

# **Living Wage Initiative Outcome Harvest**

Evaluation Report

By

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱ SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## **Acknowledgments**

The evaluation activities took place in Mohkinstsis, the Blackfoot name for Calgary, and engaged individuals throughout what is now known as Alberta. It is important to understand the learnings from this evaluation within the geographical context, which is inherently tied to the political context, where colonial governments have continuously sought to dismantle Indigenous communities and their traditional relationships with this land. The dominant economic and social systems, like capitalism, patriarchy, and individualism, that colonization has perpetuated are at the root of poverty and social disruptions that necessitate efforts like the Living Wage Initiative. We can learn from Indigenous peoples and their ways of being to disrupt systems that value profit over people and the planet. These acknowledgments go hand in hand with a desire to honour and show deep respect for the Indigenous peoples and communities on whose land this evaluation took place, including the Blackfoot confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, îethka Nakoda Nations: Chiniki, Bearspaw, Goodstoney, and Tsuut'ina Nations, as well as the Métis Nation of Alberta's Battle River Region and the many Indigenous peoples who call this place home.

Jolene Fawcett, lead researcher/evaluator, completed this work as a final capstone project in the Master of Arts in Community Development at the University of Victoria, and as an employee of KRD Consulting Group, who was commissioned to deliver the evaluation. There is no previous affiliation between KRD Consulting Group and Vibrant Communities Calgary or Alberta Living Wage Network. As a cis-gender female of white settler descent, Jolene seeks to understand her positionality and its impacts; in particular as a researcher within a system that has historically upheld colonization. Jolene made every effort to utilize reflexivity and inclusive, equitable, and accessible processes to facilitate an ethical process throughout the evaluation.

The learnings in this report would not be present without the dedication of the VCC and ALWN evaluation team members, and the willingness of all research participants to share their time and knowledge. While every perspective cannot be included in full here, this report intends to honor the essence and emergent themes shared by participants. Deep gratitude exists for the efforts that brought this report to life, and the ongoing work of so many to ensure people are paid fairly for the work they do, and that they can live well and thrive for themselves, their families, and their communities. The living wage work brings about a more just and caring community inclusive of all, and it has been a privilege to be welcomed into the journey. Lastly, deep gratitude goes out to Roman Katsnelson for his ongoing support and mentorship in learning Outcome Harvesting, and family and friends who supported, shared advice and knowledge, and provided care throughout this project.

# **Executive Summary**

## **Introduction**

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) is a nonprofit organization that advocates for and convenes groups around social and economic issues and solutions – they steward the City of Calgary’s Enough for All poverty reduction strategy and co-chair the Social Policy Collaborative which brings groups together to inform the development and implementation of public policy to improve economic and social wellbeing of Albertans. One aspect of VCC’s work includes the Living Wage Initiative, where in 2019 they convened partners to support the establishment of a coordinated Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN), and since 2008 they have calculated and published Calgary’s living wage rate, and engaged in advocacy, education, and capacity building to promote living wage awareness and utilization. A living wage is the hourly rate that an employee would need to be paid to meet their basic needs and enjoy a modest standard of living (i.e., put some money into savings, and participate in civil society). VCC commissioned KRD Consulting Group to conduct an Outcome Harvest evaluation to explore the impacts the Living Wage Initiative has had over the past five years in Calgary, and Alberta. The evaluation questions asked what workforce and operational changes living wage employers experienced, how living wage paid employees’ professional and personal quality of life changed, how relevant parties participated in collective advocacy efforts in Alberta, what impacts occurred for Calgary’s local economy, and what policy and decision-making changes did funders and governments make. For each of the above changes, the evaluation asked how VCC’s Living Wage Initiative contributed. The changes were explored for the period of March 2019 – March 2024.

