

Benefits on the street:

**Increasing access to benefits
for street-involved individuals
and families**



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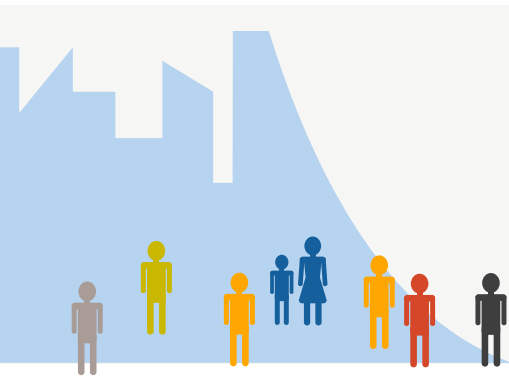
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Introduction/background



The Working Centre (TWC) in Kitchener-Waterloo has been dedicated to aiding marginalized populations for over 40 years. In partnership with Prosper Canada, it embarked on an initiative to connect the populations they serve to government benefits and tax filing support.



Recognizing the intricate challenges faced by individuals and families experiencing homelessness, the organization endeavored to enhance its outreach efforts by integrating innovative benefit navigation tools, the [Benefits Wayfinder](#) and the

[Disability Benefits Compass](#).

This pilot project also modelled a distributive model of a training mobile and place-based outreach teams to support the completion of tax returns and access to benefits for those who are unhoused. Beyond mere facilitation of benefit access, this initiative complemented the multifaceted needs encompassing tax filing assistance, housing provision, and financial stability.

Funding and evaluation

The realization of the six-month pilot project was made feasible through financial backing and evaluation oversight from Prosper Canada, a prominent national charity committed to fostering economic opportunity for all Canadians. Prosper Canada's support ensured adequate resources for project implementation and facilitated robust outcomes measurement, aligning the endeavor strategically with broader objectives in poverty alleviation and social equity.

The Working Centre: Supporting community

Central to this initiative is The Working Centre's longstanding commitment to serving marginalized communities of Kitchener-Waterloo. With an array of services spanning shelter, housing, employment supports, outreach services, a community kitchen and drop-in hub, access to primary care supports, concurrent disorders support for mental health and addiction, financial problem-solving, bicycle recycling, thrift stores, and cafes. Employing a holistic [Circle of Care model](#), characterized by collaborative interagency support, the organization exemplifies dedication to providing comprehensive wraparound services.

Introduction/background

Challenges and opportunities

The initiative aims to support people who are homeless/at risk of homelessness to test models for improved access to benefits. Navigating the access to benefits and tax filing systems is complex and difficult, particularly for those who may be unhoused, unsheltered, or in precarious housing situations, do not have access to ID, and may be apprehensive to share personal information with government and other institutions. However, within these challenges there are opportunities for innovation and collaboration. By integrating the Benefits Wayfinder and an outreach model of access to benefits into their outreach framework, The Working Centre aspired to create a bridge between service provision and unmet needs, thereby empowering individuals to navigate these complex systems.

Goals of the project

The overarching objectives of the Benefits on the Street Pilot were twofold: to underscore the tangible impact of integrating benefits access support into The Working Centre's outreach initiatives, and to outline the necessary components for the effective delivery of such services to street-involved individuals and families. Through ongoing discussion with The Working Centre, and tracking progress, the project aimed to determine if integrating the Benefits Wayfinder Tool into their services led to increasing income, supporting housing access, and lessening financial stress, with the particular aim of understanding how these goals might have been reached.

