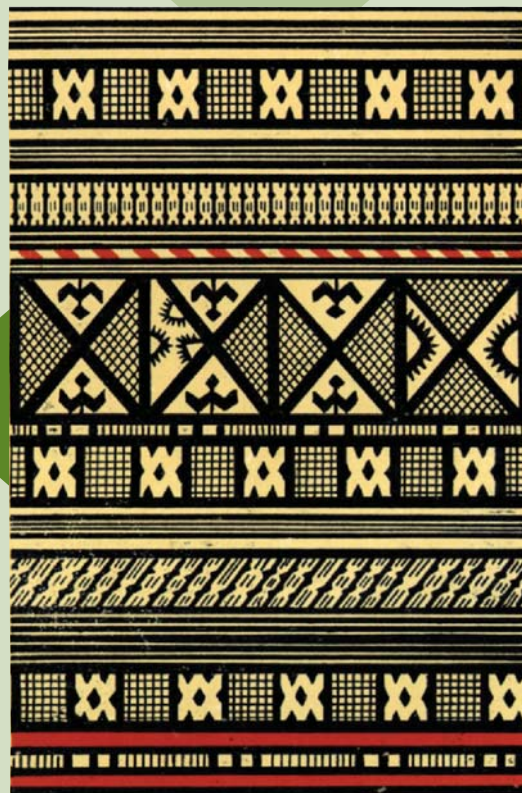


Towards an Integrated Strategy: Maximizing Use of Local Resources



A report on best practices and barriers
to the use of North Etobicoke employment
services by Somali youth



Toronto Training Board
Commission de Formation de Toronto

This report was written by Remi Warner and edited by Karen Lior
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

This research was carried out by the Toronto Training Board (TTB) in partnership with the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT). Its purpose was to learn how employment services in North Etobicoke could be structured so that more Somali youth (age 12-30) would use them, and use them successfully.

Of those we surveyed, 32.4% were not aware of an employment agency in their area. Another 40% had never visited one. We found that overall, 82% of Somali youth surveyed had never taken part in any employment training program or service. Friends and families were the primary means by which they sought employment.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS FOR SOMALI YOUTH?

Why don't Somali youth use employment agencies in North Etobicoke? Youth and agency staff noted different barriers. Many agency staff emphasized personal barriers such as single mother households, lack of role models, and parental shielding of children from the job market. The youth stressed institutional and »systemic barriers such as racism, ageism, and institutional bias.

There were major practical barriers as well:

- youth's lack of awareness, due to agency locations and lack of direct outreach;
- transportation and other costs associated with training, employment search, and starting work;
- lack of Somali-speaking staff.

Somali youth have negative perceptions of employment agencies and services. They say the number and quality of the job selections are poor. They say the staff seem uncaring or unwilling to give enough individual attention. They feel they have encountered discrimination.

For their part, the employment agencies face difficulties in finding good placements when there are so few companies in the area. Also, the Somali business community could do much more to provide Somali youth with mentoring and job placements.

Other social problems discourage Somali youth from using employment services. These include:

- racism and discrimination, which dampen motivation and breed distrust of the system and its services;
- high rates of school leaving, which disqualify many youth from training programs as well as meaningful employment;
- experiences with the criminal justice system, which cause

more alienation, cynicism, and hopelessness, thus further decreasing employment service use.

WHAT ARE THE BEST PRACTICES?

Completing The Circle, Dixon Neighbourhood, and the Somali Youth Association of Toronto are among the most successful agencies serving Somali youth. All of these agencies are not-for-profit, located in Somali neighbourhoods, and have some Somali staff. Since Somali youth rely heavily on friends and family networks to find employment, offering a greater range of services from well-integrated organizations would increase Somali youth awareness of employment opportunities, programs, and services.

These organizations have Somali-Canadian staff members with intimate knowledge of the problems affecting their community and therefore they have a greater ability to relate to and communicate with their service users. SOYAT's popularity and trust level among Somali youth makes it an ideal candidate to house employment services. Moreover, community organizations such as SOYAT offer multiple programs. Thus they are able to address many non-vocational barriers faced by Somali youth, through programs related to education, health, crime prevention, and peer counselling.

WHAT IS THE MOST PRACTICAL WAY FORWARD?

There is a need for more capacity in the Somali community to support integrated programs. But to minimize service overlap, any service provision by Somali community organizations should be complimented by strengthened partnerships with existing employment agencies. These agencies need to set a high priority for outreach efforts. They should be better funded for service outreach and partnership building with community organizations.

The multi-faceted social problems affecting Somali youth require a holistic strategy on a governmental and policy level. Greater collaboration and integration of services across sectors are important. The Toronto Training Board is well positioned to facilitate collaboration among community organizations, employment agencies, and government bodies.

This report also makes a number of practical recommendations about the kinds of employment services and programming that should be offered to Somali youth. Offering bus tickets to and from appointments is an effective strategy for eroding financial barriers. So is paying youth in advance when they get a first job, so they can buy the clothes and other items they'll need for going to work.

Many Somali youth lack the 'cultural capital' of educational

qualifications and job-seeking skills. Pre-employment training programs in resume writing and job interview preparation are essential. So are programs and that will help clients who are not 'job-ready'. One-on-one and small group counselling is an important support. Consultation with Somali youth when developing and evaluating programs is crucial.

