



# Improving Opportunities & Outcomes for Toronto's Older Job Seekers

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OLDER WORKER'S INITIATIVE PILOT



“[The OWI Program got] me  
my first job in fifteen years.”

– Program Participant

- 3 Acknowledgements
- 4 Introduction
- 5 Background
- 7 The Older Worker’s Initiative
- 9 Program Successes & Outcomes
- 10 Indicators for Labour Market Success
- 12 The Future of Work for Toronto’s Older Job Seekers
- 13 Appendix
- 15 Endnotes

## Acknowledgements

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## About WoodGreen

A United Way Anchor Agency, WoodGreen combines significant scale and a proven track record with an entrepreneurial mindset, continuously seeking and developing innovative solutions to critical social needs. With a rich history spanning more than 80 years, WoodGreen is one of the largest social service agencies in Toronto, serving 37,000 people each year from 36 locations. Together we help people find safe, affordable housing, seniors live independently, internationally-trained professionals enter the job market, parents access childcare, children and youth access after-school programs, newcomers settle in to Canadian life, homeless and marginalized people get off the streets, youth find meaningful employment and training and provide a wide range of mental health supports.

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### Funders



### Partners





Annually, WoodGreen serves 37,000 people, including 3,000 in employment related programs and services. Over the past several years, through a combination of serving residents from our housing facilities and the low-income community in east Toronto, we have seen a growth in the number of older job seekers pursuing employment.

Toronto statistics have shown that individuals 55 and older with high school attainment or less have significantly lower labour force participation rates than those of their peers.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has made it all the more challenging for older job seekers working in part-time employment: in December 2020, the Toronto economy lost 99,000 part-time jobs, with workers aged 15 to 24 and 55 and older bearing the brunt of those job losses.<sup>2</sup>

While youth unemployment has captured the imagination and attention of policy makers, the myriad of challenges faced by older workers has gone largely unnoticed. There are signals this is changing.

WoodGreen conducted several focus groups in 2017, which unearthed the urgent need for effective training supports for a growing number of older job seekers. Building on the insights gathered from clients, WoodGreen introduced the *Older Worker's Initiative*, a pilot training program developed to improve the outcomes for job seekers 45 years of age and older, who have been unemployed for at least 1 year and on Ontario Works, to obtain sustainable employment in the retail sector.

The following report details the impetus for the *Older Worker's Initiative*, the program delivery experience and key learnings identified from the pilot.

Though this is WoodGreen's first approach of the program, the lessons learned offer valuable insight into existing and emerging opportunities for reintegrating older job seekers into Toronto's labour market.

For the first time, Canada has more people over the age of 65 than under 15.<sup>3</sup> The age group that now encompasses the Boomer generation – 56 to 74 – makes up 27% of the population, compared with 18% in that age group two decades ago.<sup>4</sup> The number of people over 65, the traditional retirement age in this country, makes up 16% of the population – double their proportion in 1971.<sup>5</sup>

Toronto, while younger than most parts of Canada, is not immune from the issue of aging demographics. Even when accounting for significant immigration, the number of individuals at or near retirement (50+) will surpass those for prime working age individuals in 2030. Not only will there be serious labour shortages and decreased tax revenue, current Ontario Works data suggests we could be facing increased social assistance costs.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, those over 55 account for nearly one-third of all social assistance recipients in Toronto.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, older individuals 55+ with high school attainment or less, have significantly lower labour force participation rates than those of their peers.<sup>8</sup>

WoodGreen staff in employment related programs and services are seeing an increasing number of clients who are older and low-income earners, many of whom have had a large absence from the labour market. These individuals are now seeking employment due to economic necessity.

Despite the fact that older workers have extensive experience and are interested in part-time work, many employers are hesitant to hire them.<sup>9</sup> When speaking with older job seekers themselves, they feel acutely aware of this bias and note age discrimination as one of their primary challenges securing work.

Given the greying of both Toronto's and the province's population, challenges related to unemployment and labour force participation rates among older individuals are likely to increase over the foreseeable future. Yet, with the demise of Ontario's Targeted Initiative for Older Workers, there are no specific employment interventions for individuals from this demographic.

