

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES FOR WORKERS IN THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT SECTOR



Prepared by Leading Impact Consulting
for
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INTRODUCTION

Across Prince Edward Island's not-for-profit sector, women make up a significant portion of the workforce and are deeply embedded in all aspects of organizational leadership and service delivery. Their contributions shape how organizations operate and how communities are supported. Despite this, the conditions surrounding this work are not always well understood. Questions related to compensation, workload, career progression, and retention continue to surface across the sector, but are often discussed through anecdotal experience rather than being examined as part of a broader system.

This project explores the experiences of those working in the women-dominated not-for-profit sector, with a focus on understanding both the rewards and the challenges of this work. The first phase of the project involved an open call for anyone working in the not-for-profit sector to complete an anonymous online survey about their experiences. A total of 71 people completed this survey.

Survey participants were also invited to participate in a focus group or interview to further explore the themes emerging from the survey responses and experiences of working in the sector. A total of four engagement sessions were held in locations across PEI, in Montague, Alberton, Summerside, two sessions in Charlottetown, with a fifth session held online. Three individual interviews also took place. These conversations brought forward both common themes and unique perspectives, reflecting the variety of roles, organizations, and community contexts represented in the sector.

Like many care-focused and community-based fields, the not-for-profit sector reflects broader gendered patterns within the labour force. Work that centres relationship-building, caregiving, advocacy, and community wellbeing has historically been disproportionately carried by women and is often undervalued despite requiring significant leadership, adaptability, and professional expertise. Throughout this project, participants described challenges related to workload, compensation, burnout, flexibility, emotional labour, and recognition that mirror issues experienced across many women-dominated sectors. While not every experience shared was unique to women, gendered expectations around caregiving, service, and community responsibility shaped many participants' experiences both within and outside the workplace.

Conversations looked at the conditions that support worker well-being, retention, and professional growth, including how workloads, recognition, career progression, and access to training and development opportunities affect daily experiences. They also explored how structural factors, including funding models, the availability of core funding, and expectations from funders and policymakers, shape not only organizational sustainability but also the realities of day-to-day work for staff. Grounded in lived and living experiences, this report highlights the opportunities and challenges for workers and for the not-for-profit sector overall.

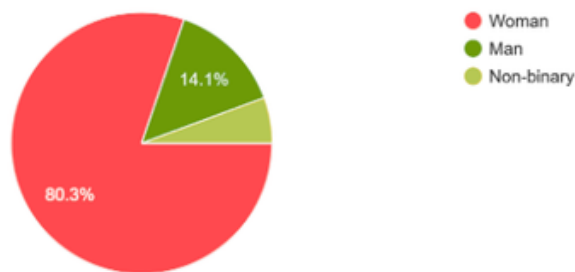


WOMEN DOMINATED SECTOR

Survey participants were invited to identify their gender as woman, man, non-binary, or other with space to write in a response. The overwhelming majority of survey participants were women (80.3%). Several responses highlighted the double day of labour many women face, balancing childcare, eldercare or other caring responsibilities with their paid work. Many of the challenges identified throughout this report mirror broader patterns experienced across women-dominated sectors, including caregiving, education, healthcare, and community services. Work that is relational, community-based, and focused on care and wellbeing is often socially valued but economically undervalued, despite requiring significant skill, leadership, and emotional labour. Participants frequently described expectations to “do more with less,” accept lower wages, and continue working beyond paid hours because of their commitment to their

How do you identify your gender?

71 responses



Many within the sector had previous exposure to not-for-profit organizations through accessing programs themselves or through family or friends already working in the sector. Increasing opportunities for not-for-profit organizations to be part of in-school presentations, “take your kid to work” days, or by ensuring the not-for-profit sector is highlighted as an employment pathway in career education curriculum could help increase awareness of the sector as a viable and rewarding option and support diversity. One on one conversations with those considering applying for positions in the sector can also help to encourage diversity and support those who may not otherwise see themselves in these positions.

“We've been led by the good old boys white boy network for a long time, and I think recognizing how many women in leadership are doing really cool things that are happening on the island needs to be leveraged in a way that's more meaningful for islanders.”

“It's just that weight I think is the pressure and mostly it's women in the nonprofit sector...they're doing all other stuff for the kids and everything else, and they're running the nonprofit center where they have the pressure that weight of like, can we make sure we can actually get our money in?”

"I find that especially here on PEI, it really matters if you are out there, if people know who you are. If you know other people who are working in nonprofits, often you will hear about job opportunities maybe a little bit earlier or you'll be able to connect with someone who knows someone...It just depends on your personality and not everybody feels comfortable in that those types of environments or networking events, so sometimes that can be a bit gatekeepy in that sense."

WHY PEOPLE CHOOSE TO WORK IN THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT SECTOR

Making a difference

The desire to make a difference in people's lives and give back to the community was shared by almost all participants. Respondents highlighted making a direct, positive difference in the lives of clients, vulnerable populations, and the community, often seeing the immediate impact of their efforts. In some cases, not-for-profits take a leading role in advocacy, aiming to be a voice for those who may not otherwise be heard. Many appreciated the opportunity to build relationships within the community and found it rewarding to know that lives had been changed or improved by their work.

Strong relationships with team members, clients, and community partners are a significant source of enjoyment. This includes the care among team members, meeting diverse people, and the strong support network and collaborative opportunities available within the sector. The small size and equity within many organizations also contributed to meaningful work experiences. The importance of the mandate and mission of an organization aligning with one's own personal values was also highlighted.

"You do sleep easier at night knowing that you're working to make everything better. You're working to leave everything better than when you found it."

"We have found that the programs we've offered have a high success rate and we have many of them coming back in to tell us how good they did with whatever it was, and even though there's not always success, the success makes you feel like you are doing something good in the community and helping."