In focus groups, Somali youth responded positively to on-the-job training programs like the Jobs for Youth Program, funded by the Province and administered by Tropicana Community Services Organization in Jamestown, Jane and Finch, and Malvern. These programs were seen as useful and attractive because of the quality of the job placements and valuable on-the-job training. Extending programs like these to the North Etobicoke community would help restore youth's trust in the system and hope for the future.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Establish or expand employment services offered through Somali community organizations in Somali neighbourhoods. This will lead to:
 - improved access and better outreach, including outreach and dialogue with parents
 - representative service providers who speak Somali and understand the issues confronting the community
 - greater levels of trust and comfort among Somali youth
 - a multi-service environment that can address other, non-vocational barriers and issues the youth face.
- 2.** Remove the financial barriers youth face in getting things like the transportation and the clothing needed to seek employment support, do job searches, and start work.
- 3.** Increase outreach to Somali youth by existing employment agencies through strengthened partnerships, collaboration, and communication with Somali community organizations. The Toronto Training Board could help to facilitate the strengthening of these partnerships.
- 4.** Increase inter-sectoral collaboration at the government and policy levels. Use the Toronto Training Board to help facilitate these collaborative efforts.
- 5.** Provide pre-employment training and services for youth who are not yet job-ready.
- 6.** Stress high quality, on-the-job training and placement programs.
- 7.** Provide one-on-one and small group counselling and improve dialogue between Somali youth and their parents.
- 8.** Involve Somali youth in program and service design and evaluation.
- 9.** Do further research on the demographics area of this to support an overall strategy for community development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The direction for this research came from findings by the YMCA and other local agencies in North Etobicoke. The findings showed low usage of employment services by Somali youth. In 2004-05, the Toronto Training Board and the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) formed a partnership to examine the issue.

The original partnership has grown to include a number of other groups and agencies, known as the Somali Youth Employment Partnership. The groups involved are:

- Boreal Institute for Civil Society
- City of Toronto Youth Employment Partnership (YEP)
- City of Toronto Youth Employment Toronto
- Community Social Planning Council of Toronto
- MicroSkills
- Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT)
- Toronto Community Housing Corporation
- Toronto Training Board
- YMCA.

The first phase of the research was conducted by researcher Sharif Osman with a team of Somali youth researchers. They are: Zahra Siad, Ahmed Abdi, Mohamed Ahmed, Farah Abdulle, Diini Hashi, Mustafa Ali, Ahlam Ali, Mohamud Abdikarim, and Yoonis Sulieman. Remi Warner was responsible for the research and report writing in the second phase. The report was edited by Karen Lior.

The Toronto Training Board would like to thank all of those who contributed their time and energy to this research. This includes the eight Somali youth who conducted peer interviews, the staff members from the employment agencies, the members of the Somali Youth Employment Partnership and the staff and volunteers from the Somali Youth Association of Toronto. The help of Faduma Mohammed, former Executive Director of SOYAT and Amina Yassin-Omar, current Executive Director, was essential.

The Toronto Training Board thanks Service Canada (formerly Human Resources and Skills Development) and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for supporting of this partnership. The views in this document do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada or the Government of Ontario.

THE PARTNERS

The Toronto Training Board (TTB), a not-for-profit organization, is a catalyst for training solutions grounded in research and guided by multi-stakeholder perspectives. The TTB is one of 21 Local Boards in the Province of Ontario funded jointly by Human Resources and Social Development Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities. Its volunteer Board of Directors represent seven labour market partner groups:

- business
- organized labour
- educators and trainers
- Francophones
- people with disabilities
- racial and visible minorities
- women.

The Training Board forms partnerships to develop solutions to local issues. The issue of youth unemployment emerged from the Board's 2004 report, *Trends, Opportunities, and Priorities in Training in Toronto*. The Somali Youth Employment Partnership was formed to work with the Somali population in North Etobicoke.

This research is the first stage of that partnership. The second stage is to bring local stakeholders together and conduct a 'think tank'.

The Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) is a non-profit, youth-based community organization established in 1992. SOYAT works with other groups to identify and create services and initiatives that promote the successful integration of Somali youth and their families into Canadian society.

Through community mobilization and outreach, SOYAT engages youth and their families in culturally sensitive services related to: leadership, settlement, recreation, and employment support. The organization is currently working on eight projects to build capacity in the community. The Somali Youth Employment Partnership is one of those initiatives.

THE CONTEXT

About 30,000 of Canada's 120,000 Somali people live in the Dixon-Islington neighbourhood of North Etobicoke. According to Statistics Canada, Somalis represent 3% of recent immigrants. About 62% of Somali families live in poverty. The 1996 employment rate for Somali-Canadians was 23.6%, much lower than national rates.

Unemployment, gang activity, violence, and lack of opportunity are the major social problems affecting the youth of this community. In the City of Toronto, the increase in the number of higher poverty neighbourhoods has been especially acute in the inner suburbs, in the former municipalities of Scarborough, North York, Etobicoke, York and East York. The combined total of high poverty neighbourhoods rose from 15 in 1981 to 92 in 2001.¹ In North Etobicoke there has been significant growth of family poverty. The United Way and other organizations report that many newcomers live in neighbourhoods that suffer from a lack of infrastructure investment and attention.

The purpose of this study is to determine how agencies can provide more effective employment services to Somali youth in North Etobicoke. Identifying the resources that are available and deciding how to use them is the key to understanding the current and potential impact of employment service delivery to the community.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in two phases. In October of 2004, the Toronto Training Board met with the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) to discuss working in partnership on this issue. SOYAT became the lead organization. SOYAT identified a researcher from the community who trained local youth to conduct 40 peer interviews. The lead researcher, Shariff Osman, conducted interviews with local agency staff.

In April 2005, SOYAT and the Training Board determined a need for additional research. Remi Warner conducted additional interviews and a focus group to connect the issue to the larger Toronto context. The second phase of the research was completed in the fall of 2005.

In total, the research that informed this report came from:

- two research surveys, one answered by 40 Somali youth, the other by 12 agency staff from eight different employment agencies.
- three focus groups, one with Somali parents and two with Somali youth (49 youth in total)
- seven interviews with employment agency staff.

It is difficult to find accurate, recent statistical or demographic information on the Somali community in North Etobicoke. More work is needed to get a better sense of the demographics as part of an overall strategy for community development.

PART 1: Agencies & Services in North Etobicoke²

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

Funded by Service Canada, Completing The Circle helps job seekers between the ages of 16 and 29 find full-time work. Their services include job search, resume and cover letter writing, interview strategies, and self-marketing. One-to-one job search and job placement supports are also offered. Participants attend pre-employment workshops in small groups of 4 to 6, covering Canadian workplace etiquette and practices. The agency contacts employers on behalf of job seekers.

