

## Site Visit #2 Report: PLEA, OnyxWorks

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### This Report

The second visits with the “Rebuilding Lives” projects were intended to deepen the evaluation team’s understanding of each project. Through conversations with staff, key stakeholders and project participants, the team was looking to learn more about how projects have evolved (since our first site visits in 2017), and the positive impacts they have had or to which they have contributed. This report summarizes what was shared during the visit.

### Site Visit Activities

Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the second site visits to the “Rebuilding Lives” projects were conducted virtually, and activities were confined to videoconference interview sessions with staff members, key informants, and project participants.

The virtual site visit with PLEA took place over four days in September 2020 and included the following interview sessions:

- **Staff meeting** – a 2-hour conversation with the following personnel from PLEA:
  - Executive Director;
  - Senior Program Director, *Youth Justice Services*;
  - *Onyx* and *Children of the Street* Program Manager;
  - *OnyxWorks* Program Manager;
  - *Children of the Street* Program Facilitator (former *OnyxWorks* Coordinator);
  - *OnyxWorks* Coordinator; and
  - Three *Onyx* Youth Development Workers.
- **Key informant interviews** – three 30-45-minute conversations with:
  - Social Worker with the Ministry of Children and Family Development; and
  - Two employer-mentors (interviewed separately).
- **Program participant interview**– one 30-minute conversation with a current program participant.

**Note:** In addition to the input provided by participants in the staff session (listed above), we also received written comments on the question guide topics from: the Manager of Communications and Development at PLEA; and a former *OnyxWorks* Coordinator / *Onyx* Youth Development Worker. An interview with a former program participant was tentatively scheduled, but did not take place.

## Findings

### Description of 'OnyxWorks'

*OnyxWorks* is a youth employment and mentorship program for young people aged 13-18. From the outset of the Foundation's grant, the program has been well-defined, with a clear purpose and scope, and clearly articulated goals and objectives. Staff have always taken a client-centred approach to delivering the program, ensuring that participants receive flexible and individualized support. Further, *OnyxWorks* is integrated with other services offered by PLEA to young people; indeed, it was developed explicitly to fill a gap in work experience programming for vulnerable youth in the lower mainland of British Columbia.

The second site visit with PLEA allowed us to explore *OnyxWorks* in finer detail, including the nuances of program delivery and the key attributes of the program's success. Hence, this description of the program focuses not simply on *what* PLEA staff do within *OnyxWorks*, but *how* they do it.

#### The 'OnyxWorks' Support Team

Young people participating in *OnyxWorks* are supported by a team of caring adults that include:

- An *Onyx* Youth Development Worker;
- The *OnyxWorks* Coordinator; and
- An 'employer-mentor.'

We heard that the relationships between the youth and these three adults are key to a positive employment placement experience. In addition, the success of the program relies to a considerable extent on close collaboration between the *Onyx* Worker and *OnyxWorks* Coordinator, as well as on the preparation and ongoing support provided to the employer-mentor by the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator. There is an emphasis on relationship-building to facilitate a placement experience that is successful for the youth and for the employer-mentor.

#### Referrals

Youth who are referred to *Onyx* program (and potentially thereafter to *OnyxWorks*) come from a variety of backgrounds and living situations. Once in the *Onyx* program, a youth may be identified as someone who would benefit from a work placement and would be referred to *OnyxWorks* program by their *Onyx* Worker.

The MCFD social worker we interviewed described how she works to support appropriate referrals to the *Onyx* program, ensuring that youth are ready to participate and/or that program staff are informed of any circumstances that may have to be taken into consideration to support each youth's successful participation.

## Identifying a Suitable Work Placement and Employer-Mentor

When a young person is referred to *OnyxWorks*, the program Coordinator engages them in a conversation (or conversations) about the type of work they are interested in pursuing through the program, and then works with the young person to find a suitable placement. According to the program participant we met with, “[The Coordinator] was really informative. We met for coffee and she explained everything. Then we worked together to find me a job.”

A critical piece of the program is matching the youth with an appropriate employer-mentor. The *OnyxWorks* Coordinator may match the youth with an employer-mentor who is already connected to the program, or, if none of the existing employer-mentors are suitable, the Coordinator will seek to engage a new employer-mentor who better suits the youth’s preferences and circumstances:

“I’ll do employer outreach. [...] I will look at the establishment and environment, and determine if it will be able to support that youth specifically.”

