the closest major centre with a population of approximately 75,000.

The Endako Molybdenum Mine, which opened in 1965, was the largest employer for village residents. However, the mine stopped producing in 2014, with the company citing extensive financial losses, leading to layoffs of 450 employees. With some workers moving away from the village to find other employment, the small community also lost many of its retail businesses. While the displacement occurred over 7 years ago, the community is still feeling the impact of the mine closure. Thus, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the community, it amplified the struggles associated with a lack of employment opportunities.

Autumn Services operates a community drop-in centre that provides technology support, social support, food security, and programs for older adults. Prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the centre experienced an influx of workers looking to update their literacy and essential skills (LES), as well as their career



planning and job application skills. This was the catalyst for Autumn Services' beta test project, the "YOU Program."

## "YOU Program"

Autumn Services' "YOU Program" provided the opportunity for community members to learn digital literacy skills, gain self-confidence, and become better suited candidates for emerging job opportunities in the local area. Prior to the beta test, Autumn Services had not provided essential skills training; however, Autumn Services staff members knew of the community's LES needs through their work and life in the community, combined with their background in adult education. Based on these identified needs, the content of the YOU Program included:

- Essential Skills training
- Skills to support job search and application preparation (e.g., resume-writing, cover letter preparation, interview preparation, and job searching)
- Stress management and self-regulation strategies, such as mindfulness.

In August 2021, the YOU Program was delivered in-person from Monday to Friday for six hours per day for three weeks.



Guest speakers included a mental health professional as well as a representative from the College of New Caledonia to discuss the college's programs and application process. Five learners completed the YOU Program. The number of learners was kept low due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the experimental nature of the project.

## Highlights from the YOU Program

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There were several highlights that were identified by learners and staff about the YOU Program:

\* Learners were **very satisfied** with the specific content and **highly engaged** in the YOU Program. The learners described the importance of being part of a community of learners, and their appreciation for the facilitator, who helped build their confidence and motivation to continue learning.

\* The **social aspect of the program was particularly important to learners**, as it was held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when many people were socially isolated. The program provided learners not only an opportunity to build their skills, but to work together with other learners, hear about each other's experiences, and develop a sense of community. This was consistent with findings from many of the other DWLES beta-test projects.

\* The YOU Program brought new learners into Autumn Services who continued to access their services after the program. Additionally, some learners signed up as

volunteers at the end of the program to continue building their skills and practical experience.



One learner described how, as a result of the program, they felt more confident in knowing what employers expect in a job application and the skills that they are looking for in an employee.

Another learner described how much they appreciated that a mental health professional delivered the mental health component of the course. They found it very helpful to have an expert who could answer their questions and help them to understand the intricacies of mental health.

## Promising practices from the YOU Program

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There were several promising practices that emerged from the YOU Program that strengthened learner engagement while supporting learners in building their LES and job search skills.



### Providing meals to learners.

Learners were provided with breakfast and lunch, which was a way for them to connect with each other in a more informal way and build their sense of community.



### Integrating opportunities for certification.

In the YOU Program, learners had the opportunity to achieve certifications (e.g., WHMIS, Food Handling) that were relevant to

their career interests. Learners shared that this was important for increasing their employability.

### **Integrating journaling activities.**

Each participant was required to keep a journal. Learners wrote a journal entry each day, which the instructor would read and provide comments. Learners described how there were some things that they did not feel comfortable communicating with the full group of learners. The journals gave them a safe and private space to share if they had challenges with mental health or other aspects of their life or learning. This allowed the instructor to address these challenges in the program more broadly or speak to the learner privately.

### **Inviting representatives from regional post-secondary institutions.**

Based on learners' self-identified interest and goals, the instructor invited a representative from the College of New Caledonia to meet with learners who were interested in enrolling in courses to review potential study plans. This gave learners a direct and personal connection to the College.

### **Assigning a quote of the day.**

Each day, one learner was assigned to provide a quote of the day and explain to the group why they chose it. The instructor then integrated that comment throughout the day into the learnings. This helped to maintain learner engagement in the course and give them some ownership over the content.

## **What we learned from the YOU Program**

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### **1 Having an opportunity to develop new programming can build capacity and diversify clients.**

The YOU Program was a new opportunity for Autumn Services to provide LES programming. Through this process, Autumn Services not only built their own capacity but also broadened their programming within the community to provide services to a greater diversity of community members. This was particularly of interest to Autumn Service's Board of Directors who saw it as a way to further address the LES needs of community members and expand the activities of the centre.

### **2 Addressing learners' mental health is critical for the success of LES programs.**

Mental health issues are not commonly addressed in LES training and education programs. Autumn Services staff learned, however, that issues related to mental health can pose significant barriers for displaced workers in seeking and obtaining employment. Addressing mental health concerns and supporting individuals through their mental health struggles was, therefore, a priority for the YOU Program.

For learners who struggled with mental health issues, the predictability and structure of attending regular programming was particularly valuable for them. The routine and accountability it provided gave them an opportunity to build their confidence and social support networks.



### **3** Locally-based LES training opportunities are important in rural communities.

Small, rural communities often have fewer community-based training and educational opportunities than larger centres, requiring residents to travel outside of the community in order to access many programs. Transportation, scheduling, and financial barriers can pose challenges to accessing programs outside the community. The YOU Program provided Fraser Lake community members with access to a locally-based training opportunity to build their LES, obtain certain certifications, and increase their job search and application skills.

### **4** LES programs can bridge connections between learners and other service providers who are outside of the community.

For learners who were interested in pursuing further education outside of the community, the YOU Program provided a way for them to learn about and navigate these opportunities through the involvement of the College of New Caledonia.

#### **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).