This agency is very successful in serving Somali youth, who make up 85% of its clientele. According to Manager Mary Harari,

The secret of our success is outreach ... We run major outreach programs with the Dixon Youth Neighbourhood Centre in a very persistent way..We use flyers, [Somali] newspapers, and radios ... visit recreation centres and Metro Housing Projects to entice youth with jobs and services. At the same time, we talk to the parents of the youth whenever we can ... We bring the services to the people. Both of our locations are in the middle of Somali neighbourhoods and that is very important to them.

DIXON NEIGHBOURHOOD YOUTH CENTRE

Established in 2003, the Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre serves youth between the ages of 13 and 24. It offers weekly employment counselling and help with job and co-op placement. Eighty per cent of the clients are Somali Youth. There is more than one Somali-speaking staff member. Although they have no specific programs catering to Somali youth, immigrants, or minorities, they are effective in reaching the Somali community because of their location, word of mouth, and flyers in various languages.³

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT TORONTO (YET) — CITY OF TORONTO

The City of Toronto Youth Employment program has an outreach worker who serves a huge area that includes Etobicoke, the former City of York, and North York. She provides a two-hour consultation weekly at the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT). Between 30% and 40% of her clients are Somali youth. She also provides referrals to other programs that address the “systemic and non-vocational barriers” often faced by immigrant and minority youth.⁴

REXDALE YOUTH RESOURCE CENTRE (RYRC) AND THE YMCA

Rexdale Youth Resource Centre helps Etobicoke job seekers between the ages of 15 and 30 to find and keep jobs in an atmosphere of personal growth and development.⁵ Their programs target at-risk youth in general, such as young people attempting to leave gangs. They do outreach to Somali youth through the Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre.

This partnership with the YMCA supports employment, education, health, recreation, and personal development. The centre offers YMCA newcomer services such as English-language assessment and language instruction. Employment services include job search and placement skills, employability and pre-employment training, apprenticeships, mentoring, internships, and co-op placement programs. The centre also refers out-of-school, unemployed youth to Job Connect programs outside the area.

PART 2: Agencies & Services Outside North Etobicoke

JOB CONNECT AND JOB START

Although they have no programs specifically for Somali youth, Job Start has a provincially funded Job Connect program offering employment services to unemployed, out-of-school youth between 16 and 24 years of age. Services include job placement, job search coaching, resume writing, career planning, new clothing allowance, TTC tickets, voice mail, computer and Internet use, apprenticeship, and information about how to access the hidden job market. There is one Somali-speaking staff person and the agency offers a program called Career Action for Newcomers. They do outreach to Somali youth through Somali organizations such as Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre.

CAREER EMPLOYMENT RESOURCE PROGRAM (CERP)

CERP provides employment services to youth between the ages of 16 and 30. They also serve clients in employment transition or on Employment Insurance or Social Assistance. Services include one-to-one career counselling, job search, a resume writing and interview skills workshop, clerical help to update resumes, free fax and internet, co-op placement, referrals to community organizations, information on how to access the hidden job market, a resource library, training program information, and daily job postings. They offer no targeted programming, services, or outreach.

TORONTO YOUTH JOB CORPS PROGRAM AND ST. CHRISTOPHER HOUSE

Toronto Youth Job Corps is an employment program designed to connect unemployed, out-of-school, 'at risk' youth between the ages of 16 and 29 to the workplace through employment, school, and training. The first phase of the program is called 're-placement', during which a youth becomes a paid member of a five-week community painting project. Here they get the opportunity to explore strengths and increase stability in personal life, receiving feedback from staff on how to be the type of worker they want to be. They receive a training stipend of \$250/week (based on attendance) and TTC tickets to and from the program.

The second phase of the program is called 'placement', during which they could receive a job paying up to \$24 an hour or a placement with an employer in the community tied to their interests and skills. There is ongoing support from staff to ensure the development of skills during this on-the-job training opportunity.

APPLE ONE

This is the largest privately owned employment service in North America. It focuses on helping clients find jobs and build careers. The service provides information and counselling on continuing education and starting a business. Job and volunteer training and placement services are provided, as well as a mentorship and help with writing resumes. They do not offer any targeted programming, services, or outreach, although "the agency tries to motivate [all] to join" and "outreach all the community."⁶

PART 3: How Somali Youth Find Work

The great majority of Somali youth surveyed or interviewed, (88% or 40 youth), had some employment experience, while some of those (64.4% or 29) were currently seeking work. Employment agencies did not rank high among the methods used by youth in search of work. Survey results found that youth relied first and foremost upon their friends when seeking employment, followed by relatives, with employment agencies coming third. The last resource was “other,” which included the newspaper, Internet, employment news, and school.

The reliance of Somali youth on friends and family when seeking work was confirmed in the two youth focus groups. As one participant explained in the second focus group interview, “Somali youths don’t use sources like [employment agencies]. When they are looking for jobs, they search and get it within their family and friends, and through ‘hook-ups’.”

EXTENT OF EMPLOYMENT AGENCY SERVICE USE BY SOMALI YOUTH

Of the 45 Somali youth answering the survey, some 66.6% (30) knew of an employment agency in their area. Another 17.7% (8) stated that there was not one in their area and 15.5% (7) did not know whether or not there was an employment agency in their area.

A significant 40% or 18 of those interviewed had never visited an employment agency. The other 60% (27) had visited one at least once. Nearly half (4) of the nine Somali youth in the second focus group had never used an employment agency. Of those who had visited an employment agency, only one had visited an agency in the last month. Eighteen youths or 64.2% had been to an agency in 2004, and 32.1% (9) in 2003.