The rapid aging of Toronto's population is a signal that the design and testing of new and innovative employment interventions for older job seekers is urgently needed.



## **A Call for Action from the WoodGreen Community**

In 2017, WoodGreen Community Services held a series of focus groups with over 50 experienced job seeker clients aged 50 years and older from across the Greater Toronto Region. The focus groups were held in response to several reports that indicated that, of Toronto residents aged 50 to 65, over 60,000 individuals were currently looking for work while 300,000 were no longer participating in the labour force. The research also indicated that, while older workers had lower unemployment rates than other age cohorts, once unemployed, they received fewer job offers, had significantly longer periods of unemployment and were more likely to rely on Ontario Works compared to their younger peers.<sup>10</sup>

The focus group included mature job seekers who came from a wide range of occupations, cultures and educational backgrounds. They shared a number of things in common:

- Most had been unemployed for over 6 months and many had been unemployed for over two years. Some had 'given-up' in their search for work.
- Their unemployment was overwhelmingly involuntary and structural,
- Many held the perspective that they had been displaced by automation or younger workers,
- Many felt 'unwelcome' at job-search centres that appeared to be more interested in youth, and/or that employers were being incentivized to prioritize youth over older job seekers.

**The Older Worker's Initiative (OWI) was a direct response to a community in need.**

These observations led WoodGreen to closely interrogate job seeker data related to employment and social assistance for the City of Toronto. The data confirmed that older job seekers who have low educational attainment and/or who are single, are less likely to be employed than the general population, have substantially longer spells of unemployment and are far less likely to be participating in the labour force.

At the same time, WoodGreen saw a gap in their own service offer for these older job seekers. While there were specific programs geared to other types of job seekers, there was a gap in programming for the older worker/job seekers. This gap was evident to the older job seekers themselves. Participants of the focus groups expressed a desire to see an employment service that would include strategies for job seekers in the later stages of their working career.



Using their innovative employer engagement model, WoodGreen collaborated with a major retail employer and the Retail Council of Canada to build the *Older Worker's Initiative*, a pilot training program funded by the Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) at the City of Toronto. This program was created to help job seekers 45 years of age and older, who have been unemployed for at least 1 year and on Ontario Works, obtain sustainable employment in the retail sector.

Furthermore, WoodGreen sought not only to train OWI participants, but also to design an employment and training intervention based on existing research and intelligence collected from targeted clients and stakeholders that was holistic, demand-driven, and customized to the needs of older job seekers in receipt of social assistance.

In collaboration with Purpose Co., a third-party consultant, and funded by the Ontario Human Capital Research and Innovation Fund (OHCRI), WoodGreen embarked on an evidence-informed design and evaluation framework around the OWI to develop a vital conduit between research and program delivery. Ultimately, through its research, WoodGreen aimed to answer a key question: "What skills training and support interventions demonstrably improve the success of older job seekers to obtain and retain meaningful employment?"

**What skills training and support interventions demonstrably improve the success of older job seekers to obtain and retain meaningful employment?**

## Program Design

Building on the literature review of workforce strategies that are effective in connecting older workers to employment, the OWI pilot was designed to be a holistic and demand-driven cohort-based program dedicated to the needs of older job seekers aged 45 years and up. The final program incorporated elements of employability/soft skills, retail technical skills, and job-search skills; culminating with a paid job-placement.

The pilot used the following program design elements:

- Cohort based programming, including a focus on peer-based learning;
- Industry specific pre-employment training, focused on the requirements of the primary employer and their entry level retail sales position; and
- Experiential and applied learning, including simulated workplace experiences.

The in-class portion of the program was 6 and 12 days, delivered over 2 and 4 weeks, for two separate cohorts, respectively, between September and November 2020. Originally designed to be delivered in-person at a WoodGreen facility, the program had to quickly pivot, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to deliver its services through a mix of both on-line and in-person instruction, following social distancing regulations. After the in-class portion, participants were placed in a 6-week paid employment placement with a retail employer.