About The Working Centre

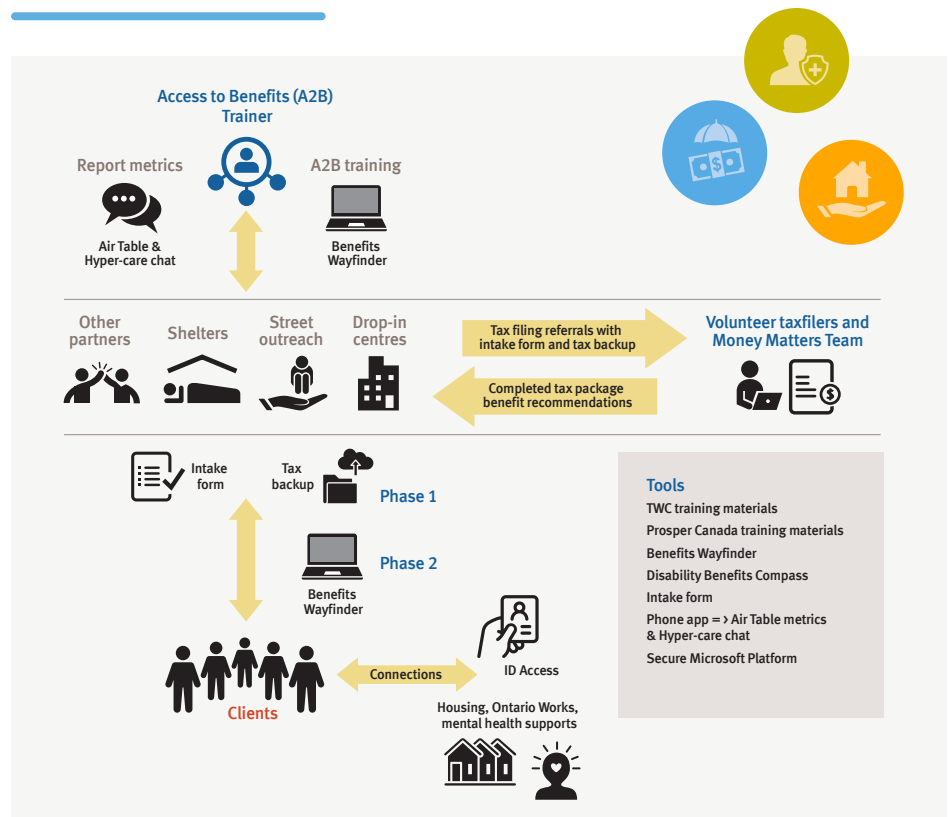


The Working Centre extends its services to a diverse array of individuals and families grappling with economic hardship. From street-involved populations to newcomers and low-income community members reliant on social assistance programs such as Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, the organization’s outreach efforts are tailored to address the nuanced needs of each group.

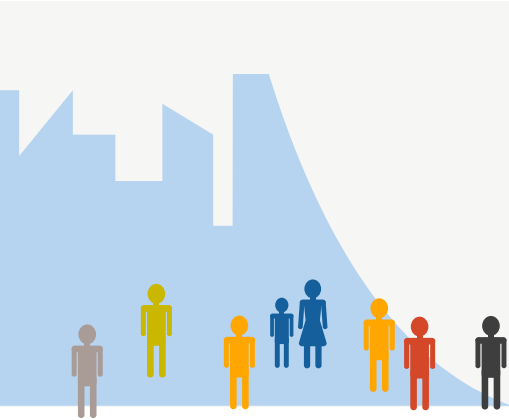
Service locations and touchpoints

Operating from diverse service touchpoints across Kitchener-Waterloo, including St. John’s Kitchen, Mobile Support units, and shelter facilities, The Working Centre ensures accessibility and inclusivity in its service delivery. Beyond traditional service hubs, the organization extends its reach through medical and psychiatric clinics, community dental care, and connection to employment, fostering a holistic ecosystem of support for the community’s most vulnerable members.

Service model



The Pilot: Integrating the Benefits Wayfinder tool into The Working Centre’s existing outreach



The project adopted a **Train-the-Trainer model** to ensure comprehensive dissemination of knowledge and skills among staff members. Training sessions were conducted at various locations to accommodate the diverse operational settings of The Working Centre. There were three main ways in which training took place.

Place-based training:

Sessions were held onsite at shelters and St. John’s Kitchen, where staff members could convene and engage in interactive learning sessions.