Of particular significance was the fact that only 17.7% (8) of the 45 youth surveyed had ever received training from an employment agency, with the great majority (82.2%) having never participated in any training service. Moreover, only 60% (24) were even aware that employment agencies could arrange access to training and employment, while another 40% (21) were completely unaware of such services. These statistics indicate that employment services in North Etobicoke are very under-used by Somali youth.

PART 4: Why do so Few Somali Youth use Employment Services?

4.1. How agency staff see the barriers

Agency staff identified personal, cultural, institutional, and social barriers that prevent Somali youth from using employment services.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The Manager of Federal Programs at the YMCA Rexdale Youth Resource Centre attributed the under-use of his agency's services by Somali youth to "lofty expectations and perceptions that if you come to the centre you will get a job immediately." These expectations, he says, "lead to disappointment for them," and reinforce their belief that agencies are ineffective. A staff member at Dixon Youth Neighbourhood Centre said, "One of the factors that discourage Somali youth is the fact that job preparation procedures and/or job placement take a period of almost three weeks. This creates anxiety and pressure on the part of the youth, therefore, many of them drop out of the program."

FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS

Agency staff felt criminal-record holders and early school-leavers were frequently discouraged and often felt their employment prospects were minimal to nil, making job-seeking futile. "The youth with criminal records ... believe that they will never be hired by anyone," said the Manager at Completing The Circle.

The Job Developer at Completing The Circle drew further attention to the low expectations of early school leavers: "Psychologically, the mindset of the youth is that when they drop out of school they believe that they cannot accomplish anything else."

A final barrier concerned a lack of confidence to venture into the workforce. Agency staff noted, "Some of them are afraid of the new challenges of the work environment and they just need someone who can lead them through, by motivation."

LACK OF NECESSARY SKILLS, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION

Agency staff frequently mentioned a lack of the necessary "skills to get jobs" on the part of Somali youth. Responding to a question about Somali youth's perception that they can't access to "real skills training," such as electrical, auto-mechanic, or air conditioner technician, the Job Connect Manager said, "Training like this is available but there is a prerequisite. They have to have experience, worked with their hands before, have Grade 12 Diplomas [and] have dedication and motivation." Such requirements mean that many youth are not qualified.

The Manager at Completing The Circle observed that agencies such as hers are designed to serve job-ready clients. However, "many Somali youth have difficulty finding work so this concept is impractical."

SHORT-TERM EMPLOYMENT FOCUS

Agency staff said many Somali youth have only short-term job goals in mind, so they lack the initiative to build their resumes. This hampers longer-term employability. A staff person at one agency told us, "In order to be successful in your employment, you need to build up your resume. This means you have to work different jobs so you can show that in your resume. Most of the Somali youth are looking only for a particular job, and that is not logical."

UNREALISTIC EMPLOYMENT PREFERENCES

One manager said Somali youth job preferences were often unrealistic in relation to their experience and training. "They do not like factory work. In fact, they hate it. They want office work, computer work, supervising work, and they do not have the skills, experience, or Grade 10-12 diploma. In such

cases, we use patience as a tool. We let them try their luck with jobs they want, and when they find out it is impossible, then we ask them to allow us to help them with the real world.”

The same information was echoed in the focus group with Somali youth held in February 2005. The youth want office work but have very little understanding of the skills sets or education needed for office work.

PARENTS SHIELDING CHILDREN FROM THE JOB MARKET

Agency staff said that Somali parents often shield their children from the job market by providing financial support into their adult years. One staff person pointed out that “their parents shower them with all their basic needs. This is not motivating them to find work.” A staff member at the Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre said:

We know the problems of our community. For instance, we know that most of the unemployed youth who also are not going to school are living with their parents. This means they get all their daily meals plus pocket money from their parents. This is cultural, if you stay with your parents they will take care of you until you decide to leave home. For the Somali parents, it is bad parenting to harass your children, no matter how old they are, to find a job and take care of themselves. This cultural thing may take years to change, but to counter that, we go to the homes, and recreation centres to entice youth with jobs and training.

The youth research contradicted the notion that Somali youth were being shielded by their parents from the workforce. Though a majority of the Somali youth surveyed (82.2%) did indeed live at home with their families (not surprising given their average age of 19.5), the great majority of the 45 respondents (90.9%) had employment experience, with another 64.4% currently seeking employment.

The parent’s focus group, on the other hand, confirmed that many Somali parents do feel responsible for continuing to support their children into their young adult years.

SINGLE-MOTHER HOUSEHOLDS

Some agency staff believed that the high number of households led by single mothers has a negative effect on Somali youth. One problem is the lack of parental supervision. They feel:

The problems slowing down the Somali youth are that most of the households are led by single mothers (75%), so there are no fathers to play the required roles, and after a while, they will not listen to their mothers either. In addition, some young people try to break away from the family because they believe that they can integrate better without their traditional family. This creates lack of supervision and motivation on the part of the youth.

Another agency staff member was concerned about motivation. “They need to be motivated ... motivation is something that has to come from them, first.”

Lack of affordable, accessible daycare makes it hard for single mothers to find employment. Agency staff said there is pressure on Somali girls and young women to leave school or employment and help their mothers raise children.

LACK OF ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS

Agency staff said the community lacks role models and mentors. “The Somali youth of today are the first generation. There are few successful personalities in the community to look up to,” noted the Toronto Youth Job Corps Team Leader. “There are no familiar role models in our community; we have to do something about that,” agreed a Dixon staff member.

LACK OF BUSINESSES IN NORTH ETOBICOKE

North Etobicoke was designed as a residential area and there are few companies to employ youth — and even fewer Somali businesses. A TYCP Team Leader at St. Christopher House pointed out the absence of a Somali business community:

Another issue is the importance of the business people within the community. In job placement or training, business owners of any particular community play a role in hiring their youth. Successful members of the community usually implement the concept of ‘each one, teach one’, through mentoring and internships. Somalis do not have a significant business community and that affects them a lot.