We heard from the key informants we spoke with, as well as staff, that this focus on the participants’ particular employment interests sets *OnyxWorks* apart from other youth work experience schemes, which tend to be affiliated with a specific sector of the job market.

Staff described a number of general considerations with regard to identifying appropriate employer-mentors, including:

- **Female business owners** – for youth who identify as female, the Coordinator will make a concerted effort to find female employer-mentors. This is seen to support the youths’ sense of safety as well as to provide them with a role model: “There is some level of comfort there [...] and it can be inspiring for these young women to work with female business owners.”
- **Community links** – one staff member noted that when they are doing “employer-mentor outreach” they aim to find potential employers from small local businesses “so the youth can have that connection in their community, close to their home.”
- **Flexibility and commitment** – we heard that employer-mentors need to be able to take a flexible approach with the youth in *OnyxWorks* and be willing to work through any issues that may arise during the work placement. This calls for a considerable degree of commitment from the employer-mentors to the goals and philosophy of the program, and to the young people who are placed with them.

Of note, both of the employer-mentors we spoke with remarked that they were attracted to *OnyxWorks* at least in part because of the positive contribution they are able to make to the life of individual youth and to the community in general. One explained that, “Being part of the program [...] just seemed like a good thing to do.” The other highlighted the alignment with their values as a business owner: “I try to model my business in a more inclusive way. Here we’re working to create a safer space for everyone.”

## Ongoing Role of the 'OnyxWorks' Coordinator

Throughout the 10-week work placement, the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator provides ongoing support to the youth and the employer-mentor. Regular check-ins with both parties are built into the formal structure of the program; however, communication and assistance are also available whenever needed, with any matter that may arise. This was described as “crucial” to the success of the program.

We heard examples of the Coordinator providing practical support to the youth participants, such as getting them appropriate work clothing, as well as socio-emotional guidance:

“It’s all about untangling the youth’s fear. Getting a job – as a 16-year old, it’s quite terrifying. With *OnyxWorks*, you have [the Coordinator] guiding you through it.”

One of the employer-mentors we spoke with noted the high level of support that youth participants receive from the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator:

“I feel like the youth have a lot of great support from the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator. We see [the Coordinator] checking in with the youth. They make sure [the youth] have everything they need.”

The Coordinator is also a vital resource for the employer-mentor, working with them proactively to address any challenges: “If the employer is having a rough day, [the Coordinator] can go in and meet with them.”

## The Employer-Mentor

As stated above, the employer-mentor plays a crucial role in supporting the young person through their work placement and helping to ensure that it is a successful and positive experience. PLEA staff emphasized the importance of the relationship between an *OnyxWorks* participant and their employer-mentor. In conversation with staff we heard that the youth participants “see [their employer-mentor] not just as an employer, but as someone who really cares for them.” This connection is of immense value, especially when the young person has had little or no experience of healthy and trusting relationships with adults in their life:

“When the young person realizes that [the employer-mentor] actually cares [...] that connectivity, that relationship is the crucial piece. It goes well beyond the work placement. [The youth] see that there are people out there who are willing to help them.”

The *OnyxWorks* participant we spoke with corroborated this perspective, noting that their employer-mentor:

“[...] is one of my favourite people to work with. He’s really informative, and he’s so nice. I used to feel scared to ask questions because I might seem stupid, but he makes me not nervous to ask questions.”

The employer-mentors we spoke with touched on aspects of their experience of the program, including the benefits of participation as business owners. One of the most significant of these is the wage subsidy provided by PLEA, which is clearly an effective incentive for business owners to participate:

“Having the youth’s position funded was huge. [...] It’s a great way of having an extra person on staff. [...] It was a real benefit to us.”

The structure of the program, with its focus on finding work placements with local small businesses, appears to facilitate mutual benefits for employer-mentors and youth. For instance, one employer-mentor observed that their workplace (a restaurant) offers a suitable environment for a young person in their first job since there are “many little tasks that you can start with – you can really work with someone at their comfort level.”

Both employer-mentors spoke to the quality of the support they received from the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator. They reported that they felt “well-prepared” with regard to what was expected of them in the role and that they valued being able to “reach out to the Coordinator [...] if there are issues.” One of the employer-mentors described appreciatively how well the Coordinator had handled a situation where a youth was “not ready” to participate in their placement:

“[The *OnyxWorks* Coordinator] was aware of what was happening with this person and was communicating with me in real-time. The situation could easily have become more complicated, but it was very well taken care of in that moment.”