From the program's inception, WoodGreen partnered with the Retail Council of Canada and retail placement employers to inform the program design and placement experience. WoodGreen and its sector partners collectively applied real world insights on sector drivers and practical needs to the development of key program elements, such as the job description, hiring criteria, and effective assessment tools for candidate selection. Using these insights, WoodGreen was able to assist program participants in successfully crafting their resumes to align with the hiring needs of the employer. WoodGreen's partners additionally provided feedback on the effectiveness of the program design and components following the program completion.

## The Program Participants

WoodGreen staff screened for OWI program candidates who were:

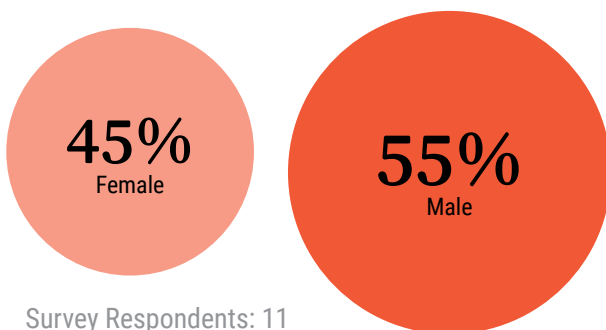
- Interested in retail or customer service
- Motivated to re-enter the workforce
- Had the required schedule availability
- Had the foundational skills required to be successful in the targeted occupation (physical requirements, interest in working with people)

The gender balance in the program was virtually even, with additional individual characteristics (age, education, etc.) similar between genders.

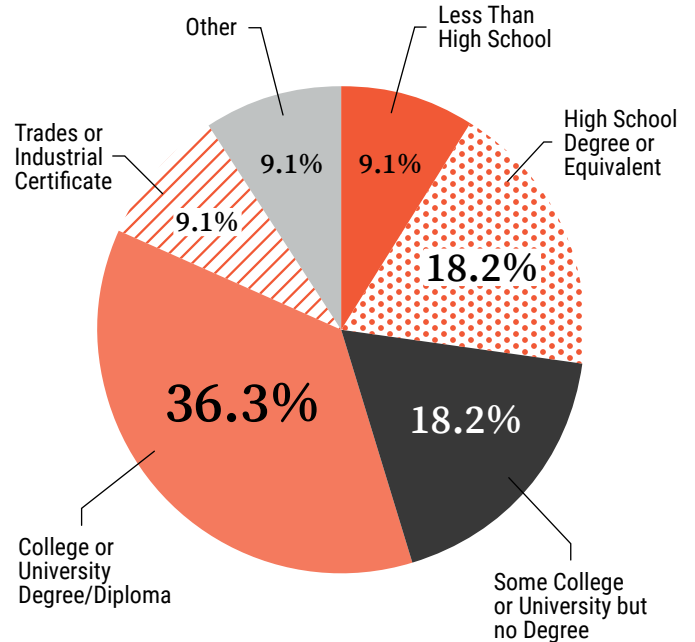
The educational attainment levels of participants were very broad, from less than high school attainment to university graduates. Four of the participants spoke English as a Second Language. All indicated that they were proficient in English.

Of interest, a significant majority of program participants indicated that they were not married or in a common law relationship (77%). This information is in keeping with previous studies on the strong correlation between unemployment and marital status for those over the age of 55. As noted in *More than a Number: A Quantitative Profile of Singles Receiving Ontario Works in Toronto*<sup>11</sup> single mature workers had been in receipt of Ontario Works in Toronto longer than prime working age adults and youth (43.2, 27.8, and 17.5 months respectively). Single mature workers were also far more likely than their single younger counterparts to be on assistance for three years or more.