## **Methodology and Methods**

In contrast to more traditional evaluation approaches that measure progress towards a predetermined set of objectives or outcomes, Outcome Harvesting collects evidence of impacts or changes that have occurred over a specified time (e.g., 2,3, or 5 years) and works backward to identify a program’s contribution to those outcomes (Wilson-Grau, 2019). It is implemented through a series of distinct, but adaptable, steps, each of which facilitates collaborative processes with primary users including dialogue, generative brainstorming, and collective decision-making; this collaborative approach ensures the evaluation is useful to those who will most use it (Wilson-Grau, 2019). In Steps 1 and 2, Plan and Design, KRD facilitated the primary users (VCC and ALWN) to identify the program and evaluation scope and roles, the purpose and uses for the evaluation, and to surface desired learnings which informed a set of five evaluation questions that guided the subsequent data collection process. In Step 3, Harvesting, VCC and ALWN evaluation team members submitted secondary data from the specified evaluation period (March 2019-2024) including emails, blog posts, policy briefs, media engagement, and reports. The lead evaluator reviewed secondary data and logged any evidence of an outcome that matched the type of change and actor of interest in the evaluation questions. The result was a large set of outcome descriptors, which the evaluator thoroughly analyzed and themed to generate a smaller, and broader, set of 15

outcome statements across the five evaluation questions which served as a hypothesis of change. In Step 4, Substantiation, the evaluator conducted individual semi-structured interviews with individuals who were either hypothesized as experiencing the change, or could have witnessed the change, asking them to verify, refute, and/or provide context to the outcome statements. The evaluator reviewed all interview transcripts, refining the outcome statements based on interview data. The final set of 12 Outcome Statements was presented to the evaluation team for interpretation, surfacing information on VCC's contribution to the outcomes, and the significance of the outcome. The final set of findings includes the substantiated outcome, its significance, and the contribution of VCC, which collectively provide answers to the evaluation questions.

## Evaluation Questions and Findings

Below is a summary of the substantiated outcomes within each of the five evaluation questions.

Q1. What operational and workforce changes have living wage employers in Calgary experienced?

- Outcome 1.1 – To gain or maintain certification, employers made **financial adaptations** (wage increases, budget, and business model changes) and **administrative adaptations** (program planning, internal/external communications)
- Outcome 1.2 – Living wage employers experienced cultural benefits (improved organizational culture), **reputational** (attract quality staff, positive public image), and **economic** (cost savings from retention of qualified and reliable workforce, repeat customers)
- Outcome 1.3 – Living wage employers experienced challenges that were **economic** (increasing wages at the same time as operating in a more expensive context), **operational** (ongoing business model planning to remain sustainable), and **reputational** (lost business from higher prices or non-values aligned customers, nonprofits competing for funding against non-living wage employers).

Q2. How did Calgary-based Living Wage Paid Employees' personal and professional quality of life change?

- Outcome 2.1 – Employees experienced **job satisfaction**, felt valued by their employer, were engaged and committed to their work, and could choose their preferred work.
- Outcome 2.2 – Employees experienced personal benefits including **less stress outside of work, increased economic independence, and improved physical and mental health.**

Q3. How did public, private, and social good organizations participate in collective advocacy efforts in Alberta?

- Outcome 3.1 – Several municipalities and non-profits collaborated to establish the Alberta Living Wage Network by providing financial and in-kind resources, which developed a standardized methodology and automated calculator
- Outcome 3.2 – ALWN members increased awareness and education on the living wage

- Outcome 3.3 – ALWN members and living wage allies collaborated to recruit more ALWN members and living wage employers
- Outcome 3.4 – ALWN members took direct action to advance living wage utilization

Q4. What changes to Calgary's local economy were experienced by private, public, and social-good sectors in Calgary?

- Outcome 4.1 – Calgary-based employers experienced business growth and customer retention

Q5. What changes to income/cost of living policy and decision-making were implemented by governments/funders in Alberta?

- Outcome 5.1 – The Government of Alberta fixed a steep eligibility cut-off, and announced wage top-ups for shelter workers
- Outcome 5.2 – Living wage information was used in policy/advocacy with varying success, funders shifted mentalities to place a higher value on living wage pay

These outcomes demonstrate the impact of VCC's employment lever of change which promotes decent work and living wage to reduce poverty in Calgary. More employers who choose to pay a living wage can have an impact on the number of employees who experience the benefits described, including job satisfaction, and personal benefits like more economic independence and improved wellbeing. These are important considering VCC's focus on promoting healthy and supportive communities where people have enough to thrive. The establishment of a coordinated living wage movement strengthened awareness and utilization of living wage by different interested, affected, or relevant parties: employers are provided a platform by way of certification, the public is engaged through education and awareness, and funders and governments are engaged through advocacy efforts. This is important in light of VCC's aims to promote shared leadership on poverty reduction solutions. Overall, VCC contributed to these outcomes through their critical work in convening partners and contributing financial and in-kind resources to establish the ALWN and develop the living wage employer certification/recognition program, providing communications expertise to publish living wage reports, representing the movement in the media, leveraging their existing platform and networks to expand participation of ALWN members and employers and keep the living wage relevant in conversations around poverty and affordability.