Of note, one of the employer-mentors observed that they would appreciate follow-up from *OnyxWorks* staff on how the young people who completed placements with them are doing: “It would be great to hear how they are getting on.” This kind of follow-up (offered with the permission of the youth concerned) is, perhaps, something that PLEA could add to its program model as an explicit component.

## Key Characteristics of the Program Approach

From our conversations with PLEA staff and key informants, as well as with the employer-mentors and the program participant we met with, a number of important characteristics of the approach taken to delivering the *OnyxWorks* program emerged.

### Clarity of program structure and roles

As noted above, *OnyxWorks* is a well-defined program with a clear structure and scope, and clear program goals. It forms a logical extension of the supports offered by the *Onyx* program and is well-integrated into the range of services and programming provided by PLEA.

The roles of the adults within the program are also clearly defined. For instance, it was apparent from our conversations with the employer-mentors that there is clarity about the nature of their role and the extent of their responsibilities to the youth they are working with. These responsibilities include, for example, providing a “safe and flexible” work environment, but do not extend to providing formal psycho-emotional support. While a young person may choose to

share details of their situation or the problems that they are facing with their employer-mentor, the employer-mentor is not a counsellor. If the youth needs additional support, the employer-mentor refers them to their *Onyx* worker, who is a trained professional:

“I listen to them and I try to be a safe person for them. That’s really it. Some of them have opened up to me, but I can’t do a lot. I can just say, ‘OK, I understand.’ And if there is a situation where they are asking me for help, then I would take that back to their case worker.”

This clarity about the scope of practice of the employer-mentor protects both the employer-mentor and the youth, ensuring, in particular, that the latter receives the right kind of support from the appropriately qualified person.

Further, PLEA staff take care to protect the privacy of the youth who participate in the *OnyxWorks* program. Employer-workers are not given personal details about a young person’s background or circumstances. This facilitates the work placement being a “normalizing” experience. As one of the PLEA staff members explained:

“*OnyxWorks* provides an opportunity for young people to connect to community mentors who are not paid to be there, and who are not focused on discussing the exploitation in their lives.”

## Flexible

*OnyxWorks* combines a clear program structure with a flexible approach to program delivery and implementation. Staff stressed the importance of this flexibility and the need to “meet the youth where they are at.” According to one staff member, “the success of the program comes from its adaptability.”

Since the needs and circumstances of each youth participant vary, the program “and the funding” have to be flexible so that the *Onyx* Workers and the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator can respond promptly to these needs, as they emerge and evolve. PLEA staff shared the following examples of how the program has been adapted to suit the particular situations of the youth:

- **Extending the duration of a work placement** – if the placement is working out well and the program has the capacity (both financially and with number of intakes/referrals), staff will explore the possibility for the participant to continue for a few weeks beyond the initial 10 weeks; and
- **Pausing the placement and allowing it to be resumed later** – if the youth’s circumstances make it difficult or impossible to complete a placement, staff will work with the employer-mentor to find a solution. Two specific examples of this were described by staff:
  - A youth was pregnant during their work placement. Arrangements were made for the youth to work as close to their due date as they felt comfortable, and they were given the option of returning to the job after the birth of the baby; and
  - A youth was dealing with significant substance use issues during their work placement. The placement was put on hold while the youth participated in

treatment, and they were welcomed back to the job after they completed treatment.

In addition to being prepared to adapt the structure of the program to meet the needs of participants, staff, key informants and employer-mentors also spoke to the flexibility implicit in the willingness to “give young people a chance.” There was a broad recognition among all the individuals we spoke with that young people will “mess up” from time to time, but that it is important to “give them the benefit of the doubt” and “support them to keep going in the program if they want to.” The commitment of those involved with *OnyxWorks* to this principle is well attested to by the example we were given of a youth who was caught stealing from their employer-mentor but who, following discussions among all parties, was able to continue working at the establishment.

The key informant with MCFD expressed her appreciation of *OnyxWorks* staff and employer-mentors being “always willing to try” with the youth who are referred to the program:

“They say, ‘Let’s try it for one or two months. And if it doesn’t work out, we can keep it open. We’re always open for them.’ I think that’s a good part of the program.”