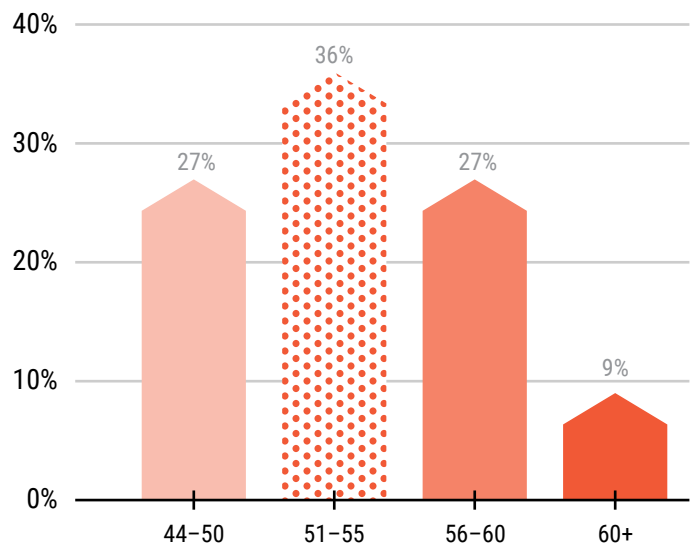
**FIGURE 1  
PARTICIPANT GENDER**



**FIGURE 2  
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED**



**FIGURE 3  
PARTICIPANT AGES**





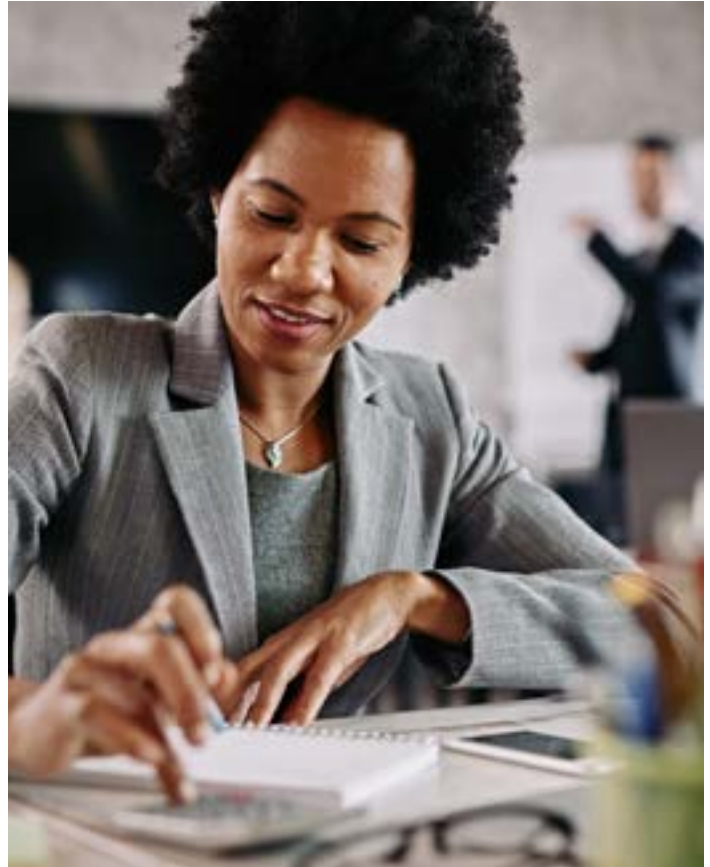
A mixed methodological evaluation process was used, led by Purpose Co., to examine the OWI pilot successes, challenges and outcomes. The evaluation process (which is still in progress) began with semi-structured interviews with several participants during their first week in the program, followed by interviews held with those participants upon program completion.

Participants were asked a series of thematic questions related to their lived experiences, future expectations, and first and final impressions of the program. It should be noted that, of those participants interviewed, all but one had not held a regular job for over a decade. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and participants were given a small honorarium upon completion.

The economic conditions caused by the pandemic created a significant challenge to the participants' employment outcomes. Normally, in the period of October to December, the retail sector will on average add over 10,000 jobs.<sup>12</sup> This year, employment totals in retail declined by approximately 2,000 jobs for the October to December period in Toronto.<sup>13</sup>

Even against these strong headwinds, however, the program achieved some success. Overall, participants were highly satisfied with the delivery of the program, and particularly appreciated the individual support, accessibility, and content knowledge. Nearly 90% of participants indicated that the skills content of the program was excellent or very good, and similarly appreciated the employment placement component of the program.