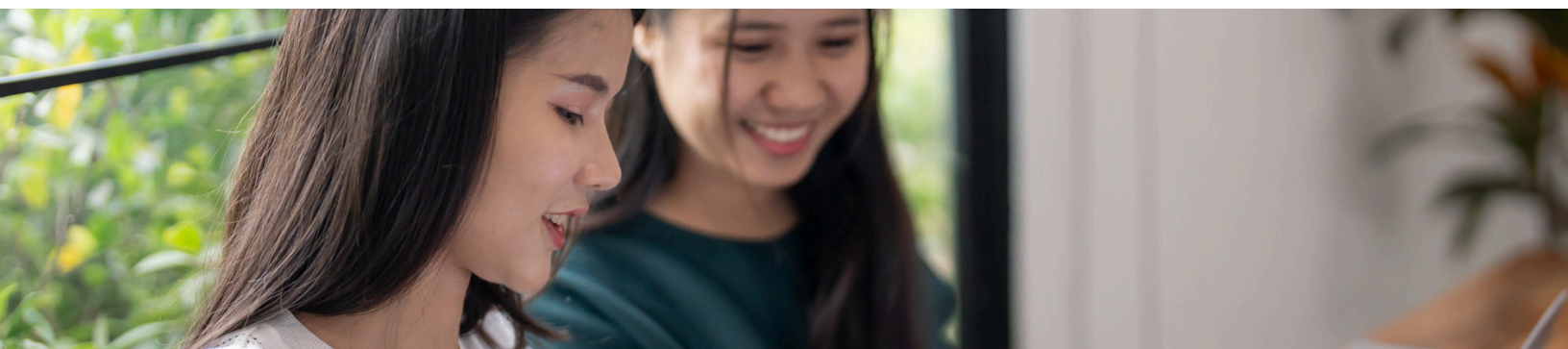
"I think because our organizations are relatively flat, you get to see the impact of your work more directly. So regardless of what that is, you can kind of go around whether it's people or facilities or activities or products or whatever, you can kind of say, 'oh, I was a part of that' because there's not a lot of steps between you and the actual results."

Working in the not-for-profit sector provided a sense of purpose and job satisfaction, with many respondents enjoying the rewarding nature of helping others and working for a cause rather than profit. Many expressed a primary function of the sector is to identify and fill gaps in existing services, and support those in need within the community, striving to ensure no one falls between the cracks in our social safety net.

"I love that the non-profit sector is possibly the only sector on the island that spends time seeking out who might need help or who might be being ignored... the nonprofit sector is outer facing. We're coming in to find out what the needs are or find out where something's missing."

Not-for-profit organizations play a critical role in supporting health, mental health and wellbeing, while celebrating diversity, equality, inclusion, and "bringing comfort to people who may not have it anywhere else". At the same time, it was acknowledged that the scope and mandate of each not-for-profit organization is limited. Social assistance or other government programs are often insufficient to meet the basic needs of people, directly impacting their capacity to engage with and benefit from community-based programs and services.

"The part that I struggle with the most is that I get funding to run programs. I don't get funding to put food in people's fridges. I don't get funding to give them rent money. All of those foundational fundamental aspects of survival I don't get to do, and so I am constantly questioning whether or not I'm actually serving my community because I can get money to buy food to pay for an event and pay for a facilitator or pay for a speaker to come to an event to talk about a thing. But if someone can't get there, how are they going to participate? If someone is struggling to put food on the table, do they have the energy and bandwidth to come to your event and get help in other ways or support if they can't meet their basic needs?"



Opportunities for professional development

Do you have sufficient access to professional development opportunities?

71 responses



Investing in workers by providing opportunities for professional development, both through training and attending conferences, was viewed positively. Having access to professional development opportunities enhances workers' ability to support clients and the community in their current roles while also growing their portfolio of knowledge and experiences to help them access possible future employment opportunities.

"There's a conference that's held in a different province each year. They cover the cost for me to go. I know we don't have a big budget for travel, but when they could make it work, they invested in me, so that is important...I guess they felt if they invested in me, I might stick around a little longer and I think it definitely has helped that they've done things like that."

Professional development fosters not only individual growth but also a culture of collaboration and shared purpose within organizations. By engaging in continuous learning and reflective practice, professionals become more open to diverse perspectives and better equipped to work collectively toward common goals. This emphasis on inclusivity and adaptability strengthens team dynamics, encourages innovation, and ensures that all members feel empowered to contribute meaningfully.

"I always tell my employees that I want them to use this as a stepping stone. I can't guarantee a future because it's a not-for-profit, but I really encourage them to think about the kind of experiences that they want going forward in their career and look at how we can build that into a project."

"The willingness to be flexible to give everybody the opportunity to share their ideas and be part of the conversation and make sure they know that their contributions are valued. As we're planning new projects or planning to apply for new funding, everybody has a say in what our next projects might look like."

Flexible work environments

Flexible scheduling and hours were highly valued by participants. Time in lieu was also important for better work/life balance, though some found it difficult to take the time off due to the demands of their positions. Several participants with children appreciated having flexibility to take time off when their children were ill, or to work outside of the traditional 9-5 hours to accommodate caring responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements were closely connected to balancing paid employment with caregiving responsibilities.

“It provides me flexibility and just at this stage of my life, that's really important...obviously if you have in-person meetings or calls, like you work around that, but it's nice that if I had a child that's not feeling well, I could take that time. That is just huge for me at this point.”

Several participants also highlighted the benefits of hybrid work and remote work options, both to accommodate working styles and to support work/life balance. Others identified that they were better able to respond to and support their own physical and mental wellbeing through flexible work schedules.

“Remote work options. I understand that sometimes being in person is a little bit better, but I don't think there should be any kind of mandatory set days for coming into the office if there is an office. Accommodating your employees and how they best work kind of centers them and creates a relationship where they feel valued. “

Many roles within the not-for-profit sector require work outside of traditional 9-5 hours, featuring evening or weekend meetings and programs, or after-hours supports, in order to meet the needs of the community. For others, work can spill over into evening hours when daytimes are filled with meetings and other responsibilities.

Overwhelmingly, participants felt flexible work hours were a benefit, but at the same time many shared that flexibility can also lead to working more than the amount of hours they are paid to get things done.

“Sometimes I work in the evening just because that's when I can sit down and focus on it instead of if I had meetings all day, or I had to prepare for a board meeting, or whatever. They don't keep track of my hours and I appreciate that, but they know as long as I kind of get my work done and it doesn't matter what hours I do it- could be midnight. And the hybrid situation, which I know so many organizations have switched to that since COVID and they realize it can work.”

"It tends to be a 37 and a half hour week, but as we all know, there's projects and things that have to get done. So, if that week, you know, it takes 50 hours, well, guess what? You're working 50 hours...So burnout then becomes the factor, right?"

Building networks and community

Building strong networks and a sense of community often begins with simple, meaningful connections that grow over time. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to engage with others working in the not-for-profit sector as well as those in the broader community through their work.

"I really enjoy community based work. I love building relationships with people. There's positives and negatives to a small sector like this that's very well connected. I feel like I have a lot of positive relationships with colleagues in the sector too."

"You get to meet a lot of people that you perhaps didn't meet before, and then you kind of see those people wearing their other hats, and sometimes you wear other hats in your community too, and so you sort of, you feel like you're part of something in the community."