The same key informant also commended the program for being open to re-referrals, noting that youth “don’t just get one chance. They can re-refer. They can come back.”

The flexibility of *OnyxWorks* (and the Canadian Women’s Foundation as the program’s funder) was also demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic following the closure of local businesses. Work placements were no longer available to *OnyxWorks* participants, therefore staff offered youth the option of doing paid online training to improve their job readiness skills. (See below for more details on the impact of COVID-19.)

### **Relationship-based**

The staff, key informants and program participants we spoke with all highlighted the importance of the healthy relationships that are built between everyone involved in the *OnyxWorks* program. We heard that making “a connection” with the youth is crucial and that the possibility of satisfying their need for connection is what draws young people into the program. What youth are able to earn in their work placements is significantly less than they could earn (or have been earning) through their involvement with “exploiters.” However, “the sense of connectedness and purpose that comes from creating healthy relationships” with the *OnyxWorks* team and co-workers appear to trump the financial aspect. In the words of one of the staff members:

“At the end of the day, it’s ‘connection’ in every single sense of the word. From the first point of contact, to introducing the youth to the program, to moving them forward with the employer-mentor. We’re their care team, and we introduce them to even more people who will care for them.”

The flexibility of implementation described above is one of the things that supports healthy relationship-building with the youth. It is a hallmark of person-centred care. Staff members

recognize that “each youth comes with their own complexities when it comes to sexual exploitation” and, therefore, the support that is provided “looks different for each youth.”

As part of the process of building a trusting relationship, *Onyx* and *OnyxWorks* staff are committed to openness and transparency with the youth they work with – ensuring that each young person fully understands the goals of the programming and what their participation will involve, and seeking their full and informed consent. This approach was described by the key informant we met with as “unique,” suggesting that other organizations that work with youth may not be as transparent:

“It’s important to say to the youth, ‘This is what we’re going to work on. Is this agreeable to you?’”

We note that this approach may be particularly important in the context of working with youth who have experienced exploitation, since it is free of any deception or coercion and supports the youth’s agency.

The program participant we met with attested to the quality of the connection that staff are able to make with young people:

“[The *OnyxWorks* staff] aren’t just friendly – anyone can be friendly. [...] It’s the way they talk to me. It’s the small talk outside of the program. We just get along really well. I’m very comfortable with them.”

### **Integrated / multi-person care team**

We heard that a young person participating in *OnyxWorks* is typically supported by at least three adults: an *Onyx* Worker, who helps them to identify goals, access relevant resources, stay safe, and build a community of supports to enable them to leave their sexually exploitive situation; the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator, who helps them gain job skills and find a work placement; and an employer-mentor, who supports them to succeed in the work placement. These adults function as a circle of support around the youth.

In addition to the team of people that comes with *OnyxWorks*, young people connected with PLEA may also be supported by a social worker. The key informant with MCFD described how she is able to intervene when situations with an *OnyxWorks* participant become challenging. She also described working collaboratively with a young person’s *Onyx* Worker in circumstances when a youth is considering pursuing legal action against their exploiter.

### **Evolution of PLEA's Service Offerings**

PLEA offers a broad range of services for children and youth (and their families) who are facing challenges or barriers with respect to leading safe and fulfilling lives. One of the staff members described the organization as “the lead agency in providing intervention services to youth being sexually exploited in the Vancouver Coastal region of BC” and a “provincial leader on the issue of sexual exploitation.”

During our first site visit, we heard about the “close working relationship” between PLEA and the Children of the Street Society, an organization devoted to public awareness, education and early intervention strategies to prevent the sexual exploitation of children and youth. In conversation with staff during this second site visit, we learned that the *Children of the Street* programming has been formally transferred to PLEA (in July 2019) and is now offered in-house. This addition means that PLEA is able to provide prevention services as well as intervention programming and supports: “We are a more rounded service.”

### Internal Evaluation / Strategic Planning

PLEA stands out among the grantee cohort for taking an explicit and systematic approach to evaluation and ongoing service improvement. With regard to the *OnyxWorks* program specifically, we note that an evaluative process is built into the structure of the program: the youth and their employer-mentor participate in a mid-point review and a final review, and a follow-up at three months post completion is conducted with the youth. Less formal check-ins are also conducted throughout the youth’s work placement.