RACISM AND MISTRUST OF THE SYSTEM

All of those interviewed identified racism — both real and perceived — as an important factor in alienating youth from employment services. The Youth Outreach Worker for York-Etobicoke viewed Somali youth’s employment problems as closely related to their “high dropout and exclusion rate” within education and society in general, in which racism played a role.

Others contended that “awareness of systemic racism [has] created a mistrust of the system,” which in turn has contributed to Somali youth disengagement from society and its social-employment services. An Employment Counsellor related that “some youth feel they are hassled by mall security” before they even get to the employment centre, further fuelling perceptions of discrimination.

LACK OF SOMALI SERVICE PROVIDERS

A YMCA Employment Counsellor observed that one of the problems blocking Somali youth from using their services more fully was a lack of Somali representation on staff. “Youth may feel they are not adequately represented in our services/centre,” she said, recommending “more communication with youth representative of the community.” In contrast, the staff at Completing The Circle and Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre viewed much of their success in reaching the Somali youth community as deriving from their hiring of Somali-speaking staff. These staff members have close connections with and knowledge of the communities they serve.

LACK OF SERVICES THAT ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF THE SOMALI COMMUNITY

Opinions were divided on the need for employment services to address the needs of specific ethnic communities. One manager noted, “We know that they [Somali youth] have problems. However, we cannot address their problems due to our funding constraints and program design.”

Limited budgets and a ‘one-size-fits-all’ service approach hampers outreach to Somali youth. Staff members from several agencies explained that their programs are governed by tight program guidelines and tight budgets. They are only able to offer the same interventions to all clients. “All youth, regardless of their background are the same in our situation. They need jobs and if they find work, their situation improves for sure. I don’t know any other way to improve their situation.”

A staff person from another service noted, “This agency is for everybody and we cannot concentrate on one ethnic group because there is a specific budget that limits us to specific services.” Most of the agencies in the survey mentioned the lack of stable funding and insufficient resources as factors limiting their ability to outreach to or design programs for specific populations.

Even so, these workers understand that their services may not be, in many instances, suitable for Somali youth. The fact that the services don’t match the needs of the Somali youth population contributes to the under-usage of the agencies.

LACK OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICE CO-ORDINATION

A major barrier is the lack of pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship, and employability programs. These youth may need more than help with writing resumes or a job placement. In many cases there is a need for better assessment; for workshops or programs that help with employability skills; for programs that bridge education and employment.

While such programs are missing in all areas of the city, it is true that the existing services are not equally distributed across the Greater Toronto Area. What is needed, noted the City of Toronto's Outreach Worker, is better coordination between the various agencies, the different sectors, and the labour market.

OTHER PRACTICAL BARRIERS

Agency staff felt other, practical factors reduce Somali youth employability, such as:

- lack of a Social Insurance Number
- lack of voicemail for employers and agency staff to contact the youth
- scheduling conflicts with school hours
- lack of affordable, accessible daycare.

4.2 How Somali parents view the barriers

A focus group with Somali parents was conducted in February 2005. Parents gave three main reasons for the difficulties youth face succeeding in Canada:

- the experience and perception of systemic racism and consequent mistrust of the system;
- absentee fathers and lack of role models and motivators;
- lack of education, training, and necessary skills.

The focus group also confirmed that Somali parents believe they are responsible for continuing to support their children into early adulthood.

SYSTEMIC RACISM

The parents in the focus group contended "there is prejudice everywhere in the system and that hinders [the youth's] hopes and dreams."⁷ Particularly generative of mistrust for 'the system' was the inability of internationally trained male parents to find work in Canada appropriate to their qualifications. This is demoralizing for many internationally educated and trained professionals.

ABSENCE OF MALE ROLE MODELS

The absence of male role models or authority figures in the home may be another contributing factor to the high rate of Somali youth unemployment. The Somali parents related high Somali youth unemployment to the fact that "male parents are not here, or they work night shifts as cab drivers, and their role as motivators or role models is either absent or weak."

LACK OF EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND SKILLS

The lack of role models may also contribute to the high rate of early school-leavers. The parents said that "they have no experience, no skills, and no diplomas [and] about 75% of the Somali kids are losing grades."

SUPPORTING SOMALI YOUTH INTO EARLY ADULTHOOD

Parents explained their ongoing support of their children into their early adult years along the following lines:

- It is part of our culture to maintain our kids as long as they are at home.
- If we do not give them what they want they may steal it from stores and then go to jail.
- It is to keep them away from crime. If they cannot buy what they need, they will sell drugs.

- Many of the kids have criminal records and we were made to believe that they couldn't work.
- Since they lost hope of attaining their dreams, this is one way we can boost their morale

4.3 How Somali youth view the barriers

SURVEY FINDINGS: BARRIERS IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE

The Somali youth who had never visited an employment agency were asked to rank in order of importance the most common barriers affecting their ability or willingness to use employment services. The survey results were as follows, in order of importance:

- (1) Transportation
- (2) Financial
- (3) Language
- (4) Medical
- (5) Personal mobility
- (6) Cultural
- (7) Other

The following sections discuss these and other barriers based on information gathered in the youth focus groups.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation was by far the number one barrier the youth identified. They said they needed transportation or bus tickets when looking for jobs or starting work and these are not supplied by any of the agencies. The youth noted that many of their families are on social assistance.

POOR LOCATION AND OUTREACH

Youth focus group participants saw the location of employment agencies and their level of outreach as an obstacle.

[Employment agencies and services are] not located close by Somali youths, even the services that are within Rexdale. They are usually located around business areas where business people live around ... They could change the location of the agencies. Because it seems as if they are located in the rich class areas where people already have money and don't really need employment or help from these agencies. It's not within our community areas. In our community we only see SOYAT and a few others.⁸

Participants agreed that agencies ought to be located "in the subsidized areas like Dixon, Tandridge, in the Rexdale area. You don't see that type of advertisement or those specific agencies in those areas."