CHALLENGES WORKERS FACE IN THE SECTOR

Lack of job security and low salaries

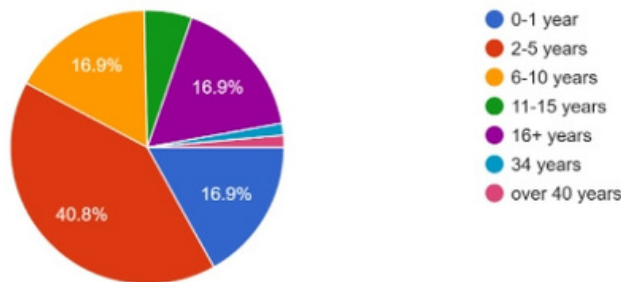
The majority of those surveyed had been at their current organization for 5 years or less. However, many of those who completed the survey were in leadership positions in their organizations, so this may underrepresent the experience of those working more precarious or shorter-term contracts.

"The idea that you could lose your job every year... What would I do if we didn't get funded this year? That's the math we're all doing every year."

Employment in the not-for-profit sector is often tied to short-term, project-based funding cycles, creating a constant undercurrent of uncertainty. This instability makes it difficult for organizations to offer stable, full-time positions, which in turn complicates hiring and retention, and causes stress and hardship for workers.

How long have you been with your current organization?

71 responses

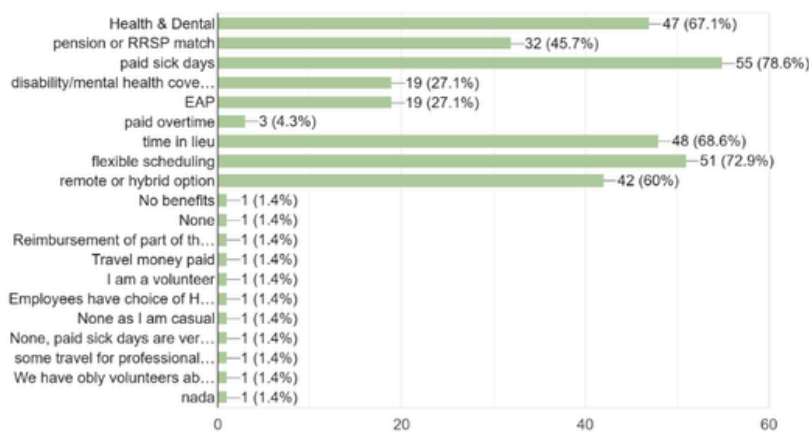


"If you take our sector and our charitable program that we offer, I would suspect most of the employees in our sector would qualify for support because they would meet the standard. So we're working in a field by which most of our people will actually qualify for support in our field."

Not-for-profit organizations are often working within very limited budgets, and project-based funding often also has strict limits on the amount of pay employees can receive to work on projects. Most organizations are unable to provide benefits to all workers such as health, dental or pensions.

What benefits do you currently receive? (check all that apply)

70 responses



"That intrinsic motivation to work in something where you can see your impact and all that kind of stuff becomes an excuse for paying people less and hiring people on these, one year contracts, project funding, and all that kind of stuff, which really in almost any other industry would just not fly."

Many participants highlighted the overall low rates of pay in the sector, often below the cost of living, as an issue for employee retention long-term. Some participants highlighted a tension between what not-for-profits are able to pay, and what government employees receive for a comparable position. While the government provides funding for many not-for-profit organizations on either an operational or project basis, this funding is often not sufficient to align worker compensation with government jobs.

Several participants' reflections also point to broader patterns of gendered undervaluation within the labour market. Occupations and sectors dominated by women have historically experienced lower wages, reduced job security, and fewer benefits, even when requiring significant education, specialization, and leadership. Participants described frustration that work supporting community wellbeing and social infrastructure is often treated as less economically valuable than work in male-dominated sectors.

"The pay rates maybe, like if you look at the type of job you do within the not-for-profit versus if you were doing it for government or whatever, it doesn't really correlate. So those people tend to go to government jobs where there is long-term planning, for things like retirement and future investment."

Small organizations and staff teams

While smaller sized organizations often offer many positive aspects for workers, they can also pose challenges. Many of the organizations represented in this project have only one or two paid staff members. As such, staff are often required to take on multiple roles and wear many different hats

"Wearing a different hat every day. It was almost hourly, the position was changing. There were just never enough hours in the day and then I'd have to work nights to do my job. That's a big challenge that we face."

within the organization and the broader community. Some participants felt pressure to be an expert in many different areas, contributing to feelings of stress and burnout.

The small size of most not-for-profit organizations on PEI can also limit opportunities for growth and advancement. This can be a particular deterrent for younger workers looking to expand their career opportunities.

"I like the flexibility in lean and mean organizations. I think a challenge about those is that there's not a lot of room for progression. Sometimes you're the only staff of an organization, so you can't go up."

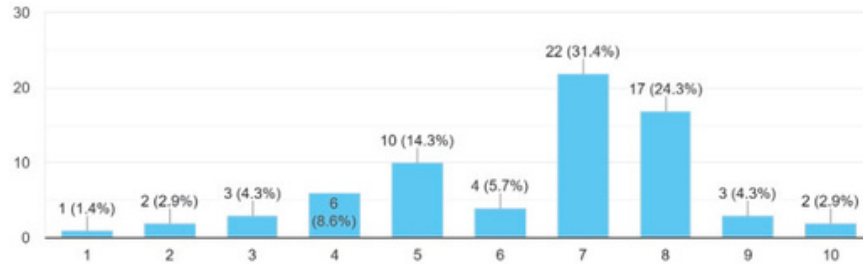
Recognizing workers in the not-for profit sector

The not-for-profit sector is often misunderstood, burdened by assumptions that it lacks the talent and expertise found in higher-paying industries. Some believe that skilled professionals gravitate toward corporate roles, leaving not-for-profits with fewer resources and less capable workers. However, this perception overlooks the depth of creativity, leadership, and entrepreneurial thinking that thrives within the sector.

"When you look at the workload that someone who works at a not-for-profit has, it's comparable to a CEO in a lot of workplaces. The community at large doesn't understand how extremely skilled the not-for-profit sector can be."

Many are working in positions in higher stress environments or situations, with the majority of survey respondents rating their workplace stress levels as 7/10 or higher.

On a scale of 1-10, with one being very low stress and 10 being extremely stressful, in general, how stressful is your work?
70 responses



Nonprofit professionals frequently manage complex responsibilities, demonstrate exceptional adaptability, and bring extensive education and experience to their roles. Participants' reflections highlighted how leadership within women-dominated sectors may be less publicly celebrated or visible than leadership in business or other traditionally male-dominated fields. Several noted that nonprofit work is often associated with self-sacrifice and humility, which can make the expertise and innovation within the sector less visible to the broader public.

"My colleagues and friends in the sector are so gifted and educated and skilled and have incredible backgrounds and stuff, but I just think there hasn't been a lift of that awareness or I don't even know how you display that because of course we're super humble and we don't want to brag ever, right?"