From a program delivery perspective, this process allows staff to adjust the placement (as needed) and respond to any issues in real time. From a program evaluation perspective, it allows for the gathering of qualitative data that the organization uses to inform ongoing program enhancement.

We heard that the data gathered through the interviews with the youth also directly inform PLEA’s strategic planning:

“The information we get from *OnyxWorks* participants pushes us forward to look at what goals we have, and what we’re doing. It helps us to learn more about the gaps in services, how better to support parents. It’s all about what we can learn from the evaluations and feedback. It helps us determine what’s next.”

### Changing Landscape of Sexual Exploitation

We asked staff members and the MCFD key informant (with whom we had spoken during the first site visit) to comment on their perceptions of how the issue of sexual exploitation has changed within the local context since we last met in 2017. The following topics were raised during the discussion.

#### **Increase in online exploitation**

Staff reported a noticeable increase over the past three years in youth being exploited online, and noted that the majority of referrals coming into PLEA now involve some component of online exploitation. This was corroborated by the key informant who acknowledged that youth – some as young as ten years old – are sharing sexual images or nude pictures “with people they don’t know” through various social media platforms and websites. Staff explained that youth tend to see the online environment as “safer” because they are “not being physically hurt” and “nobody can get to them.” However, the key informant pointed out that the youth they work with rarely think about the implications of sharing images online.

We also discussed the increasing popularity of “sugar baby” websites, which are often seen by young people as an “easy way to make money.” Staff observed that, in their online profiles, youth will describe their experiences with “sugar baby” websites as “easy,” “glamorous,” and “lucrative,” even if they have experienced “terrible” or “scary” things. By only highlighting the positive aspects, other young people are more easily drawn into becoming involved themselves.

“People will just flock to sugar-babying, because it sounds so good. It sounds like easy money.”

“This online culture can create a very false picture of what is happening in real life.”

In response to this, staff have recognized the need to educate youth about online exploitation, and have added an “online education component” to their main program offerings. *Onyx* staff also highlighted the need to be “up-to-date” and “on the pulse” of new apps and social media platforms. In order to “meet kids where they are at,” the *OnyxWorks* team runs an Instagram account, which they post to regularly, and which they also use to connect with youth directly.

“We constantly need education on what’s happening, and the only way we’re going to find out is if we’re in the same place that they are.”

Staff also noted that, in some situations, youth connected to the *Onyx* program may be provided with a cell phone (in addition to other basic necessities) to help facilitate connection with their *Onyx* Worker and to keep themselves safe. Staff acknowledged that there can be a tricky balance between ensuring that they can connect with youth by providing a cell phone, and inadvertently enabling their exposure to exploitative activities online.

### **Peer-to-peer exploitation**

Staff members commented on a recent increase in peer-to-peer exploitation among youth, particularly in the context of sharing nude pictures online and coercing peers to participate in exploitative activities.

One staff member described the re-emergence of a recruitment tactic that involves young females recruiting their female peers to engage in sexual exploitation. In the recruitment scenario, the youth, who is already being exploited by a “pimp” or “trafficker,” is told to ask a friend from their peer group to join them on the street to help keep them “safe,” e.g. by writing down license plate numbers or monitoring how long they have been gone for. Over time, the youth will ask their friend to “try it out themselves,” by pointing out that they are “already out [on the street] so they might as well make some money.” Often the “pimp” or “trafficker” will promise youth that they will not have to “see as many customers” if they can recruit other people. The staff member observed that this recruitment tactic had been common 10-15 years ago, and that they have recently seen it re-emerge in their local area.

## Needs of Youth Being Served

### Financial security

According to staff, many of the youth who participate in the *OnyxWorks* program are looking for (and are in need of) financial independence and a consistent income. We heard that many of the youth have engaged in exploitative activities as a means of making money, and that they typically lack other opportunities for employment.

A Program Manager at PLEA emphasized the importance of offering youth an alternative means of making money, which is what they aim to do through the *OnyxWorks* program. “If you can’t provide a means for them to receive income in a safe and legitimate way, then it’s easy for them to stay in the rabbit hole.”

### Education about online exploitation

The staff and key informants we spoke with stated that youth require more education on the issue of online exploitation, so that they are “aware of what can happen.” Although staff acknowledged that the “internet is a great place,” they feel that youth need to better understand the risks, particularly with respect to online image sharing.