## **Conclusion**

This evaluation can support ALWN and VCC in advancing living wage utilization in the province. Key learnings and lived experiences will be used to inform communications and program activities, to promote more involvement from larger and highly visible organizations, and to surface barriers to collective advocacy that have the potential to drive more affordability measures and improve individual and community wellbeing. The findings will be critical to securing funding to continue engaging diverse actors in poverty reduction systems change.

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**Acronyms**

ALWN	Alberta Living Wage Network
E4A	Enough for All
KRD	KRD Consulting Group
LWE	Living Wage Employers
LWPE	Living Wage Paid Employees
VCC	Vibrant Communities Calgary

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## **Introduction**

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) is a nonprofit organization that advocates for and convenes groups around social and economic issues and solutions – they steward the City of Calgary’s Enough for All poverty reduction strategy and co-chair the Social Policy Collaborative which brings groups together to inform the development and implementation of public policy to improve economic and social wellbeing of Albertans. In March 2024, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC), approached KRD Consulting Group (KRD) to explore the possibility of conducting an Outcome Harvest Evaluation of their Living Wage Initiative. KRD is a social impact organization that supports organizations to learn and build collective efficacy through consultant services focused on strategy, evaluation, and data. Outcome Harvesting is an evaluation methodology that identifies, formulates, verifies, and makes sense of outcomes based on a program’s contribution. It is useful in complex program contexts where change is not linear, predictable, or fully understood, and where there is a desire to learn about the influence of a program’s outcomes on broader systems change (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). Initial conversations between KRD and VCC identified Outcome Harvesting as a meaningful approach for evaluating the impacts of the VCC’s living wage work that seeks to contribute to poverty reduction through systems change.

As a KRD employee and UVic student researcher, Jolene Fawcett led an Outcome Harvest evaluation of VCC’s Living Wage Initiative from April to October 2024. The work was supported by a core evaluation team with representatives from VCC, the Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN), and KRD. The evaluation aimed to learn about the merit and value of VCC’s living wage work in Calgary and Alberta by surfacing the initiative’s impact over the past five years and facilitating an understanding of how VCC contributed to those impacts. While there is a growing body of research on the impacts of living wage programs on employers, employees, and the economy, there was no research specific to the outcomes occurring in Calgary and Alberta, nor the impacts of coordinating living wage work regionally. This final capstone project evaluation report describes the context and purpose of the program and evaluation, the methodology used to conduct the evaluation activities, and a robust set of findings as Outcome Statements that describe what changed, for whom, how the program contributed, and why the change is important.

## **Background**

### **Project Client**

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) is the steward of Enough for All, Calgary’s community-owned poverty reduction strategy. VCC leads poverty reduction efforts in Calgary, working towards a future where all Calgarians live in a strong, supportive, and inclusive community and have sufficient income and assets to thrive, and where all Indigenous people are co-creators in Calgary’s future (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2020). Employment is one of 10 Levers of Changes identified in Enough for All by promoting the paying of a living wage to employees. The Levers are key focus areas that guide VCC’s poverty reduction work.

## **Living Wage Initiative**

A living wage is an hourly wage an employee should be paid to meet their basic needs, be able to save for an unexpected event, and be able to fully participate in their community (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2021). VCC has been calculating and publishing the living wage rate annually for Calgary since 2008. Other municipalities in Alberta were also calculating the living wage, however, each was using a different methodology and there was no coordination in when or how they would publish or communicate information about the living wage rate. In 2018, VCC identified an opportunity to advance the living wage movement in Alberta by creating a coordinated provincial Network that could standardize the use of the calculation, like other provinces such as British Columbia and Ontario. VCC supported early coordination efforts with other municipalities, each offering resources towards the early aspects of the Network. This included the development of a methodology and software to standardize the calculation and increase its credibility and comparability across communities and over time, and the hiring of staff to facilitate Network activities. This early collaboration led to the establishment of the Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN), which launched in the summer of 2021 to support annual calculations for participating communities and to certify and recognize living wage employers across the province (Alberta Living Wage Network, n.d.). VCC maintained an integral role as a member of the leadership council of the ALWN and has continued its Living Wage Initiative local to Calgary.