Mobile support training:

Recognizing the dynamic nature of outreach work, training sessions were also conducted for the Street Outreach team in street encampments, public spaces, and locations lacking permanent infrastructure. This mobile approach ensured that front-line workers were equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to engage with unhoused individuals wherever they may be.

Remote participation:

Additionally, remote training opportunities were extended to accommodate staff members who were unable to attend in-person sessions. Through phone-ins to The Working Centre, participants could access training materials and engage in virtual learning experiences.

Training and resources

The **training curriculum** encompassed a multifaceted approach to equip staff members with the requisite knowledge and skills. The Working Centre workers were trained on the following topics below. Some of the knowledge came from internal expertise within The Working Centre, and some came from Prosper Canada offering training support.

Housing system knowledge and tax filing:	Role-specific training and de-escalation techniques:	Online courses and workshops:	Training on Benefits Wayfinder and Disability Benefits Compass:
<p>Participants received comprehensive training on the intricacies of the housing system, alongside the role of income tax and identification in accessing benefits and housing supports. This foundational understanding enabled staff members to navigate complex bureaucratic processes with confidence.</p>	<p>Recognizing the diverse roles within The Working Centre, role-specific training was provided to ensure that each staff member was equipped to fulfill their duties effectively. Moreover, de-escalation techniques and trauma-informed approaches were incorporated into the training curriculum to foster a compassionate and supportive environment for both staff and clients.</p>	<p>Staff members were provided access to various online courses and workshops on financial empowerment, benefits access, and financial literacy. These resources complemented the in-person training sessions, allowing for continuous learning and skill development.</p>	<p>Specialized training was conducted on the utilization of the Benefits Wayfinder and Disability Benefits Compass tools. Staff members were trained to effectively navigate these resources to assess benefit eligibility and support clients in accessing the benefits they are entitled to.</p>

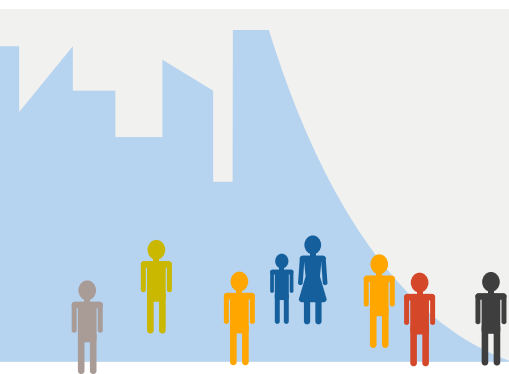
Outreach steps for accessing benefits

The implementation of the pilot project involved a systematic approach to outreach and benefit access:

- **Utilization of Benefits Wayfinder:** Staff members were trained in the effective use of the Benefits Wayfinder tool to assess benefit eligibility and facilitate access to available supports.
- **Offering Benefits Wayfinder and the Disability Benefits Compass to Individuals:** Individuals were offered the opportunity to engage with the Benefits Wayfinder tool directly or complete a survey in advance to streamline the assessment process.
- **Registration and documentation:** Information gathered through the Benefits Wayfinder tool was recorded using the Air Table app to ensure accurate documentation and tracking of client interactions.
- **Income source verification:** Staff members checked for existing income sources and facilitated connections with relevant agencies such as Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) as needed.
- **Assessment of housing needs:** Housing needs were assessed, and individuals were connected with relevant housing supports to address their immediate shelter needs.
- **Verification of ID requirements:** Assistance was provided to individuals in obtaining necessary documentation to meet identification requirements for benefit applications. Appendix A: ID Access Process – Community Healthcaring Kitchener-Waterloo
- **Referral for tax filing assistance:** Internal referrals were made for individuals requiring assistance with tax filing, ensuring compliance with tax obligations, and maximizing benefit entitlements.
- **Follow-up and troubleshooting:** Staff members followed up on benefit reception and addressed any issues or challenges that arose during the application process, providing ongoing support and advocacy as needed.
- **Assessment of further benefit eligibility:** Continual assessment of clients' benefit eligibility was conducted, with ongoing support provided to access additional benefits and supports as appropriate.