Several participants identified the need to raise awareness about the important and innovative work being done in the not-for-profit sector. It was suggested that having awards for workers making significant contributions in the sector could help to bolster public awareness, similar to the awards available to volunteers and in other sectors.

A common misconception about the not-for-profit sector, noted by some participants, is the belief that everyone working in it is a volunteer. While there was consensus that volunteers play vital roles, emphasizing the contributions of paid staff would provide a more complete understanding of the sector's wide-ranging social and economic impact.

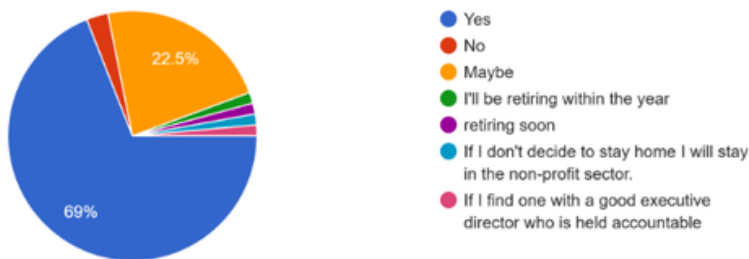
"You see the business community definitely champions business leaders. There's awards. There's promotions for them...people who have their whole careers in the nonprofit sector, I don't think there's any platform for them to even display their skills or display their gifts or their accomplishments."

“You could also invite elected politicians to an awards ceremony, who, when you say that people don't understand that the sector is not all volunteers, most of the time, if you really listen, they're assuming that they're talking to a room of volunteers.”

CHALLENGES ACROSS THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT SECTOR

Do you plan to stay in the non-profit sector for the foreseeable future?

71 responses



Access to funding

The most common issue shared by participants was a need to invest more in the not-for-profit sector. Many identified they are facing growing needs in the community, while seeing available funding stagnate or decrease. Gaining access to sufficient funding to allow organizations to achieve their mandate is an ongoing issue for most organizations. Some receive a small amount of core funding that might allow them to hire a full-time or part-time staff, while others rely on project based funding and donations to keep the doors open.

Many highlighted that the not-for-profit sector is consistently expected to do more with less. Organizations strive to support communities with limited resources. However, they are often unable to meet the needs, having to turn people away or take on work beyond the scope of the organization. Many participants reported consistently working more hours than they are paid for. Project-based funding can limit the time and duration of programs, leaving service gaps that can have detrimental impacts on individuals and families.

“They want all these things, but they don't want to recognize what you need to invest in the sector, in human resources and funding in order to make that happen. It's like, ‘well, you need to do that with nothing’.”

“They always talk about investing in business and giving to a charity. So a grant to a charity and investing in a business.

Why don't they just consider it an investment? That's the whole thing that you hear a lot of the time, ‘we can't just keep giving

handouts.’ It's not a handout, you're investing.

You're investing in the improvement of people's lives. In our society, our environment, all the things we do, right? It's an investment.”

“They ask us, ‘why should you get more money if you can make do with this?’ But when you think about a business coming forward and saying, ‘hey, we want to expand, we want to hire more people’, they don’t say, ‘well, why would we let you do that when you can scrape by’, right? We want to see the sector valued for what they’re worth, instead of being lowballed.”

Reporting requirements outlined by funders can also be onerous, placing additional strain on organizations already working at maximum capacity. Some highlighted a growing trend toward professionalization that has introduced important benefits, such as improved standards, safety, and consistency. However, this same shift has also led to more complex processes, administrative burden, and slower implementation, especially when resources have not expanded to match these new expectations.

“No one comes to you after you get your fridge and says, ‘You got your fridge. That’s great. Is it working? That’s great. How is it helping you? Is it easier to open? Like, is it crispier? Are the vegetables crispier now? There’s vegetables in your body. Do they feel better?’ Said no one ever, right? And the person who sold the fridge doesn’t have to prove that each year that fridge is still giving you benefits, over and over again, and then somebody else can decide whether you deserve to sell that fridge anymore. So it’s like extra eyes, extra measurement, extra obsession, extra steps to make sure the impact’s actually correct”

For organizations that do have access to enough core funding to hire a staff person, that individual is often responsible for finding the rest of the money the organization will need to function. This involves applying for project-based grants, and in many cases also leading fundraising efforts, including donor outreach and planning fundraising events. Organizations without charitable status face additional barriers in their fundraising efforts as they are unable to give charitable tax receipts for donations and are ineligible for some grant funding programs.

“I didn’t get a raise because I asked not to have one. I don’t feel like raising more money at this point. You should be rewarded for your work, and yet you can’t because you don’t want to have the burden of having to raise the funds, because that’s just more pressure.”

Challenges finding sufficient project-based funding opportunities that align with the organization’s work and mandate were experienced by many participants. Several participants described limiting their own pay for the betterment of the organization, or to avoid adding additional work to their plate because they would need to raise these funds themselves, taking away from their critical work to meet the organization’s mandate.

"We kind of focus more on just trying to make sure the money's coming through the door rather than spending our time on creating more sessions and things that could benefit our membership...It's getting harder and harder, the programs are getting tighter and tighter, and less things are eligible, and so I honestly, I don't know what the future of some of the organizations are gonna end up being."

An additional challenge shared by some participants is misalignment with certain funders and an organization's mission or mandate, preventing them from access some opportunities.

Relying on limited or project-based funding to provide programs and services poses particular challenges for recruitment and retention of workers in the sector. Projects are often time-limited resulting in short-term contracts that do not provide job stability or benefits for workers. This is not only problematic for workers, but results in organizations continuously having to hire and train new employees, losing experienced workers and institutional knowledge.

"We don't want to promote the lottery for people, especially if they're dealing with recovery, right? So many groups we're working with that are vulnerable, and that is not what you want to put in front of their face."

A further limitation of project-based funding is that many opportunities focus on introducing new programs or services. As a result, organizations are often challenged to reframe, modify, or simply give up on existing, evidence-based, successful programs and services that are making a difference in people's lives. Additionally, there can sometimes be delays in project-funding distribution, with organizations needing to start projects before receiving funds, putting them in a precarious situation.

"It's scary when you're getting towards the end of a project and you're starting to feel that panic that I need to figure out where the next project dollars are going to come from because I want to maintain my staff. There's not a lot of long-term security for employees in the not-for-profit sector. We definitely struggle with that."

"All of them are looking for new. Nobody wants to support well-established. It's like maybe we've come to the top of this particular thing and we want to continue to do that thing. But no, what's the new thing?...It's almost like if you have a good program, that's bad."

Organizations based in some rural areas of the province may face additional challenges to access funding. In parts of the province where large areas are unincorporated, not-for-profit organizations have taken on roles in the community that municipalities would normally provide, such as maintaining parks, community halls, and recreation facilities.