Some of the youth employment programs that the focus group participants found most useful, such as Tropicana, were located outside their neighbourhoods. These services target communities such as Jane and Finch, to the exclusion of other high needs neighbourhoods. Focus group participants thought it would help a lot if they had more programs like Tropicana, COSTI and Job Connect located closer to their area.

LACK OF SOMALI SERVICE PROVIDERS

Though 'culture' did not rank high among the barriers that Somali youth identified in the research survey, they did rank 'language' as the third highest obstacle. The fact that only three of the nine agencies surveyed had Somali-speaking staff is thus a concern.

Participants at both youth focus group sessions noted that the temporary employment agencies and the youth employment services don't have many employees who can relate to the Somali youth. "It's

pretty much all white people in their three-piece suits,” one youth explained. “They should have more workers from different cultures so that they can relate to different people,” another agreed. “It would be better because they would be more understanding. If it’s just Caucasian people, if they don’t understand your background, then they can’t help you as much.”

DISCRIMINATION AT AGENCIES, IN THE WORKFORCE AND IN SOCIETY

Youth focus group participants told many stories of discrimination at the workplace, at an agency, or during the hiring process. One participant described an incident in which she and a white, non-Muslim friend were treated differently:

When it comes to the agency, I have friend, she doesn’t wear hijab or anything, she’s not even a Muslim, but me and her are registered with the same agency, and we both have the same qualifications. With these agencies, you sit at home until they call you and find you a job. She keeps getting these calls about jobs and telling me about it, while I’m not getting any calls. And I have to call them and tell them to tell me about the job, and that’s how I found it.

She also talked about another incident of discrimination on the basis of clothing, which she felt was unfair given that not all can afford to buy the clothing necessary to be considered as a client in some agencies.

“I remember one time when I was registering for an agency. First of all, you have to dress professionally. There was a man who came in and he was wearing a jersey and a hat, and the staff told him to leave ... He was African. They sent him out because they were all professional people in there, and he didn’t ‘look’ professional. They told him, you don’t qualify. Before you register with an agency you have to call for an appointment. When you come, they give you an interview themselves first, and then test your qualities.”

Many participants gave accounts of discrimination on a religious basis. Three young women had experiences like this:

I applied to Wonderland and previously, I never use to wear the hijab and skirt so I never had a problem with getting job. So they gave me a call the next day telling me about the outfits and the dress code, basically I got the job. But when she called me she was telling me that I had to wear pants and I told her that I wasn’t going to do that, that I didn’t want to wear pants for the job. So when I asked her if it was okay for me to wear a skirt, she said she would talk to the management and call me back. But she never called me back.

Another participant was discouraged by his experience of ethnic favouritism in the workplace.

In my other job, there was me and these other two girls who got the job at the same time. With my job the supervisors look at your quality, how many accounts, cancels you have or subscriptions you make. I had one of the top scores right, and these girls had less than me. But their background was Hispanic and management was of Hispanic background, so that led them to become trainers and coaches, but I was still stuck with my position.

COUNTERING THE ‘SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY’ THESIS

Youth focus group participants unanimously contested the view that single-parent families, absentee fathers, or lack of male role models were the primary cause for the lack of motivation attributed to Somali youth by many in the service sector. Countering the single-parent family thesis, one participant said:

It doesn't determine who you are just because you come from a single-parent family, or if you're living with your relatives or if you're in foster care. To say that because they come from a single-parent family, they have a lack of motivation — I think it's the opposite. The individuals who come from a single-parent family are the ones that have more motivation, because they see the hardship.

Another agreed: "I think it has nothing to do with how motivated you are just from the family or race you're from. If you're motivated you're motivated, if you're not, you're not." Other participants noted that views of single parent families were "stigmatizing" and "generalizations."

Ultimately, many felt, it was the recurring experience of racism, prejudice and discrimination that most affected Somali youth alienation and disaffection with the system:

"When they think that the Somali youth is not as motivated or not as brilliant or whatever it's because when you have other people coming in at the same time, and you're constantly seeing that they are getting higher than you, when you are working just as hard. You tend to lose your motivation and your enthusiasm of getting a job."

VIEW OF AGENCIES AS INEFFECTIVE

Many of the youth in the focus groups had negative views of employment agencies. However, the peer research survey, which consisted of a larger sample of Somali youth, revealed that a majority (84% or 37 respondents) thought employment agency services could help them. Most of the youth (75.5% or 34 respondents) nevertheless also felt that employment agencies could improve the quality and number of services that they provide.

POOR JOB SELECTION

One of the reasons Somali youth gave for their low usage of employment agencies was the poor job selection of available jobs. Participants did not differentiate much in this respect between the not-for-profit and the private employment services. One participant said, "When I was young I used the agency but that wasn't for me because they were paying less and it wasn't good for my time. Plus, they don't give the jobs that you wanted in the first place, they give you whatever jobs they have available ... and they give you the jobs that nobody wants to work for and when you go there they give you positions that are hard, and those companies have a hard time getting people to work for them."

Many Somali youth want office work and are disappointed by the jobs available. Somali youth dislike factory work and prefer clerical work:

Agencies are only good if you desperately need a job, and will go for anything, mainly because the kinds of employment readily available are frequently the lowest paying and hardest working. I realized the jobs that pay \$7.15/hour are the jobs that actually require you to do more work. Retail, factory, the ones that require you to be standing and walking around and get you more tired at the end of the day pay the minimum wage.

WAGE SIPHONING BY PRIVATE AGENCIES

Somali youth focus group participants also felt that the private employment agencies benefited unduly from their labours in siphoning off a portion of their wages for the agency. This discouraged many from seeking their services, and encouraged them to try and find employment on their own. They said, "I don't like the agency because they take from you whatever you got. It's like if you make 10 dollars an hour, they take two dollars off, so then you're making eight dollars an hour." Another participant said, "The position I work for right now pays thirteen dollars an hour, but I'm getting 10 dollars an hour and the agency gets the three dollars."

