

Transportation and child care: Key barriers to work in Kawartha Lakes ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Until his work accident, 'Tom' had always had regular employment. Deemed medically unfit to work by a team of doctors, and denied WSIB benefits, Tom had to sell his possessions and eventually the family vehicle to feed his family.

He had to move from Lindsay to a rural part of the city in search of less expensive rent. Finally cleared to return to work, Tom faced what employment professionals call a 'barrier' to work.

"The (time off from the) accident had used up every available dollar I could borrow from friends and family. I had already sold anything of value. I needed a car to get a job. And I needed a job to get a car. I was in this feedback loop of failure," he says.

Experts identify many barriers to work, among them: a lack of childcare, a lack of education or training, a criminal record, domestic violence, age, gaps in employment history, a sick family member, and physical or mental health issues among them. To be clear, these are not excuses used by people who don't want to work: These are barriers that are preventing someone who wants to work from entering or re-entering the workforce.

According to Brenda Roxburgh, executive director of VCCS, "transportation is by far the biggest barrier that we see in the City of Kawartha Lakes."

"There are jobs in Lindsay that qualified people from other parts of the city can't get to reliably. There are jobs in Fenelon Falls and Bobcaygeon that cannot be filled by people in Lindsay. "It is a conversation we have with the City at every opportunity we have," continues Roxburgh.

A lack of affordable or flexible childcare is another employment barrier in the CKL that affects primarily women's ability to re-enter the workforce. According to Roxburgh, an extended-hours child care program was investigated years ago when there were more factory jobs (and resultant shift-work) in Lindsay but the issue has not been recently pursued.

The affordable childcare introduced in Quebec 20 years ago has seen employment participation of women aged 22-44 grow to 87 per cent (compared to a 91 per cent rate for men nationally), the highest level in the world and comparable to Nordic country rates, with fertility rates rising as well. In a March 2018 speech, Stephen Polatz, governor of the Bank of Canada said, "if we could simply bring the participation rate of prime-age women in the rest of Canada up to the level in Quebec, we could add almost 300,000 people to our country's workforce."

Training and education are also areas of concern here in Kawartha Lakes. One third of VCCS' clients have a high school diploma or less, which is a lower level of education than provincial averages. However, a survey undertaken by VCCS of the tourism and tourism-related

employers in the City showed an overwhelming 'skill gap' in soft skills (showing up regularly and on-time, communication, etc.)

Some of these barriers to work involve complex issues or policy solutions that are beyond the municipal level, but the largest barrier — transportation — is firmly within the City's responsibilities. Says Roxburgh, "we need to talk about, at a minimum, a regularly scheduled transportation service between the three largest economic centres in the city: Lindsay, Bobcaygeon and Fenelon Falls."

"We also need to look at the scheduling of Lindsay Transit. If someone lives on St. David Street in Lindsay for example and has a job at Armada, that can be challenging to arrange. Add a child that needs to be dropped off in that mix (assuming an affordable day care spot can be found) and transportation becomes a huge issue and a significant barrier" to re-entering the workforce.

Roxburgh points out "that in a rural setting, you have to problem solve around the expectation that government isn't going to fix it." But there are things a local government could do to help. For Tom to get back to work, it took a few months to find a job that made a ride-share possible. That is consistent with VCCS' experiences.

"We find that if a client can find a way to work for the first week, ride-share opportunities with co-workers often become possible," adds Roxburgh. In the absence of a rural transit system, "perhaps the City (with its staff and website infrastructure), could help with creating a formalized, local rideshare where individuals could work out rides" themselves.

Clearly something has to be done. We have people like Tom, who want to work and forever leave social assistance. And Roxburgh states that "it is a myth that there aren't any jobs. On any given day we have 20 jobs on the VCCS board."

What we are lacking is any municipal strategy and policy to put those two needs together and form a solution to transportation, the biggest barrier to work in the City of Kawartha Lakes.

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