Federal funding available to support these types of initiatives often requires a given percentage of the program be funded through the province and a municipality, making many funding opportunities inaccessible for not-for-profit organizations outside of municipalities. Not-for-profit organizations are also less likely to get low-interest loans than municipalities, creating further limitations.

“In this area, and I’m sure in other rural areas, there’s not strong local government through municipalities, so a lot of not-for-profits end up filling that void. Like the rinks are often not-for-profit and the curling club is a not-for-profit. So things that in other jurisdictions are either owned and operated by a municipality or maybe receive a subsidy or a grant to help their operations. That doesn’t always happen. So I think the nonprofits in rural areas just deliver more or expect it to deliver more in a certain way.”

Fiscal responsibility and reserve funds

“People think, oh, it’s a not-for-profit, you’re not allowed to make a profit. Technically, that’s not what it is. It’s just that nobody personally benefits financially from any of the profit that’s made within the organization, and it just gets reinvested back into the community. There’s a lot of people who don’t really understand how not-for-profits work.”

Another theme that arose during the project discussions was perceptions and misunderstanding about how not-for-profit organizations manage funds. It is common for organizations to strive to

have reserve funds set aside, in order to ensure an organization remains viable despite fluctuations in funding opportunities and to address unplanned expenses, such as building maintenance or impacts of natural disasters.

Some organizations venture into social enterprises to provide additional income and help support their organization’s mandate, which can be a positive experience but can also

“The number of people who would say, Well, you’re a nonprofit, so you can’t make a profit. ‘You have to spend it all, you have to get down to zero.’ And I’m like, ‘No, actually, that’s a very bad thing’, right? And ironically, some of the people that make that comment are people who work in government...But if you’re a nonprofit and you don’t have any money, people aren’t getting paid, right? So there’s a big difference there.”

add additional work and responsibility for the organization. Many felt the need to have reserve funds as an organization was not widely understood or accepted by some funders or the general public. A few participants reported experiencing having clauses in funding agreements that allowed the funder to look at the organization’s bank statements, with some worried that if they showed reserve funding was available they would not be eligible for or would lose access to grant funding as a result.

“You'll see these little clauses in their agreements that say, we reserve the right to look at your reserves, or if you've got so much of reserves that, you know, defund you. You want to have that kind of reserve in your coffers, whatever your annual budget might look like, because of the COVIDs that might happen or some sort of event like Fiona changed something, or you have a facility that has an issue. If you are not creating those reserves, then you are actually doing a disservice to your organization.”

The role of core funding

“I would love for funding agencies, whoever they may be, our government, provincial, federal, etc. to really look at the value that a notfor profit is bringing to a particular sector and just offer operational funds. I know that there has to be accountability attached to that, but at the end of the day, it is frustrating to have to do so much piecemeal project by project just to get that 10-15% admin dollars and try to keep stacking that to have enough money to pay your staff.”

For not-for-profit organizations serving essential functions in the community, helping people to live healthy and well, stable and sufficient core funding is key to achieving an organization's mission. Without consistent core funding, the people served and supported through not-for-profit programs and services are directly impacted and may experience hardship or harm as a result. Providing organizations with core funding is a recognition of the importance of the organization's mission, and the value they bring to the community.

“They want all these things, but they don't want to recognize what you need to invest in the sector, in human resources and funding in order to make that happen. It's like, ‘well, you need to do that with nothing’.”

“If core funding doesn't start to become the norm, we will lose organizations. Full stop. It's going to happen. It's already starting to happen. If they don't change their philosophy around core funding, it will 100% happen, or they will go private. So you'll see some people that decide to put in a private shingle and just do a very small piece of the sector with people that can afford it.”



Some participants described feeling pressure to diversify or ‘juggle’ sources of income for the organization in case any one source is reduced or removed completely. Projects are time limited and often require strict adherence to plans and outcomes that may shift throughout a project,

and limit flexibility to support staff effectively should they experience something that requires them to take time away from their paid work, such as illness or meeting caregiving responsibilities. For organizations without access to core funding, trying to find the next project or donation-based funding source can cause significant stress for managers and staff.

“I wasn't even sure how I was going to make payroll. It was so stressful. I don't think I slept for two months.”

In some cases, project-based funding opportunities require an organization to have a certain level of insurance, or to complete an audit of the organization's finances. To meet these requirements, organizations need to have a base amount of funding to draw from to even be considered for project-based funding.

“There is always a need for funding to pay for the boring things like liability insurance, office supplies, and bookkeepers. Too many funders want to pay for the attention grabbing items like tree planting or new jobs, but they could really make a lot more impact by providing unrestricted funds.”

Having sufficient core funding that is unrestricted allows for consistency in programing that can better meet the needs of communities long-term. Constantly shifting focus to align with project-based funding opportunities can dilute impact and strain resources.

“We would love to have at least one program that runs consistently and it would be such a benefit to what we can offer people, right? Because then we're not always having to advertise we're doing this new project and we're doing this new project and we're here and here and here. We could actually focus on one of our main objectives.”



It was widely recognized that strategic planning is critical for organizations to effectively achieve their mission and mandate. Providing core funding for multiple years rather than needing to reapply annually would allow organizations to plan for the long-term. Without consistent core funding providing a base level of stability and predictability, organizations struggle to provide consistent programs and services.

Succession planning is also a challenge for organizations with no core funding, or limited core funding, causing additional strain and hardship when staff retire or leave positions. This is particularly challenging for smaller organizations who may only have one paid staff person.

“Planning ahead strategically as an organization, it's very risky, right, to know that the next year that funding could be completely gone. So you have to still sustain fundraising and donations and all those pieces, right? So not just core funding, but multi-year core funding that you have that security is critical.”

“We only ever have one staff member, and there might be a few months before you can find somebody to replace them, and then who brings them up to speed? Maybe the person who left isn't able or willing to bring the other person up to speed. So, we are in very precarious positions, and it'd be great if the government sort of looked at that as a system where it's like, how can we provide more support to those small organizations.”

Transparency in core funding processes

Are you satisfied with the current approaches used by the provincial government to determine eligibility and distribute core funding?

64 responses



“There needs to be more of a consistent and transparent approach to how core funding is allocated, how it's calculated in PEI. I feel like the government's looking at things in different boxes, where different departments might approach it differently.”

While project-based funding opportunities offered through government departments tend to have clear requirements for application, outlining factors and metrics that will be considered in funding decisions, many participants expressed uncertainty and confusions about the processes and requirements to access core funding through the province. For organizations who had been able to access some level of core funding through government, funding amounts often remained static for many years, not taking into account yearly increases in operational costs.

Those who had accessed some core funding often had to take the lead to contact departments directly, and build relationships with staff and elected officials in order for their organization to be considered. No one described filling out an application form or experiencing defined processes around core funding applications. Many struggled with knowing who to contact, or which departments they should reach out to if their organization's mandate overlaps with multiple government departments.