We also heard that adults, including parents and teachers, can be “wildly uncomfortable” talking about exploitation with youth, and so it is important to give youth opportunities to connect with professionals who are equipped to have these conversations with them.

### Sense of connection

All of the individuals we met with emphasized young people’s desire for connection with others. When this desire cannot be met by healthy relationships, youth may be susceptible to forming unhealthy connections. However, interviewees felt strongly that youth are really looking for positive and healthy relationships and that this is what draws participants to *Onyx* and *OnyxWorks*. As one key informant stated, “The youth want to be connected to someone that is healthy. They want to be with people who are doing normal stuff.”

One staff member noted that youth particularly benefit from having positive *long-term* connections. Therefore, *OnyxWorks* staff will seek employer-mentors who are willing to “be around [to support the youth] beyond the timeframe of the program.” An *Onyx* Worker noted that they have made a shift in the way they approach their work, based on their growing understanding of the importance of long-term connections for youth:

“Through my time with *Onyx*, I have moved away from providing immediate band-aid solutions, to working to connect young people with healthy, in-person, and *long-term* relationships.”

### Sense of normalcy

One employer-mentor we spoke with felt that the youth he had worked with were looking for a “sense of normalcy” in their lives, and that his role was to treat them “as normally as possible”

while they were employed at his business. Later in our discussion, the employer-mentor commented that it is important for youth to have access to a safe place where they can “figure out how to be a successful person in a somewhat normal environment.” He recognized that many of the youth he worked with seemed to “grow” and “mature quite quickly” when they were treated like the rest of the staff.

### **Transitional services**

The Program Director at PLEA raised the issue that there are very few organizations in the local area (and region) that provide transitional services and programming for youth in their late teens and early twenties. Many of these individuals do not yet have the capacity to lead fully independent lives and they require support as they transition into adulthood.

“There is a real need for ongoing connection and support for these youth, especially at these transitional points in their lives.”

### **Program Outcomes / Evidence of Impact**

Staff and employer-mentors shared a variety of program outcomes based on their observations of youth in *OnyxWorks* as well as experiences described to them by the youth. The program participant we met with also touched on a number of program impacts, though these reflect the more immediate/short-term outcomes associated with the first few weeks of the work placement.

### **Increased confidence and sense of self-worth**

We heard from staff and employer-mentors that youth in the *OnyxWorks* program gain “more confidence,” particularly in the context of the work environment. Two of the employer-mentors we spoke with observed that the “confidence of youth increase” throughout their work placements, with one mentor noting, “I could see her coming out of her shell. I just felt like some healing was happening there.” Another mentor described a noticeable shift in one of the youth’s level of engagement at work over a relatively short period of time:

“She came in very shy and she was not sure that it was going to work out. But that changed so quickly [...]. She just took on all the aspects of the job without even having to be trained. That was so nice to see. You could tell she was trying to figure out how to do things well.”

We also heard a number of examples from staff who have noticed youth experiencing a “huge confidence boost” because of their participation in the program. For example, a youth reported that they “realized they were good enough and smart enough” and felt confident that they could now work “anywhere they wanted” because of their experience in the work placement.

### **Stronger interpersonal connections / relationships**

Staff acknowledged the role that *OnyxWorks* plays in the development of positive, and often long-term, relationships between the youth and their employer-mentors and co-workers. The program participant we spoke with, for example, was happy to report that they are “getting along well”

with all of their co-workers, and noted that they especially look forward to the days when they work directly with their employer-mentor.

Staff members also provided a number of examples of youth who have graduated from the program but who still remain in close contact with their former employer-mentors and co-workers. One youth, for example, regularly drops-in to the place they used to work to visit with former co-workers. We also heard about other graduates of the program who continue to stay in touch with their former employer-mentors and will reach out to them for support from time to time:

“For one youth, even though her placement ended over a year ago, she remains connected to her previous employer-mentor, and [the employer-mentor] continues to play a big part in her life.”

The MCFD key informant we met with reflected that the healthy work environment that youth get to experience shows them that, “work does not have to be just a transactional place, where somebody is always taking something from [them].” Instead, there can be “social goodness in the workplace,” where mutually respectful and supportive relationships can be built.

### **Enhanced “people skills” and “life skills”**

The program participant we spoke with reported that they were learning “more people skills” through their current work placement. They reflected that, in the past, they had been a shy person who was always “scared to mess up;” however, since starting the work placement, they have learned how to work with new people and engage with customers. They stated, “I love waking up in the morning and saying to myself, ‘Yay! I’m going to work!’”