Half of all participants were employed upon program exit. Of those participants, 66% were able to retain employment in the retail sector after January 15th, 2021. These reasonably positive employment results are complimented by post-program survey results that indicated that over 90% of program participants felt more confident about their employment future and income. The program's evaluation process is still in progress.



**“The program was clear, everything well explained. I am so thankful that I had these lovely, dedicated people as my program facilitators.”**

– Program Participant

There were several salient early learnings from the first iteration of the *Older Worker's Initiative* that WoodGreen believes can inform future program design and effective labour market interventions for mature job seekers.

### **Age-centred programming improves older job seeker confidence**

Having a cohort of job seekers grouped according to age appeared to be critical in the eyes of participants. Many noted that they were “embarrassed” to be on social assistance at this stage in their lives. Seeing other participants of similar age struggle with similar economic circumstances had real value in helping participants know they were “not alone.”

There was intentionality in the program delivery to create a welcoming environment that wasn't ageist. Many of the participants previously had bad experiences with employment programs that seemed to be geared towards youth. Having an environment which recognized experience (and age) as an asset was an important dimension.

### **Employer and sector collaboration help align older job seeker skillsets**

Programs informed by employers, clients and service providers are shown to be more successful, as is evident in the OWI pilot program.

**“I finally learned how to use a computer.”**

– Program Participant

Working with bodies such as the Retail Council of Canada enabled WoodGreen to obtain real-world, sector-specific advice and information on strategic drivers and practical consideration when hiring as well as feedback on program design and on program components (e.g. training courses, assessments) at key project milestones to troubleshoot and refine the process and ensure continued alignment between the program and employer hiring needs. Furthermore, by working directly with the employer on program design, WoodGreen could more effectively create a pool of skilled, prepared candidates that the employer could rapidly and confidently consider for current and future employment opportunities.

### **Virtual programming enhances older job seeker digital skills**

The migration of the OWI program onto an online platform for some aspects of the program had unexpected but positive outcomes.

Most participants indicated that they had weak computer and/or digital skills before they participated in the program. In the participant surveys, over 70% of participants indicated that their biggest challenge to employment was in developing their digital and computer skills.

While not an explicitly planned outcome of the initiative, almost all participants noted that their digital skills had increased significantly post-program. Almost all participants gained these skills, and felt they were more employable because they had digital abilities. During the participant interviews with several participants, they indicated that learning to use their computer or tablet and/or enhancing their digital skills was “the silver lining of COVID.”

### **Cohort-based programming builds older job seeker social capital**

Although social capital is notoriously difficult to measure, it was evident that most of the program participants were living in social isolation prior to participating in the program. COVID-19 had further exacerbated this isolation.

Feedback provided in the post-program interviews showed that the OWI program had supported most participants to develop stronger social networks.

### Elder care supports alleviate older job seeker absence from the labour market

Ongoing discussions with participants revealed an unexpected finding: half of all OWI participants indicated that they left the workforce to “care for an elderly parent.” Many participants indicated that they became the primary care-giver to a parent suffering from dementia (in one case, a participant had cared for a parent for over 10 years). Participants noted that explaining the long-term unemployment to employers was difficult. Furthermore, many participants felt that this employment history “gap” caused them to be screened out.

As population aging becomes more important, work absence to care for parents may become a policy issue. Approaches to ameliorate labour force exits to care for aging or incapacitated parents should be considered.

## The Next Phase of the Older Workers Initiative

Using these learnings and insights gathered from the OWI Pilot, WoodGreen has is set to launch a second iteration of the *Older Worker’s Initiative* in the August 2021. Similar to the OWI pilot, WoodGreen has developed this second iteration using a heightened employer engagement model, in collaboration with a large security guard employer in Toronto committed to considering all program participants for employment.

A significant boost in the demand for security services is expected between 2020 and 2025, leading to an increase in job openings.<sup>14</sup> Security jobs provide an entry point into a variety of future work settings for workers. Looking towards the future of work for job seekers far removed from the labour market, WoodGreen has identified this as a prime opportunity for older jobseekers to train and obtain sustainable employment.