"PEI could adopt multi-year core funding agreements to provide stability, simplify reporting requirements for small organizations, and ensure equitable access across rural areas. A transparent scoring system and public guidelines could be used, with consultation from community sectors to align funding priorities with local needs and sustainable impact."

"I'd like the government to publish 'here's our goals, our objectives, and these are some of the criteria we'll be looking at. This is the methodology that we use to triage applications and to divvy up the funding that we have available.' And then when you receive your response, there should be some kind of explanation about why you got this much versus that much, or why it's going up, or what you could do to improve your core funding situation potentially in the future. And this should be public information. It's public money, like what are different organizations getting so that we can have a broad view of what's going on."

In some cases, participants described being shuffled from one department to another, or one staff person to another, sometimes ending up with access to some core funding and sometimes not, without a clear rationale as to why funding decisions were made. Relying on building personal connections within departments in order to gain access to core funding can also cause anxiety and stress at times of transition or elections, when the people in decision making positions may change. Shifting government priorities and elections can affect who the contact is for nonprofits within government, also potentially impacting their operations and/or funding.

"Everything is tied to the political machine. There's just certain nonprofits that people have to eat, people need health care, people need an environment. There should be priorities within the government of things that function whether or not the political machine is on hold."

One proposed solution to help increase transparency and consistency in funding across departments was for the provincial government to create an interministerial not-for-profit secretariat. This secretariat would develop clear and consistent processes and metrics for allocating grant funding, and core funding in particular, supporting departments to distribute funding in a transparent manner, and without external distribution approaches used by some departments that can lack accountability.

“A fair, transparent PEI core funding process should use clear public criteria, equitable access for rural and small organizations, consistent evaluation by independent reviewers, and published decisions with rationale. It should prioritize accountability, community impact, and alignment with provincial goals while minimizing administrative burden for applicants.”

Many highlighted the importance including criteria based on qualitative evaluations and impact stories rather than relying solely on quantitative metrics. Additionally, some suggested there could be different levels of core funding available to meet the needs of diverse organizations of different sizes and scopes, or a stepped process beginning with project funding, moving to two to three year program funding and culminating in longer-term core funding.

Clear and consistent processes should also be developed for reporting mechanisms that ensure accountability of organizations with reasonable reporting requirements. It is critical that these reporting requirements are developed in collaboration with the not-for-profit sector, and consider not only numbers served, but the qualitative impacts on people and communities.

“Organizations should be provided with clear eligibility criteria, funding priorities, application timelines, assessment process, available funding amounts, required documentation, reporting expectations, and examples of eligible and ineligible costs. They should also know how decisions are made, who reviews applications, and where to access support or clarification.”

“Impact is important because all of our missions are focused on what we're impacting, who we're impacting. The application could have something that you just explain your impact. Just let us have a little statement about if we had X amount of core funding, whatever is being potentially offered, here's what we could achieve. And then, if that's your statement, they give you the core funding, and then in your report, you say, here's what we achieved. And if we actually did it, then we get core funding again. So there's accountability on both sides for the organizations getting the funding and from government as to how they're making those decisions.”



Limitations and gaps in employment programs

“Some of the programs that are offered through Skills are a little frustrating too because they're usually all minimum wage and they are short term. So you just start to get somebody trained...We have some lovely people that have come in and they've helped us, but by the time we onboard them, they have two weeks left. There's never enough people in the non-profit sector to get everything done anyways, let alone onboard the sweet student.”

With limited budgets to implement projects and programs, many not-for-profits access employment programs that provide financial support for organizations to hire staff. Overall, employment programs were viewed by most as a benefit for their organization and for the worker, with CSN's new ASCEND program highlighted as being particularly effective and appreciated.

“The ASCEND program is still entry, but being able to know who you want to hire or knowing their skill set and then creating the position around their skill set is really valuable to an organization as opposed to the reverse, where you have to work within the parameters of the funding program, and then you're putting it like a cold call for who you're gonna get in that low wage range and stuff like that.”

At the same time it was widely acknowledged that the structure of these types of programs can also pose challenges. Student job positions primarily take place over the summer, which may not always align with the needs of an organization. Additionally, having to re-apply for student positions annually, and not knowing if your organization will receive student support until late in the year, can make it difficult to plan effectively, or even meet the requirements of project-based funding in some cases. The later organizations are notified about successful student job placements, the harder it is for them to find a student to fill the position. Some expressed frustration with not being told why their organization was or was not approved for student support, making it difficult for them to prepare for future applications.

“Often when you need the people you're so busy you don't have time to train them. Double-edged sword you know because you're trying to get things done. And then it's a cycle every year.”

Non-student employment programs that provide short-term support also have their limitations, as organizations are often unable to afford to keep staff when the program funding ends. These programs are also often at minimum wage or slightly above, which may not support hiring workers with post-secondary education, skills, or experience organizations need. There was also a desire for additional supports for organizations to help ensure workers have meaningful and productive experiences during their employment program placements.

“They want to go have a job that's more than \$20 an hour because they presumably have gone through university and gotten a degree in something, and the marketplace is \$25 to \$30. There almost should be another level there for positions that require more skills and that these NGOs, organizations require to run. Because we're trying to make that program work for something that it's not working for.”