Through this structured approach to outreach and benefit access, The Working Centre aimed to empower unhoused individuals and families with the resources and support needed to achieve stability and improve their quality of life.

Pilot evaluation: What did we learn?



The goal of the evaluation was to demonstrate the impact of including benefits access supports as part of broader wraparound services for street-involved individuals and families as well as to document key components necessary for an effective benefits access support services.

Evaluation questions

1. Does the Benefits Wayfinder Tool enhance the effectiveness of the part-time outreach worker in supporting clients?
2. Is the Benefits Wayfinder tool adaptable to the mobile service model offered by TWC?
3. How was the Benefits Wayfinder tool utilized by TWC – for training or directly on the street?
4. How does the Benefits Wayfinder tool and training integrate into the Integrated Circle of Care at The Working Centre?

Evaluation methods

The Working Centre staff tracked a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that were agreed upon at the beginning of the pilot.

These included:

Key Performance Indicator (KPI)

Number of participants who received information about Benefits & Number of benefits applications submitted (separate from tax filing)

Number of clients supported to fill out a tax return in the street outreach program

Number of TWC staff trained on Benefits access using the Benefits Wayfinder tool over the 6 months of project

Outreach staff also participated in a focus group with Prosper Canada on October 11th, 2023.

Pilot evaluation: What did we learn?

Findings of the evaluation

Key Performance Indicator (KPI)	Total
Number of participants who received information about Benefits & Number of benefits applications submitted (separate from tax filing) (a)	346 (b)
Number of clients supported to fill out a tax return in the street outreach program	76 (c)
Number of TWC staff trained on Benefits access using the Benefits Wayfinder tool over the 6 months of project	15

(a) Challenging to calculate these 2 KPI's separately due to data collection methods, hence they have been bundled together.

(b) Data collected from street outreach teams. However, the kitchen and various shelters combined who did not collect data is estimated at 1,730+.

(c) Number of individuals whom we recorded as filing taxes through this program. Many of the participants filed multiple tax years. The number of tax returns filed is 180+ (data tracking was started later in the project).

Pilot evaluation: What did we learn?

Focus group

The Prosper Canada led focus group took place on Wednesday, October 11th, 2023. It was conducted at the end of the pilot project, where outreach workers attempted to implement access to benefit services into their work with people experiencing homelessness, and several main themes and key learnings emerged:

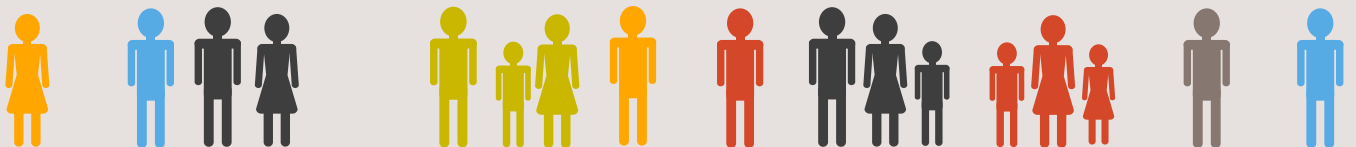
- **Client priorities and barriers:** Outreach workers who participated in the pilot noted that clients experiencing homelessness often have immediate needs and face significant barriers when it comes to accessing benefit services. Many clients prioritize securing funds during a crisis, and the steps required to obtain benefits can be overwhelming.
- **Client-centered approach:** Outreach workers emphasized the importance of acknowledging and addressing the client's immediate concerns and building trust before discussing benefit services. Trust and relationships play a crucial role in this work.
- **Referrals and challenges:** Participants discussed the importance of referrals to various services, including shelters, medical care, and government agencies like Service Ontario. The challenges included locating clients, coordinating services, and dealing with missed appointments.
- **Direct line to CRA:** One significant barrier identified was the difficulty of reaching the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), with long wait times and issues related to security questions. There was a strong need for a direct line to CRA for quicker access.
- **Time-consuming process:** The process of applying for benefits was described as lengthy and complicated, involving numerous steps. This complexity could deter clients from pursuing available benefits.
- **Tool as a knowledge resource:** The tool provided valuable information to outreach workers, helping them become familiar with different benefits and identifying new ones that could apply to their clients. It served as a knowledge resource for the staff.
- **Importance of client expectations:** Participants highlighted the need to manage client expectations by conducting background work to understand potential benefits without raising false hopes, as clients might be disappointed if benefits do not materialize.
- **The role of outreach workers:** Outreach workers act as intermediaries for clients, helping them navigate the process and applying for benefits. They play a crucial role in mediating knowledge and trust.
- **Taxes as a gateway to benefits:** Taxes were viewed as a potential gateway to introducing clients to benefits once their tax obligations are settled. Benefit screening and applications might come after addressing tax-related concerns.