One of the employer-mentors we spoke with also observed that youth in the program tend to develop additional “life skills” as a by-product of the work placement:

“The person comes in, and we get to know each other. And then very quickly you see them going through all these steps to re-integrate themselves, like finding a new place to live, or applying for other jobs, or asking for letters of recommendation to go to college. It feels good to see that.”

### **New work readiness and job skills**

Staff noted that the majority of the youth entering the *OnyxWorks* program come with limited work experience and few job skills. Many have never created a resumé or participated in a job interview.

Through *OnyxWorks*, participants develop core work readiness skills to prepare them for their placements; these are skills that they “continue to use after the program is done.” For example, the participant we met with described some of the benefits of undertaking online training, offered by *OnyxWorks*, prior to their work placement:

“In my *Serving It Right* [course], I learned how to check people’s IDs, which is something I need to do in my current job. It’s something I didn’t know how to do before.”

Through their placement, participants gain crucial work experience, which sets them up to find permanent or longer-term employment after the program has ended. Staff reported that most of the youth come out of the program with a “really solid job reference,” which also works to their advantage when looking for other employment. The program participant we spoke with certainly felt optimistic about their chances of finding future work, thanks to the experience they are gaining in their placement.

We also heard that a number of youth have, on completion of their work placements, been invited to stay on as permanent employees by their employer-mentors. Others have found employment with different establishments because of the experience and job skills that they have gained in their placements.

### **Increased self-efficacy and sense of optimism**

Over the course of the site visit we heard from several individuals that participation in *OnyxWorks* gives youth a greater sense self-efficacy and optimism with regard to what their futures will look like. Staff illustrated this with a number of stories about participants planning for their next steps, whether that that may be continuing in the workforce or seeking out educational opportunities.

For instance, a youth shared with their *Onyx Worker* a sense of excitement about their long-term work prospects. Reportedly, the youth is feeling positive about the chance of being hired on permanently by their employer-mentor, but, if this does not happen, they “will still be excited to apply for jobs.” This example indicates a level of confidence and resiliency on the part of the youth.

We were told that other graduates of the *OnyxWorks* are now exploring new training and education opportunities. For instance, the MCFD key informant described recently re-connecting with a former program participant who is now working towards becoming a police officer. A PLEA staff member reported that an *OnyxWorks* graduate has gone from “being actively pimp-controlled” to pursuing post-secondary education at a local university: ““I really feel that *OnyxWorks* was a huge component of that.”

Of note, the current program participant that we interviewed shared their long-term goals. These included studying psychology and becoming a social worker: “So I can work with kids. I think I’d be really good at that.”

### **Replication of the ‘OnyxWorks’ Model**

In conversation with staff, we learned that a neighbouring municipality is launching a pilot project modelled after the *OnyxWorks* program. This is a testament to the effectiveness of the program model and the influence of PLEA within the sector. As one of the staff members commented: “It’s one of our greatest compliments. [*OnyxWorks*] is a really good model that is

getting some traction [...]. There are other agencies now looking at what we are delivering and seeing if they can deliver it as well.”

## Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way in which frontline service agencies do their work, as well as on the populations that they serve. We invited staff and key informants to speak to the impact of the pandemic on the lives and situations of the youth they are supporting and on their capacity to deliver services.

Conversations about the impacts on youth focused largely on their increased risk for sexual exploitation, both online and “on the streets.” Staff also described the changes they have put in place with respect to the delivery of *OnyxWorks* in order to keep participants engaged, connected and learning during the pandemic and the temporary closure of businesses.

### Increased vulnerability to exploitation

Staff members observed that the social restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have resulted in youth “spending a lot of their time online” where they may be at risk of exploitation. Staff noted that during the period when schools and businesses were closed, youth were at home and “bored.” Boredom drives youth to the internet and to social media platforms.

“Going online” was described by staff as “so easy.” It facilitates immediate gratification for connection, even though those connections are virtual and may not necessarily be healthy. A member of staff commented that they had asked one of the *OnyxWorks* participants outright why they engaged in unhealthy and exploitative activities online, and the youth replied, “Because I’m bored.”