Volunteer boards

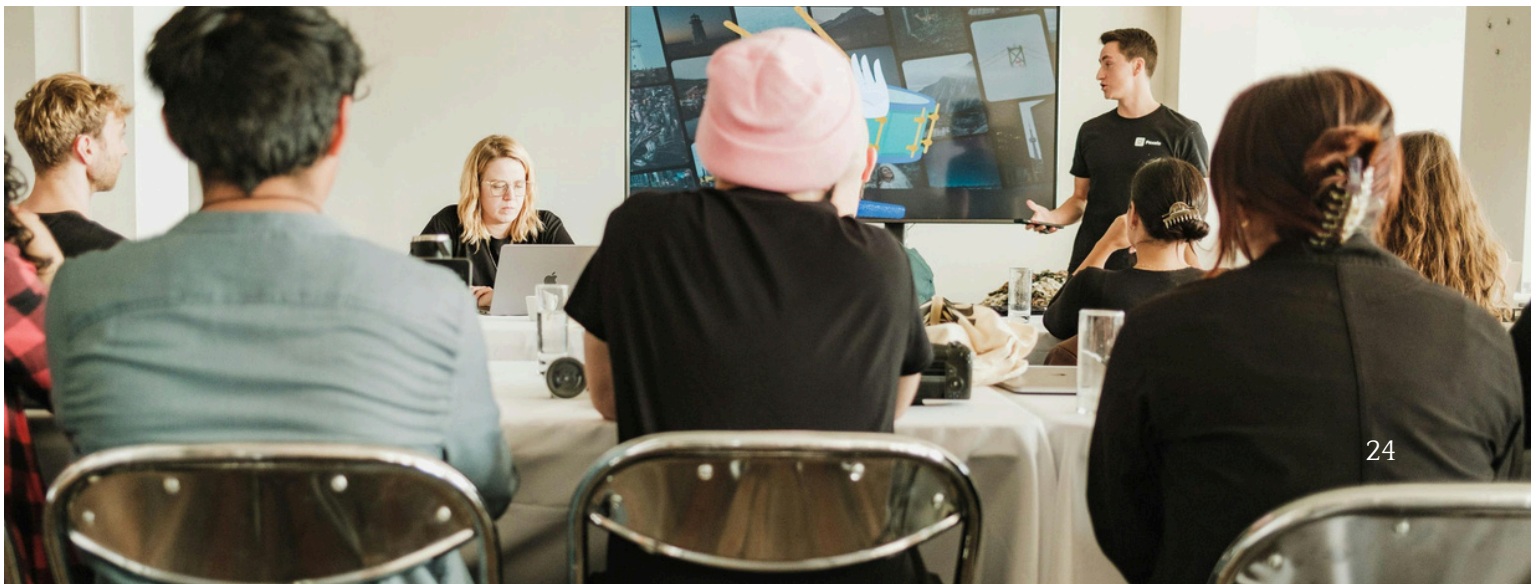
“Sometimes working with a board can be challenging, but knock on wood, I've had some really great boards. They're very supportive and appreciative and that makes a world of difference. And I know one person could change that and change the dynamics of everything.”

Each not-for-profit organization is led by a volunteer board of directors that is responsible for the overall governance and stewardship of an organization. They don't run day-to-day operations, but they make sure the organization is doing what it's supposed to do, ethically and sustainably. Participants expressed great appreciation for the commitment made by volunteer board members and the important role

they play in supporting organizations. It was also recognized that as volunteers, board members bring differing skills and experience to the table, and often have multiple responsibilities outside of the organization limiting what they are able to contribute.

Many board members are also part of more than one board, further limiting the time they have for each organization. Being able to engage and connect with people in the community through volunteering on boards was also identified as a positive for social interaction and to build relationships and networks.

“We're asking those folks to do it after they've done their full-time job for the day, if they've got children or parents that they're tending for. And then we go, oh, well, you should be doing more. Where's the more that they're going to give you, right?”



“It's funny because sometimes you go to a meeting and it's like, well, at work, I work for you, you, and you. What hat do you wear? Now I'm here and I'm the chair, so we're working together on this one. Depending on what tables, what table you're sitting at it's like the same 45 people, we just trade out kind of thing.”

Some participants identified challenges in recruiting new board members. This can be a particular challenge for organizations with multiple senior board members who may soon be retiring from these positions. The Youth on Board Program was highlighted as a great opportunity to engage more young people as board members who may not otherwise envision themselves in these positions.

“The Youth on Board program is a great way to get students involved with boards and let them know the need for volunteers. We had a student one year who didn't even know what a non-profit was and their parents didn't volunteer and it was just a great way to show them this sector and what's available and what community needs. So, I just wanted to let everybody know about that program because it's fantastic.”

Making an effort to reach out to newcomers in the community, or connect with organizations supporting newcomers, can help to expand the pool of potential board members and also provide opportunities for newcomers to connect with the community.

In recent years, many organizations have moved to online board meetings. Meeting online at least part of the time can help to facilitate engagement, particularly for organizations that work across the province.

Some organizations are also finding that advertising opportunities to join their board on their social media has helped connect with new board member.

“If you're coming from a city where, say the city of Toronto ran the rank and the community center and there was YMCA that was this big monolith and had thousands of people that were involved, your chances of being on a board for something might be less kind of idea. You might do one thing if you were doing anything in the big city like that. You wouldn't be on multiple boards. They don't know how to connect to it.”

“The big change was COVID for us because everything moved online and we used to have in-person board meetings and it used to be like you'd be asking someone from this area to drive to Charlottetown or we'd do a board meeting maybe every other time in Summerside or vice versa, but now everything's online. So that's made a big difference for support from board members.”

Ensuring that volunteer board members feel appreciated and supported to thrive in their roles is key to maintaining these relationships. Taking the time to connect with new board members and find out their skills and interests can be key to helping them feel comfortable and connected. Additionally, ensuring board meetings are well organized and efficient can support engagement.

Those who step forward to fill board positions may not always come with the skills and experience to fill gaps. Providing training opportunities and support for board members can not only help them be more effective in their board roles, but also provides useful skills and knowledge they can take and apply in their lives outside of the organization.

“I’ve just seen some people where I think they get too tied up in like, ‘We gotta meet every month whether we need to meet or not. And we gotta read the minutes out word by word from last time’. And then you’re there for like 45 minutes and you’re like, this could have been an e-mail. So I think for other people that maybe have other things on the go, that’s less enticing to them.”

“The inequity that exists within the concept of the board is that you know often you’re looking for people who have backgrounds in law, have backgrounds in finance, have backgrounds in governance and what sort of life situation would they be in to get them to achieve that level of education, right? So it’s a bit classist in a lot of ways because it’s like, well, we need people with those skill sets and at the same time it creates a barrier to people in the community who want to participate but don’t have the understanding of what it means to be a board of directors.”

In addition to providing training sessions when new members join a board, it was also suggested that the Community Sector Network could host an open session for anyone interested in volunteering who might want to know more about being a board member and the opportunities available. This event could allow for information sharing about the roles and responsibilities of board members generally, and also provide a space for people to connect with organizations with open board positions.

Recruiting and retaining volunteer board members is an ongoing challenge for many organizations. Finding new and innovative ways to encourage and support volunteer board members is essential for sustaining not only the organizations themselves, but also the broader sector and workforce they serve.

“Having a series of training sessions where people who are interested in being on a board but aren’t sure where to start. It could be sort of like a personal development kind of thing where it’s figuring out where do you fit within a board, what would be most suited for you, and then we could create an entire event where we match organizations with potential board members, like speed dating.”

“We have so many organizations, they each need a board and those boards give so much. With seeing a number of organizations in the community experiencing a transition in leadership, the responsibility of that is falling on volunteer boards, and a lot of those volunteers who have been members of some of the boards of organizations that are really essential to services in our community are under pressure, and some of them are cracking. Considering those services and supports to boards and to volunteers is actually an essential part of support for workers and work in the sector.”

COLLABORATION IN THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT SECTOR

As organizations struggle to achieve their mandates and support those in need with limited resources, finding ways to work together and share resources with other organizations can be a great benefit. Many participants appreciated the introduction of CSN’s shared services program and look forward to seeing this program continue to grow and expand in the future. Some areas that were identified as potential shared services were bookkeeping, accounting, audit services, technology support, grant writing, directors insurance, and pension or benefit plans.