“The in-class sessions were great and the interaction of the staff and students was great.”

– Program Participant





The rising magnitude of the older job seeker situation is an urgent call to action for the greater public sector in Toronto. Findings from WoodGreen's focus groups and the OWI pilot point to the need for labour market partnership solutions that connect older workers to sustainable employment.

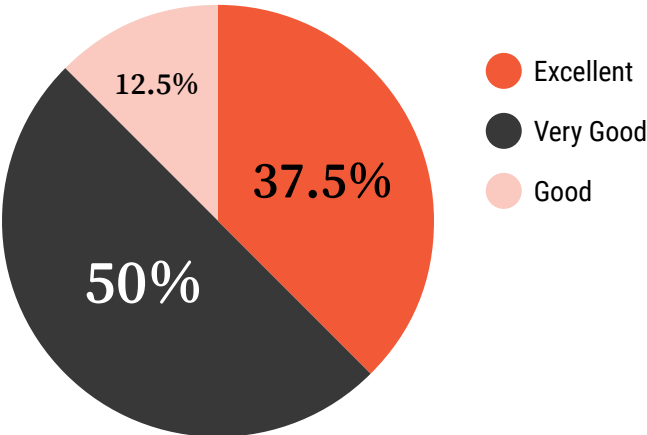
WoodGreen champions the formation of collaborative working groups among employers and older workers, in combination with other community stakeholders, to:

- Confirm and prioritize the most pressing issues associated with older jobseekers;
- Engage employers and older workers together to understand needs and opportunities;
- Conduct facilitated co-design processes to explore, ideate and propose new solutions; and
- Mobilize findings and recommendations to encourage and positively influence employment programming for older workers.

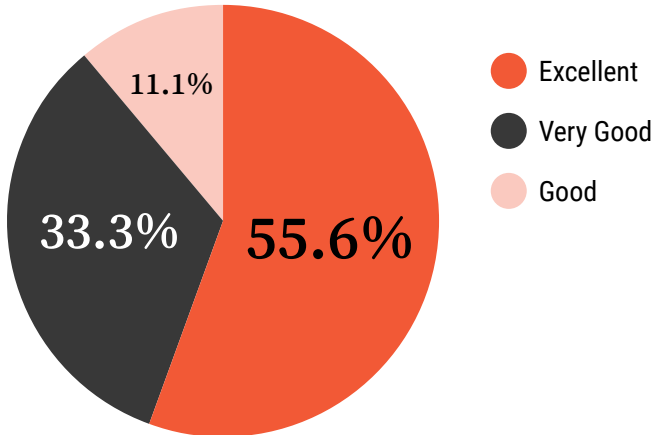
By developing innovative interventions and identifying opportunities to scale, WoodGreen aims to lead meaningful improvements in the lives of older job seekers and the employers who benefit from their contributions in the labour market.

# PROGRAM PARTICIPANT SURVEY RESULTS

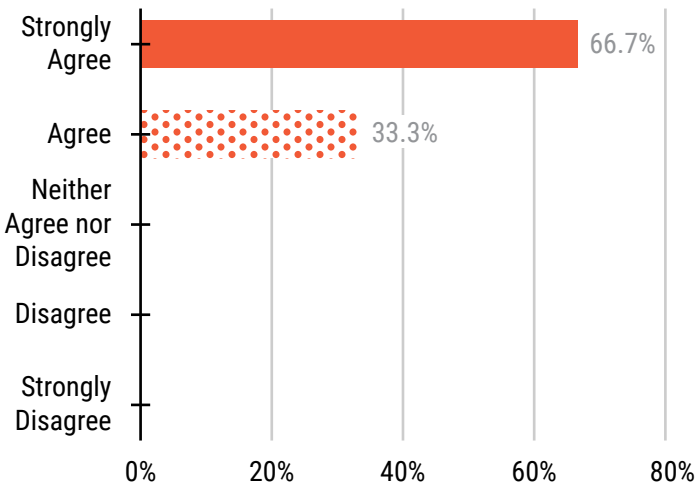
**FIGURE 4**  
**"HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PART OF THE PROGRAM?"**