Insights and recommendations

- Outreach workers should prioritize building trust and addressing immediate client concerns before discussing benefit services.
- A direct line to CRA is essential to streamline the process, as wait times and security questions present significant barriers, especially when combined with supporting people living in encampments.
- Background work and managing client expectations are crucial to avoid disappointment if benefits do not materialize.
- The tool provided valuable information to outreach workers but may not be directly usable with clients.
- Tax filing may be the first step to having a client successfully receive some income, and it could be a way to build confidence in the client to access services in the future. There is also the potential of the opposite effect if tax filing does not materialize into an increase in income.

“This project taught us a lot about how to help people who are deeply homeless to access income tax and benefits support. We modeled a distributive learning and access approach that modified the available tools to meet the needs of those who are most unlikely to be able to access existing services. We also assisted a broad team of outreach workers to become confident in discussing finances, problem-solving places they were stuck (ID, unsubmitted tax returns, inability to track history or previous documents, inability to contact helplines for government services). This project assisted us in modeling and delivering this enhancement to existing outreach services”.

– Stephanie Mancini, Co-Director, The Working Centre





Appendix A ID Access Process – Community Healthcaring Kitchener-Waterloo (K-W)

Community Healthcaring Kitchener-Waterloo

Community Healthcaring Kitchener-Waterloo is one of 75 Community Health Centres (CHCs) in Ontario ([Community Health Centres | ontario.ca](https://www.ontario.ca)). Each Centre is an incorporated, non-profit agency, governed by a Volunteer Board of Directors.

Outreach primary care team

The outreach primary care team includes MDs, NPs, Nurses, Community Health Workers, other outreach staff and administrative support staff. The interdisciplinary team provides client-centred primary care to some of the most vulnerable people in Kitchener-Waterloo, meeting them where they shelter, eat, camp, and gather. It supports over twenty outreach locations along with its KW4 OHT partners. The outreach to provide ID support is described in the section below.

Appendices

ID (identification) Clinic

Community Healthcaring Kitchener-Waterloo (K-W)'s mission is to provide accessible health care and supports to those facing barriers in their communities. Their ID Clinic provides health coverage and supports ID to 800+ people per year, most of whom are experiencing homelessness (and who use Community Healthcaring K-W's address for OHIP), but also supports clients at-risk of homelessness who are living on low, fixed income.

The ID Clinic helps people obtain an Ontario Health Card and apply for a birth certificate or proof of status in Canada. These documents then support an application for other ID. ID is necessary to access healthcare, and it is required to obtain housing and income. For those who are unhoused, getting, keeping, and having a safe place to store ID is an essential resource. Precariously housed individuals on Ontario Works (OW) or on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), or who have no form of income, are also assisted to replace a birth certificate, to apply for OHIP and other forms of income and housing.

In addition to community outreach to several locations where unhoused individuals stay or gather, individuals can drop-in or meet by appointment at the main office at 44 Francis Street South, Kitchener location.