While many felt sharing services with organizations would be an asset, some also felt unsure about how to make these connections with other organizations and find alignment in shared needs. Opportunities to share office spaces or meeting locations were also highlighted.

“They need the administrative kind of the bookkeeping and the financial and grant writing and all those shared services kind of things. Things that we’re all paying separately for, and we can get kind of a better economies of scale in terms of the costing of some of those things. Because you don’t have a lot of those administrative costs in your funding structures for your organizations.”

“There needs to be a shared services program because I don’t need a tech person 40 hours a week, but I do need a tech person sometimes right? So there’s some value in sharing resources even though we’re in different sectors or delivering different services.”



In addition to shared services, it was also recognized that there may be multiple organizations offering the same or similar services across PEI or in the Atlantic region. These smaller organizations are often competing for the same funding opportunities. It

“I think the other challenge in our sector is there's over 1,700 not-for-profits, and most have been created because they didn't know another one existed doing the same work. And so I think some of the work of the Community Sector Network and others is part of bringing those groups together. Maybe having separate organizations doesn't make any sense anymore. Maybe there is an opportunity for a few other amalgamations of associations.”

was suggested that the Community Sector Network could play a role in connecting similar organizations and supporting collaborative engagement, exploring potential benefits of working more closely together, sharing services, or considering amalgamation when organizational missions, visions and values align.

In many cases, organizations emerge either in response to available funding or out of necessity when communities face unmet needs. An interesting theme throughout the survey responses and focus group discussions was the differences between government and not-for-profit led programs and services, leading to important questions about responsibility and sustainability.

It was widely recognized that there are limitations and benefits to both government led and not-for-profit programs and services. Governments were generally viewed as having more direct access to resources and public accountability, while not-for-profits can be more flexible and directly connected to communities.

“It can be the funding structure exists and an organization grows to take advantage of that funding structure or there's a gap in the community that has to be met by volunteers, met by a not-for-profit, and then has to advocate for a funding structure to be applied. But those discussions about what appropriately should be in each sector don't happen.”



“There's some things that are shifted out of government for the non-profit world, and that allows the funding to be cut off at a moment's notice, and so it allows government to distance itself from the consequences of its decisions.”

As PEI communities continue to face growing economic pressures and evolving social needs, questions arise about which responsibilities should remain in the hands of government and which can be more effectively managed at the local level. However, meaningful consideration and consultation on what should be addressed by the government directly is not often available or offered.

“I think that there is a conversation to be had sector by sector about what should be public service and what really should be delivered directly. And I think that we have not had those conversations, but there are things that are currently being offloaded onto the community that should be core public services, and there are things that really would be better delivered in the community that are being delivered by government. It has to be specific to each sector, but there has to be a really clear conversation.”

As organizations continue their daily efforts to meet diverse needs and support healthy living across PEI communities, many noted an increasing awareness of the need for a more coordinated and unified approach to advocacy and funding. Participants emphasized the importance of advocating collectively as a sector through the Community Sector Network, rather than operating in isolation, to strengthen conditions for all not-for-profit organizations and the people they serve.

“That strong collective voice of this is on the ground work that's happening every day in the community sector. And if it wasn't happening tomorrow, what would that look like? That gives some value to the positions, but collectively, right, not each individual organization.”

CONCLUSION

The experiences shared by those who participated in this project paint a picture of a sector that is deeply committed to its work, but operating within ongoing constraints. Many participants spoke about the strong sense of purpose that comes from contributing to their communities, building relationships, and seeing the direct impact of their work. At the same time, this sense of purpose often exists alongside financial instability, high workloads, and limited opportunities for advancement. Participants' experiences illustrate the tension between expectations and available resources, showing how systemic funding structures, short-term grants, and program-focused initiatives can constrain what organizations and their staff can achieve.

The findings also highlight the ways in which structural factors shape day-to-day experiences. Reliance on short-term, project-based funding contributes to job insecurity, limits long-term planning, and creates additional administrative burden for organizations. Access to stable core funding was consistently identified as a key factor in improving both working conditions and organizational sustainability, yet processes for obtaining this funding were often described as unclear or inconsistent.

Participants also described the realities of working within small organizations, where staff are frequently required to take on multiple roles, and where limited capacity can affect everything from program delivery to succession planning. At the same time, these smaller environments can foster strong relationships, flexibility, and a sense of shared purpose. This combination of strengths and pressures underscores how systemic factors, rather than individual organizational choices, largely shape staff experiences, workloads, and retention.

The project also highlighted broader sector dynamics, including the role of volunteer boards, the importance of collaboration, and ongoing questions about the relationship between government and the not-for-profit sector. Many participants pointed to the need for clearer expectations, more coordinated approaches to funding and service delivery, and stronger recognition of the sector's role in supporting communities across the province. Overall, the findings point to structural pressures—funding constraints, undervaluation, and limited influence in decision-making—that shape both organizational capacity and the experiences of those working in the sector.

The findings are intended to inform future conversations about workforce development, organizational policy, and funding practices. They also offer guidance for how employers, funders, and policymakers can support more equitable and sustainable working conditions, ensuring that the contributions of women in the nonprofit sector are recognized, valued, and supported.

The findings also point to the importance of understanding these challenges within the context of a women-dominated workforce. Many of the pressures described throughout the project, including emotional labour, caregiving responsibilities, expectations of flexibility, wage suppression, and the normalization of “doing more with less”, reflect broader patterns experienced across feminized sectors. Participants consistently described highly skilled and complex work that is essential to community wellbeing, yet often undervalued economically and publicly. Recognizing the not-for-profit sector as both a critical social infrastructure and a major source of women’s employment is important to understanding the long-term implications of funding instability, burnout, and workforce retention across the province.

Throughout this project, it was clear that the Community Sector Network (CSN) plays a pivotal role in strengthening the capacity and sustainability of not-for-profit organizations across Prince Edward Island. Through initiatives like the ASCEND program, CSN enables more flexible and effective hiring practices that better align with organizational needs and worker skills. CSN fosters collaboration by advancing shared services that help organizations reduce costs and access essential resources such as accounting, technology, and grant writing, with further opportunities to support organizations to find new ways to support each other. Professional development offered through CSN helps enhance organizational effectiveness and capacity, while supporting workers to thrive. Most importantly, CSN is in a unique position to serve as a unifying force for the sector, amplifying a collective voice in advocacy efforts to improve conditions for organizations and workers. By coordinating efforts and representing the sector as a whole, CSN enhances the visibility, value, and impact of community-based work, ultimately strengthening support systems for the communities they serve.