UNCARING STAFF AND LACK OF INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION

Participants in the focus groups session believed that “People do not care about you” in the employment sector service, and that the latter are only “looking after their own interests [and being] more loyal to the employers.”

They highlighted the lack of individual attention and one-on-one counselling. “They give you books and papers where you read on your own, like, *How to Conduct a Good Interview*, but there are no one-on-one counsellors.” One youth felt one-on-one counselling would help “because it would give you help face-to-face, instead of reading it on a paper on our own. With one-on-one, it focuses more on your own special needs as opposed to generalizing what to do, like focusing on your goals, and what you have planned five years from now.”

One-on-one counselling was especially important for Somali youth who may not be as comfortable or familiar with public services. “Let’s say your resume is not as great as everyone else’s, you save yourself the embarrassment, because like you wouldn’t feel comfortable asking questions in front of everyone else. But with one-on-one, you could tell your counsellor what you’re having problems with and get help.”

PART 5: Best Practices and Strategies

TRANSPORTATION SUPPORT, STIPENDS, AND ADVANCE PAY

Transportation was the number one obstacle for Somali youth who want to use employment agencies. Outreach incentives such as offering bus tickets to and from appointments were recommended as an important means of tackling mobility barriers.

Youth focus group participants commended the practices of some employment service agencies⁹ of providing youth with an advance on their first pay cheque, to help with job preparation and transportation.

Another great thing that [COSTI, Tropicana and sometimes Job Connect] do is like for some of the youth that don't have a lot of start-up money, they give you your transportation money for the first three weeks and so you actually receive your first paycheck. And when you have to go into an interview or anything like that, they actually give you like \$100 to buy your dress pants, shirt and your dress shoes. And they take a small bit from your paycheck. So that's what they do. So they kind of get you ready for that, dressing you up, giving you transportation, as well as sitting down with you and giving you interview preparation and so on.

OUTREACH TO SOMALI YOUTH

Outreach initiatives that target Somali youth were deemed essential by agency staff. Completing The Circle, which had the highest Somali youth clientele (85-90%) of all the agencies surveyed, attributed much of their organization's success to their targeted and persistent outreach initiatives in the Dixon neighbourhood.

Our program is just one year old but in our short period of existence we accomplished a lot ... The secret of our success is outreach ... We go to the homes, and recreation centres to entice youth with jobs and training ... We undertake major outreach programs with the Dixon Neighbourhood in a very persistent way ... Our outreach program is very strong and we use flyers, (Somali) newspapers, and radios. We visit recreation centres and Metro Housing Projects. At the same time, we talk to the parents of the youth whenever we can ...

The manager at the YMCA Rexdale Youth Resource Centre also saw outreach as critical to attracting more Somali youth to his services, although their budget limits them to specific services. Other agency staff said that targeted outreach, hosting special events in the community, and organizing job fairs were good means of attracting youth to employment services.

LOCATING AGENCIES IN SOMALI NEIGHBOURHOODS

Agency staff felt it was crucial to locate employment agencies and services in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of Somali-Canadians. "One of the major factors that contribute to our success," said the Manager of Completing The Circle, "is that we brought the services to the people. Both of our locations are in the middle of Somali neighbourhoods, and that is very important to them."

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES DESIGNED FOR SOMALI YOUTH

Agency staff, Somali youth and parents all expressed the need for programs and services designed for Somali youth rather than a generic youth program. Parents insisted, "We are a new community and we cannot compete with other stable communities, therefore we need special programs to be designed for our kids ... we do not want to be statistics but we need something to be done for us and for our children."

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES WITHIN SOMALI COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Agency staff, parents, and youth all felt that an employment service administered by, and located within, a Somali community organization would greatly enhance Somali youth use of employment services. A YMCA staff member commented, “When a community has problems like these and lacks the basic systems that would assist normal growth and development, then the solution for such a community is to have a special [community-specific] employment agency.”

Somali parents saw that Somali community organizations could play a leadership role because of their knowledge of the community. “It is up to the community organizations to find a way because they have experience in such situations.”

Youth supported the idea of expanding employment services at SOYAT. One explained:

I think if SOYAT had some certified full-time counsellors, then this place would be packed because everyone would know about it. Everybody living around here knows what goes on here and they attend any events we host...so I think it would be beneficial because in the Somali community, everyone knows everyone and is related to each other somehow. So if there were even one Somali representation, then that one person would be able to bring in a lot of youths just counting the people that one person would know. And [SOYAT] is somewhere the Somali youths already know about.

Locating employment services at SOYAT could resolve some of the youth’s mobility and transportation issues.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES AND SOMALI COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Closer collaboration among employment service providers and Somali community organizations is critical. The important Somali community organizations identified are:

- Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT)
- Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre
- Dixon Community Services
- Horn of Africa
- Somali Association of Canada.

The Somali youth defined three steps needed to improve the usage of services:

- extreme outreach
- getting to know the community
- developing a relationship with the community.

Following these steps could help to dispel some of the negative perceptions voiced by employment agency staff, creating a better relationship with youth and the community as a whole. The agencies might invite Somali youth workers to meetings or hold workshops in the Somali youth centres. Partnerships in service provision, advocacy, and community development are essential ingredients for success.

INTER-SECTORAL CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION

There is a discrepancy for Somali youth between the education they have received and type of employment they seek. Both agency workers and community representatives want government and public sector agencies to avoid working at cross-purposes and to achieve better results. This would lead to more integrated, holistic public policy. The community needs cross-sectoral cooperation, communication, and a greater integration of services to forge solutions to youth problems.

YOUTH INPUT AND EVALUATION

Consultation with the youth is an important ingredient in gaining their respect and trust. One youth said, “I think it’s just the fact that we don’t get a chance to say what is on our minds.” Youth must be encouraged to get together with the employment agency staff and let them know what changes they want to see happen.

ENGAGING AND INCLUDING SOMALI PARENTS

Engaging Somali parents in an effort to address youth unemployment problems is another important strategy. Service providers felt that there were cultural issues that “may take years to change.” But they also acknowledged that going to homes and recreation centres to attract youth to jobs and training would give them an opportunity to talk to parents at same time.