VCC's work points to a rapid increase in the cost of living and illustrates that wages have not kept up sufficiently, contributing to increasing poverty for workers (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2020). The work of VCC to advance the living wage in Calgary is critical to their overall aim of reducing poverty. The below activities describe "VCC's Living Wage Initiative":

1. Coordination: Providing knowledge, experience, time, and resources to support the development and maintenance of the Alberta Living Wage Network by
  - a. Convening several municipalities and actors toward the goal of a coordinated Network
  - b. Developing systems and structures (e.g., governance documents, software development) to standardize and make more efficient the living wage calculation across Alberta municipalities.
  - c. Ongoing involvement on ALWN leadership council and subcommittees, securing and contributing funding, strategic communications support
  - d. Developing the Living Wage Employer Certification Program (including employer recognition resources) in conjunction with the Alberta Living Wage Network
2. Living Wage Advocacy, Education, and Capacity Building
  - a. Communications: policy briefs, news releases, media engagement, social media, blogs, infographics

- b. Facilitating relevant partners: networking with government, living wage allies, and prospective employers, stewarding the Enough for All Champion Network
- c. Education: providing presentations and training, research dissemination

Some of the above activities were more present in the early days of convening and coordination, whereas others are still ongoing in VCC's day-to-day work. While the Living Wage Initiative work conducted by VCC is Calgary-based, their activities also focus provincially through advocacy efforts and their integral role in the development of, and ongoing involvement in, the provincial Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN).

## **Evaluation Design**

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this Outcome Harvest evaluation is to support VCC in learning about the impacts of their living wage work over the past five years, from early coordination until the present day. In contrast to more traditional evaluation approaches that measure progress towards a predetermined set of objectives or outcomes, Outcome Harvesting asks what *has* happened, surfacing both intended and unintended outcomes from the knowledge and experiences of key informants, and seeking to understand the contribution of the program to those changes (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). In short, it identifies how change has occurred, as well as why the changes are important (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). It can be a useful methodology for evaluating initiatives that operate in complex environments, where change is not linear or predictable or where cause and effect are not well known, and when wanting to understand how individual outcomes have contributed to more widespread system change (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). VCC identified Outcome Harvesting as a meaningful methodology as a way to learn about positive outcomes and to surface potential negative outcomes for informing program enhancement. Ultimately, VCC desired to understand and communicate the value of the living wage as a poverty reduction tool. VCC operates in a complex context, as many systemic and structural factors impact poverty. Outcome Harvesting provides VCC an opportunity to learn about and maximize their impact on poverty reduction in Calgary.

### **EVALUATION USES**

The VCC and ALWN members in conversation with KRD Consulting group (as the evaluation team) identified that VCC and ALWN most need the evaluation findings to:

1. Identify the impacts of the Living Wage Initiative to inform program improvement and evidence-based decision-making around resources.
2. Support recruitment of more living wage employers.
3. Communicate the impact of the Living Wage Initiative to prospective funders.
4. Ensure accountability and alignment with the broader Enough for All 2.0 poverty reduction strategy and organizational aims.

5. Support other advocacy and research organizations to understand and communicate the potential impacts of their own Living Wage work.

### **SCOPE & EVALUATION QUESTIONS**

In 2019, VCC was driving momentum towards a coordinated provincial living wage network. Therefore, a retrospective evaluation exploring outcomes between early coordination until the present day (March 2019 to March 2024) became the timeline for the Outcome Harvest. Clarifying program scope proved challenging, as VCC played an integral role in driving early coordination and ongoing activities as a member of the ALWN leadership council. Parts of the living wage work that VCC previously held are now collectively overseen at the level of the Network. The evaluation team agreed on exploring impacts at a provincial scope, where relevant, to maximize learnings, and at a municipal/local scope to support feasibility. These geographic boundaries were explicitly identified and named in each evaluation question. