

Supporting Newcomer Young Adult Employment in the Food and Beverage Sector



Background

Canada's food and beverage sector has been struggling with high staff turnover and vacancy rates. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic increased these challenges. The job vacancy rate in the accommodation and food services sector across Canada increased from 4.4% at the start of 2020 to 11.9% by the beginning of 2022.¹ In December 2023, Alberta's food and beverage sector had the highest job vacancy rate in the province at 8.3%.²

Increasing the employment and retention of newcomer young adults is one way to decrease the vacancy rate in Alberta's food and beverage sector. Newcomer young adults are 18 to 29 years old and arrived in Canada within the past five years. In 2020, the unemployment rate for this group was 19.8%.³

Reducing the barriers that newcomer young adults face when entering the food and beverage sector can:

- Address the challenges that food and beverage operators experience.
- Enable newcomer young adult employees to thrive.

Having more workplaces in the sector adopt promising recruitment and retention practices can help improve the overall health and well-being of newcomer young adults.

PolicyWise for Children & Families compiled evidence and identified promising practices to support the sustainable hiring and retention of newcomer young adults in Alberta's food and beverage sector. We reviewed academic and non-academic documents, conducted thought leader and key stakeholder interviews, and met with our Community Working Group and Project Advisory Group members.

In this research summary, we outline:

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Barriers experienced by newcomer young adults

We found that newcomer young adults experience unique barriers entering, staying, and thriving in the food and beverage sector.

Barriers to entering the sector

New Opportunity Youth

- Insufficient opportunities to practice English before entering the food and beverage sector.⁴
- Lack of familiarity with the hiring process and how to find job openings.⁵
- Limited experience with resume writing and interviewing.
- Insufficient recognition for transferable skills gained before arriving in Canada.⁴
- Lack of recognition for training received in previous food and beverage jobs.
- Perceptions that jobs are entry-level with little opportunity for advancement.⁶
- Cost of pre-requisite certifications such as food safety and pro-serve.

Employers

- Inconsistent updates on the hiring process.
- Insufficient interview feedback to improve participation in future recruitment activities.

Barriers to staying in the sector

- Lack of familiarity with the workplace culture and food and beverage sector expectations.³
- Challenging working conditions like long hours, fast pace, and high-performance standards.
- Harassment, bullying, harsh criticism, and public humiliation.
- Unawareness of rights, such as worker rights, and how to exercise them.
- Difficulty coordinating shift schedules to accommodate family and community responsibilities, employment in multiple jobs, and English classes.⁵
- Seasonal and precarious nature of employment.⁷

Barriers to thriving in the sector

- Insufficient opportunities for professional growth and career advancement.
- Low starting wages and little opportunity for wage increases.⁸
- Fear that declining requests, like working overtime or taking extra shifts, will negatively impact their employment.
- Difficulty accessing and navigating community, health, and social supports.⁴
- Insufficient opportunities for cultural and religious expression.



Guiding principles for action

We identified five action-oriented principles and grounded them with promising practices. These principles are described below and are grounded in these principles. Stakeholders can use these principles when planning, implementing, and evaluating collaborative action that prioritizes the well-being and dignity of project stakeholders and their communities.

Principle 1

Use a person-centered approach

Focus on the individual's unique needs, preferences, and experiences. By remaining flexible and adaptable to an individual's changing needs and circumstances, employers and agencies can best support newcomer young adults to contribute, learn, and grow.

Principle 2

Ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion

Create fair and respectful environments. By celebrating diversity, employers and community agencies can best support newcomer young adults in feeling valued, respected, and empowered to participate and contribute. Examples include breaking down power imbalances, systemic barriers, and biases.

Employing these principles is easier when we recognize the strengths of each stakeholder group. By acknowledging and valuing their unique contributions, we can build trust and create a solid foundation for taking relevant, effective, and sustainable action.

Principle 3

Strengthen community engagement

Foster meaningful connections with people, groups, and organizations. By hearing and valuing diverse perspectives, employers and agencies can best ensure that they incorporate newcomer young adult voices and perspectives into the decisions that impact their lives.

Principle 4

Strengthen cross-sector collaboration

Bring organizations and community groups together to achieve shared goals. By sharing unique sector strengths, perspectives, resources, and expertise, new ways to solve tough challenges can be developed. This can lead to better community outcomes.

Principle 5

Foster accessible communication

Ensure that information is easy to understand and available to everyone. By making information available to everyone, regardless of their language, abilities, or circumstances, people can access the information they need to fully take part in conversations and activities, including decision-making processes.

We highlight the identified strengths for each stakeholder group on the next page.

Stakeholder Strengths

Newcomer young adults

- Are resilient.
- Are motivated to adapt to the local culture.
- Are interested in learning and building diverse skills.
- Are receptive to feedback and want to improve.
- Hold important, supportive roles in their families and communities.

Food and beverage operators

- Provide opportunities to develop interpersonal and technical skills.
- Provide jobs to people with diverse skills and experiences.
- Prioritize understanding the goals and needs of their staff.
- Aim to make employment a positive experience.

Social and community support agencies

- Prepare newcomer young adults to enter the Canadian workplace.
- Support newcomer young adults in building technical skills for food and beverage jobs.
- Support newcomer young adults in the recruitment process.
- Provide newcomer young adults with access to social, health, financial, and legal supports.
- Use a person-centred approach that is trauma-informed, holistic, culturally competent, and strengths-based.



Five areas of action

We identified five interconnected areas of action to address the barriers newcomer young adults experience when trying to obtain meaningful employment in the food and beverage sector. Each area of action has associated outcomes and promising practices. Because the areas of action are linked, acting on one area may impact the outcomes described for other areas.