REPRESENTATIVE SERVICE PROVIDERS

There is certainly a co-relation between agencies with Somali speaking staff and those with the highest Somali youth clientele. Agencies with Somali staff were acknowledged as having a special understanding of Somali culture and issues. “Sometimes ... services are personalized as a Somali working for a Somali, and many times, our staff goes to the extra mile to convince these youngsters to trust us,” said one agency staff member.

Youth focus group participants felt it was important that service providers reflect the community they serve. Cultural and linguistic competence — the ability to speak the language and understand the issues Somali youth face — was seen as a critical factor in raising levels of trust.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING: HELPING CLIENTS WHO ARE NOT ‘JOB-READY’

Pre-employment training programs are essential in making employment services relevant to and effective for Somali youth. Programs need to focus on employability, not just employment placement. Assessment, referral, and case management are all necessary components of a youth employment service. The worker ought to be able to work with someone until they are engaged in employment, training, or an educational program.

Programs with the prerequisite that the client be ‘job-ready’ are not practical for many youth in this community. This is particularly important in the case of Somali youth who have criminal records or who have dropped out of school, since they are often discouraged about their employment prospects.

A more successful approach is to prepare the youth and then look for appropriate jobs. Such best practices help explain why Completing The Circle has a “retention rate with the Somali youth [of] 90%. There is no other organization that has secured this kind of achievement,” said its Manager.

The employment programs that received the most praise by the youth featured pre-employment training services. Organizations such as COSTI, Tropicana and Job Start that “help you with the interview, resume writing, and writing the cover letter” were cited. Simply directing youth to agency books on how to write a good resume or conduct a good interview was not seen as enough for youth who need more personal attention.

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS AND SUBSIDIZED PLACEMENTS

Somali youth saw programs like those offered by COSTI, Tropicana, and Job Connect as useful and relevant to long term job aspirations and career goals.

Job Connect actually had this program where they place you with an organization for three months, and if the company likes you, then that company will hire you to work for them. So that is how I came about working here [at SOYAT]. I did the program with Job Connect [and] I stayed for a few months, until they hired me.”

What they do is, you actually register with them and find yourself a placement, and after that once you find a placement, that organization or company doesn't pay for the first three months. And if they like your work ethics, they take you over afterwards ... if that person is hard working and working for free for the first three months, then you're able to give them a chance ... if they don't meet your company standards then you [can] let them go.

Offering youth rapid placement in potentially upwardly mobile job positions helps to restore their trust in the system:

This gives them a chance for employers see them for their work ethics instead of experience or education. They're not trying to make money off of you. They give you money when you need so that you can help yourself in the long run. It's not just entry level positions that they only offer you. You actually get good positions. They give jobs like reception, office duty and other jobs that you really can't get without experience. The pay might start off low, but it will help you out in the end. We'd like to see more of these kinds of programs.

Making such programs more available in North Etobicoke on a full-year basis could do a lot to solve youth unemployment problems.

ONE-ON-ONE COUNSELLING

Youth stressed the importance of one-on-one employment counselling. Individualized attention could increase trust and build confidence in many for whom using an employment service is a new experience.

Focus group participants all found the weekly employment counselling services available at SOYAT through the City of Toronto to be most helpful and fruitful. "She actually helped me with my resume and I sent it through six different places, and I got call six calls back. She's like a big sister. She gets the job done and at the same time she doesn't make you feel less of anything."

MULTI-SERVICE PROVISION: ADDRESSING NON-VOCATIONAL BARRIERS

The ability to offer youth a range of services beyond employment or job placement is one of the best ways to encourage youth to use employment services. Addressing non-vocational barriers like housing and mental health, particularly when working with the employment needs of highly marginalized youth, requires multiple services with a community development and advocacy approach. This makes it more possible to address systemic discrimination, decrease youth alienation from the system, help them deal with racism, and restore faith in service providers.

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Mary Harari, Manager
Mohamud Mohamud, Job Developer
Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre
Abdinassir Haginur, Job Developer
Mokhtar Ykhlef
Youth Employment Toronto (YET) — City of Toronto
Lisa King, Outreach Worker
Rexdale Youth Resource Centre
Alex Cocco, Manager
Job Start (Job Connect Program)
Career Employment Resource Centre
Toronto Youth Job Corp Program (TYCP, St. Christopher House)
Apple One

INTERVIEWS

Mary Harari, Completing the Circle
Alex Cocco, YMCA Rexdale Youth Resource Centre
Lisa King, City of Toronto
Mohamud Mohamud, Completing the Circle
Mokhtar Ykhlef, Dixon Neighbourhood Centre
Gillian Watson, Toronto Youth Job Corp Program
Mishele Ecker, YMCA Rexdale Youth Resource Centre
Gus Van Berkel, Job Start
Nadia Bissasor, The Career Foundation
Amina Yassin-Omar, SOYAT

SOMALI YOUTH PEER INTERVIEWERS

Zahra Siad, Ahmed Abdi, Mohamed Ahmed, Farah Abdulle, Diini Hashi, Mustafa Ali, Ahlam Ali, Mohamud Abdikarim, and Yoonis Sulieman

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- 3 Staff members, Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre
- 4 City of Toronto Youth Outreach Worker
- 5 www.rexdaleyouth.org
- 6 Resource Specialist, Apple One
- 7 All quotations in this section of the report are from parent focus group participants.
- 8 All footnotes in this part of the report are from youth focus group participants.

9 COSTI — an organization whose objective “is to assist both newly arrived and settled immigrants to participate fully in Canada by helping them with employment and settlement services” — offers its services at the Caledonia Employment Centre and the Vaughan Employment Centre. (http://www.costi.org/abtcosti/centre_cal_employ.htm). Other agencies offering stipends or transportation are Toronto Youth Job Corp Program and some Job Connect agencies.