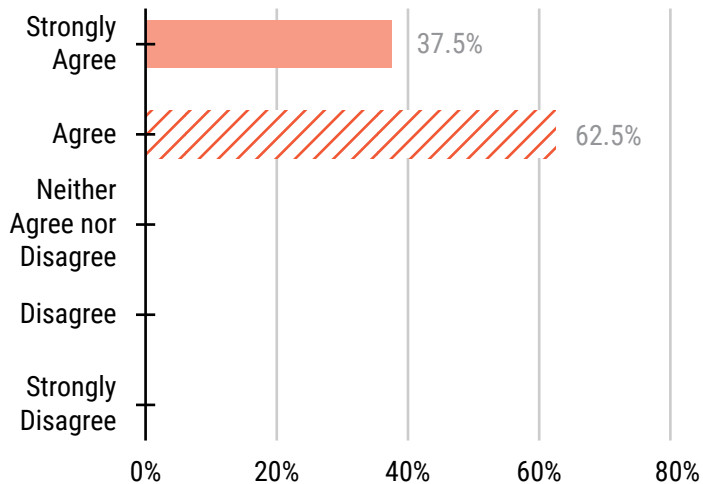
**FIGURE 5**  
**"HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE EMPLOYMENT PLACEMENT PART OF THE PROGRAM?"**