The outcomes may be experienced by more employee groups than just newcomer young adults, and the recommended solutions can be implemented by food and beverage operators, community support agencies, or newcomer community groups.

Depending on the local context, some solutions require development, while others would need to be scaled and spread to become more available.



Area of action 1

Develop a supportive workplace culture

This area of action involves promoting cultural competency, fostering an inclusive mindset, building supportive leaders, and creating community connections. Developing this culture can create a space where all employees feel valued, respected, and included.

Acting in this area can:

- Improve the capacity of food and beverage workplaces to support employees' mental health.
- Ensure that employees are aware of and can access appropriate community supports.
- Improve employee morale and motivation.
- Improve employee loyalty and retention.
- Attract more job applicants.
- Enhance customer service.

Promising practices:

- Participate in training and develop policies on equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Build the leadership skills of supervisors and managers to provide mentorship to staff.
- Develop stronger partnerships with social, health, and community support organizations.
- Build flexibility into shift scheduling to accommodate competing pressures of staff.
- Share good news stories about newcomer young adults in the sector.

Area of action 2

Prepare newcomer young adults for employment in the food and beverage sector

This area of action involves preparing newcomer young adults through training, gaining practical experience, building job application skills, and connecting with peers. Preparing newcomer young adults for employment in the food and beverage sector can increase their workplace participation and help them succeed.



Acting in this area can:

- Improve the success of newcomer young adults in securing food and beverage sector employment.
- Provide newcomer young adults with interpersonal skills to help them develop co-worker relationships.
- Equip newcomer young adults with the essential technical skills needed for succeeding in the food and beverage sector.
- Ensure that newcomer young adults can advocate for themselves.
- Improve employee loyalty and retention.

Promising practices:

- Provide orientation to workplace expectations, language, and culture.
- Give an orientation on worker rights and how to exercise them.
- Make training available in technical skills required in the food and beverage sector.
- Offer skill building in resume development and interview participation.
- Hold and take part in job fairs.
- Connect newcomers to peers with food and beverage sector experience for support and guidance.
- Provide short-term and volunteer opportunities to gain experience and references.

Area of action 3

Implement thoughtful and inclusive recruitment practices

This area of action involves making connections with newcomer communities, ensuring recruitment activities are accessible, and providing newcomer young adults with interview feedback. Implementing thoughtful and inclusive recruitment practices can ensure that newcomer young adults are aware of job opportunities in the sector, understand the job requirements, and learn and improve on future job applications.



Acting in this area can:

- Improve understanding of newcomer young adult needs, barriers, and interests in the food and beverage sector.
- Attract more job applicants.
- Improve the success of newcomer young adults in securing food and beverage sector employment.
- Ensure newcomers learn from the recruitment process to improve their future job applications.

Promising practices:

- Engage with newcomer communities and their community organizations.
- Promote job opportunities through channels accessible to newcomer communities.
- Use plain language when communicating about job and career opportunities in the food and beverage sector.
- Develop a standard recruitment approach with clear, consistent steps and timelines.
- Provide timely updates and feedback to candidates throughout the recruitment process.

Area of action 4

Support professional development and career advancement

This area of action involves establishing clear career advancement pathways, providing access to professional development opportunities, and reducing financial barriers for development activities. Investing in employee development can help retain and support newcomer young adults in the food and beverage sector.



Acting in this area can:

- Enhance positive perceptions of employment in food and beverage workplaces.
- Equip newcomers with the skills needed for career advancement in the food and beverage sector.
- Increase the capacity of food and beverage workplaces to fill shifts by cross-training employees.
- Increase employee loyalty and retention.
- Attract more job applicants.

Promising practices:

- Communicate opportunities for growth and career advancement in the food and beverage sector.
- Develop certificate opportunities for education and training that are essential to food and beverage employment.
- Provide guidance on education enrollment processes, learning supports, and scholarships.
- Provide newcomer young adults opportunities to gain experience and learn skills in different food and beverage roles.
- Create training opportunities for newcomer young adults to gain practical experience.
- Ease financial barriers by supporting training through bursaries or scholarships.

Area of action 5

Improve access to health, social, and community supports

This area of action involves improving food and beverage workplace connections to community support agencies, creating opportunities for newcomer young adults to learn from others with similar experiences, and ensuring employees and their families are aware of available community supports. Improving access to community supports can help relieve the pressures of balancing personal, family, and community responsibilities.

Acting in this area can:

- Ensure that employees are aware of and can access appropriate community supports.
- Improve the health and well-being of newcomer young adults and their families.
- Foster newcomer young adult connections to the community.
- Enhance positive perceptions of employment in food and beverage workplaces.
- Increase employee loyalty and retention.
- Attract more job applicants.

Promising practices:

- Build partnerships between food and beverage operators and health, social, and community supports.
- Embed access to health, social, and community supports within the food and beverage workplace.
- Provide access to health, social, and community supports in more languages.
- Create opportunities for newcomer young adults to access peer support.
- Extend health, social, and community support access to family members of newcomer young adults.
- Provide opportunities for newcomer young adults to connect to the community, such as cultural events and youth programs.



References

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PolicyWise for Children & Families is a non-profit organization that supports the development of policies, programs, and services to benefit the well-being of Albertans. We conduct research, evaluation, and data analyses to ensure children, youth, and families can thrive.

To connect with us about this summary report, contact the project team at info@policywise.com.

The Government of Alberta is working in partnership with the Government of Canada to provide employment support programs and services.