In addition to an increased vulnerability to exploitation online, we heard from the key informant with MCFD that they have seen an increase in referrals to *Onyx* since the onset of COVID-19. The key informant speculated that because more parents are working from home, they are more aware of what their children are doing:

“Everyone is at home, watching. One parent said they saw their daughter’s phone and realized she had been sneaking out at night. She was ‘sugar-babysing,’ and she has since been referred to the program.”

The same key informant also stated that there has been an “explosion” in exploitation “on the streets” since the start of the pandemic. However, in the interview, we did not explore the reasons underpinning this perception or the evidence that would substantiate it.

### Loss of work placements and the need to adapt program delivery

As a work experience program, the capacity to deliver *OnyxWorks* was substantively affected by the public health response to COVID-19 and efforts to limit the spread of the virus. In March, most of the businesses that typically employ youth (such restaurants and other service industry businesses) were forced to close; this included businesses with whom work placements were

already underway or scheduled to begin. This presented a huge challenge to *OnyxWorks*: “For a while it was a problem for us to think about how we could run the program at all.”

With the cessation of work placements, staff were worried that some youth might return to their previous (exploitative and unsafe) money-making activities in order to have some financial security. The pressure to implement a new, workable iteration of the program was considerable:

“When their placements stopped, we were concerned about them going back to their previous activities, and they were concerned too. We were trying to come up with an alternative solution really fast.”

Staff determined that by “pivoting” to offer paid online training to participants, they could keep youth engaged and provide them with an income:

“The paid online training was something that made sense in all of the uncertainty. The youth could continue their personal development in the things they were interested in.”

The change in focus for *OnyxWorks* has seen youth taking food service training/qualifications, such as *FoodSafe* and *Serving It Right*. Staff have also worked to find online training and education options to suit participants’ broader interests: “One youth was interested in architecture, so we looked for online courses she could take in the meantime.”

Staff observed that the online training has been beneficial, especially for youth who were not yet ready to do an in-person work placement. Engaging in the training helped the youth to acquire some foundational knowledge and skills, and increased their confidence, potentially supporting a “smoother transition” into the workplace. The program participant we met with shared some of the positive impacts for them of being involved in online training courses:

“It kept me busy. I wasn’t doing anything otherwise, and this was good motivation to do something. I found out that I really like doing online classes. I did *Serving It Right*, and a [...] Udemy social media marketing course. I had a lot of fun with that.”

In view of these benefits, *OnyxWorks* staff intend to continue to offer online training as an option for participants in the longer-term (i.e. post-pandemic).

### **Ongoing challenges with work placements**

While businesses are now reopening, they are doing so under public health restrictions that limit the number of people (staff and customers) who can be on the premises at the same time. This means reduced capacity for restaurants and other service industry businesses. In some cases, having an additional worker on a premises may mean one fewer customer. These circumstances continue to constrain the feasibility of work placements, and for some youth placements remain on hold.

Staff also reported that it is proving challenging to find new employer-mentors in the context of the pandemic, as business owners are having to deal with the financial impacts of COVID-19 and find ways to restructure or adapt their business model. In the words of one of the *Onyx Workers*:

“People I’m talking to right now are really appreciative of what we are doing, but they just can’t offer us anything right now. Often they’ll say, ‘Please call back in October or November!’”

### ‘Final Comments’

At the close of each conversation, we invited interviewees to share any final comments about the *OnyxWorks* program. All of the comments were positive and spoke to the importance of the program for the youth participants as well as the effectiveness of the program model. A selection of what people said is provided in the text box below.

**“This program is helping kids a lot. I’m very grateful that there are programs out there like this. I love my *Onyx Worker* and [the *OnyxWorks* Coordinator]. They are the first people I met and I liked them right away.”** (*Program Participant*)

**“Not many programs are so client-focused. *OnyxWorks* is truly flexible. They always give each kid a chance. They’re expanding that young person’s safe world.”** (*Key Informant*)

**“I would absolutely continue to be involved in the program. It’s been really successful for us.”** (*Employer-Mentor*)

**“We are just grateful to have been involved with *OnyxWorks* for this long. We keep finding really lovely young people to work with. I love it.”** (*Employer-Mentor*)

**“I feel like *OnyxWorks* is so unique because it provides those placements and supports in the youth’s own community. I’m really honoured to be part of that.”** (*Staff Member*)

**“The people here put their heart and souls into this work. The work is so hard, but it’s also so life changing.”** (*PLEA Executive Director*)