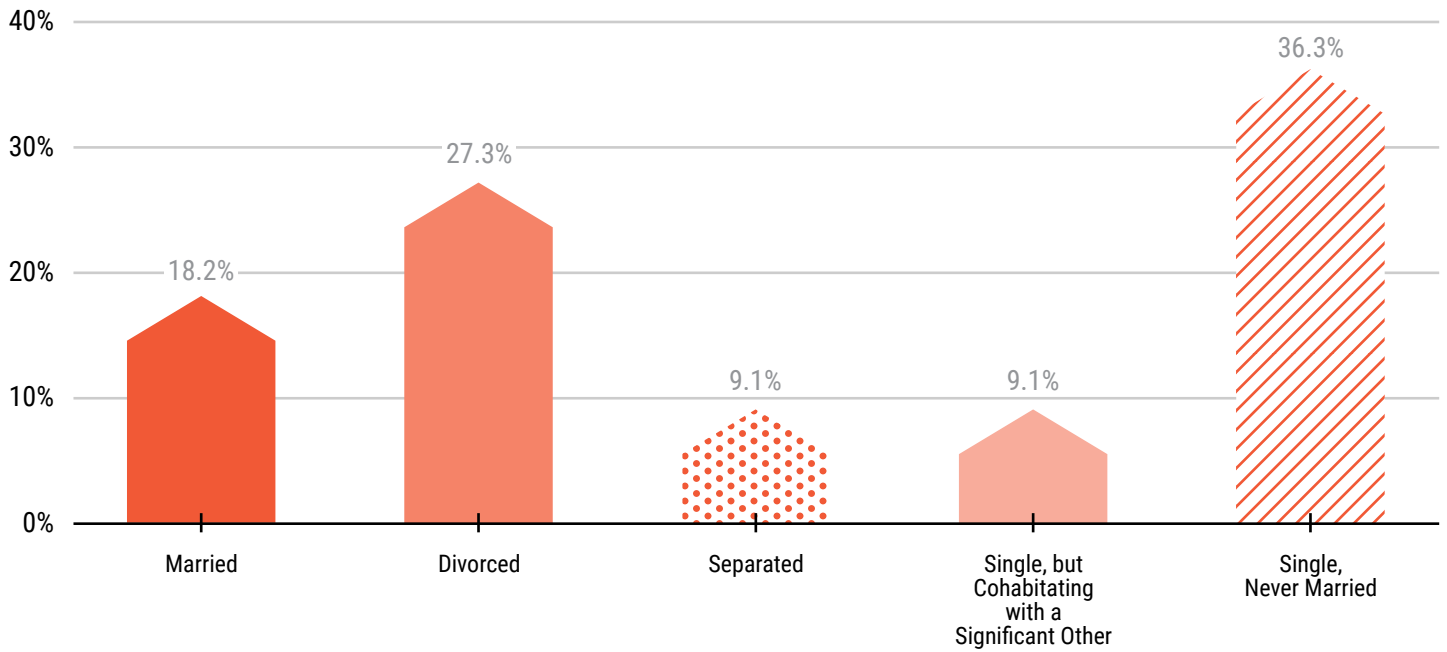
**FIGURE 6**  
**"WOODGREEN STAFF WERE HELPFUL AND RESPONSIVE TO MY NEEDS"**



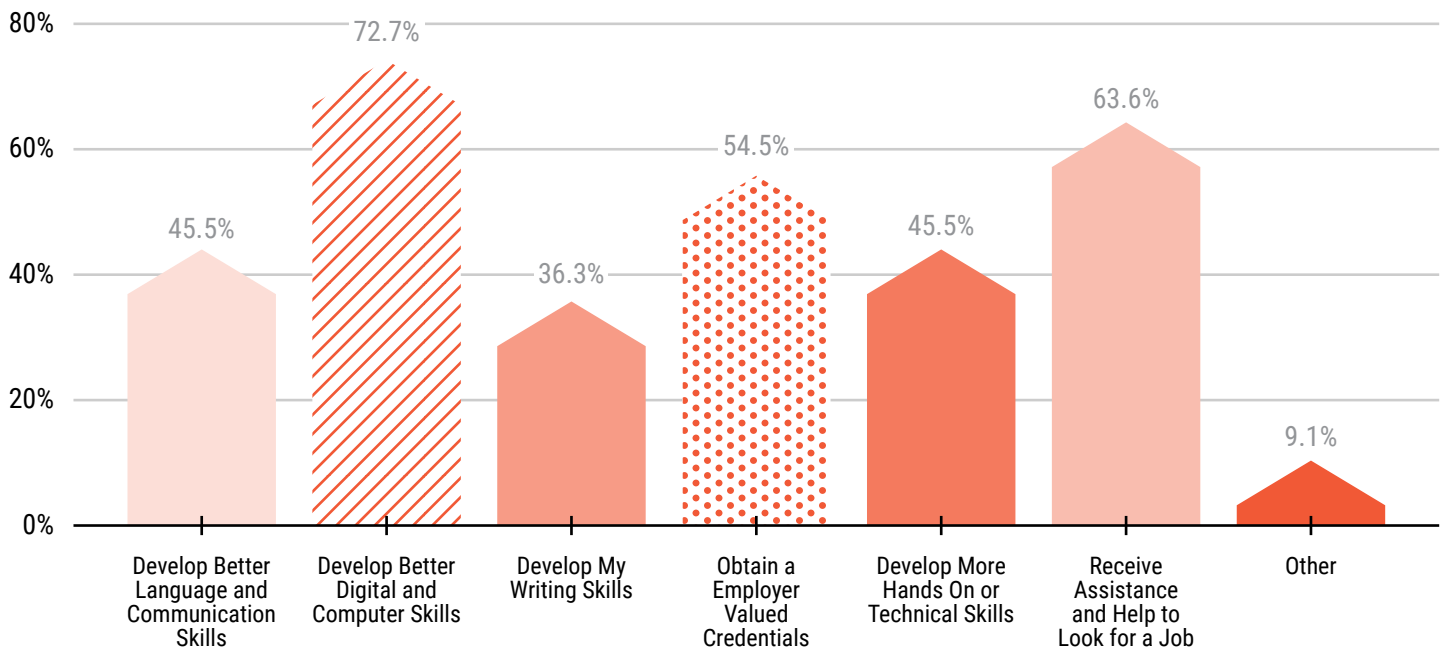
**FIGURE 7**  
**"THE OWI PROGRAM HAS IMPROVED MY EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS"**



**FIGURE 8**  
**PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP STATUS**



**FIGURE 9**  
**"IN ORDER TO HAVE MORE AND BETTER EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, I NEED TO:"**



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