ID Clinic staffing: There are four staff on the outreach team who can provide ID support to clients at all outreach locations. One primary staff is responsible for program coordination and administration. The ID clinic is also well supported by administrative staff.

Outreach locations – The Working Centre

St. John's Kitchen, Erbs Road Outdoor Shelter, and King Street Shelter
Outreach is done on either a weekly or bi-weekly basis at The Working Centre locations.

ID Clinic staff work closely with The Working Centre staff teams at these locations to support ID work. The ID clinic meets with participants in private spaces.

Appendices

ID Clinic – Key set-up steps

Anyone can set up an ID Clinic, but there are systems which need to be in place first before helping someone apply for an ID.

1. Contract with Service Ontario (SO)

[Service Ontario – Special Homeless Registration Process](#)

Everyone in Ontario must provide an address for getting and renewing their health card. This leaves a gap for people who are unhoused and have no address. An organization supporting unhoused people can request to join the Agency Participation Agreement in the Special Homeless Registration Process with Service Ontario, so unhoused clients can use the agency's address.

To provide this service an organization must meet program and administrative requirements. Service Ontario is bound by the same rules and regulations as the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) for privacy and handling of personal information and personal health information as an agent under the Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA). All ID Clinic work must be done within the guidelines of PHIPA.

If approved the organization can provide documents to unhoused individuals to take to Service Ontario to get or renew their health card (if they meet requirements for OHIP coverage in Ontario). Participation in the Special Homeless Registration Process also requires that organizations must assist clients to obtain documents that are required to verify eligibility for OHIP (birth certificate, Verification of Status, or other documents). Organizations must have procedures for receiving, tracking, and signing out health cards and other ID that are private and secure.

2. Contract with the Office of the Registrar General in Thunder Bay

[Send a request to the Office of the Registrar General | ontario.ca](#)

The Office of the Registrar General is responsible for formal documents and records such as licenses, birth and death certificates, land registries and surveys, business registrations and writs. Replacing Ontario birth certificates is a key function of ID Clinic work because birth certificates are required for accessing OHIP, income resources and housing. They are often required to get other ID, e.g., Ontario Photo ID, confirmation of SIN letter.

Community Healthcaring KW has an Agreement Respecting Fees for Services Provided by the Registrar General, that enables the ID Clinic to support unhoused clients acquiring Ontario birth certificates free of charge. It also enables the ID Clinics to submit birth certificate applications on behalf of clients who meet the Registrar General's definition of homeless, as specified in the agreement.

Not for profit corporations who have a mandate to assist homeless or marginally housed individuals can request to be part of this Agreement that is commonly known as the 'No Fee Program.' Participation in the program requires meeting security and confidentiality requirements and is subject to inspection and review by the Office of the Registrar General.

The Agreement supports an ID Clinic to acquire and receive Ontario birth certificate by mail – a key resource for support of folks who aren't able to apply on their own and have no address to receive mail.

Appendices

Tips for setting up an ID clinic

Setting up a permanent ID clinic in your organization will require a commitment in staffing, administration, and ongoing maintenance of procedures to apply for, receive and securely manage the storage and signing out of ID. If you decide to include outreach support to unhoused community members, in addition to on-site support, staff capacity should be considered for this additional service.

The organization should also support individuals who need their out of province birth certificate so their program is equitable. Funds will be required to pay the fees for these documents. Applications will also need to be submitted to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for verification of the individual's status in Canada if not born in Canada, (Verification of status) or to get their birth certificate (if born in Canada).

Other sources of ID support

Like The Working Centre and the other organizations who have ID Clinic outreach provided by Community Healthcaring KW, you can search for a Community Health Centre with an ID clinic nearby to refer individuals to for ID support. You can also inquire about collaborating with the Community Health Centre for any outreach needs for your community.

Appendices



Appendix B Tools used throughout the project

- Client intake sheet on Air Table app
- [Benefits Wayfinder](#)
- [Disability Benefits Compass](#)
- Laptop and mobile internet
- Metrics tools/database
- Training materials from The Working Centre and Prosper Canada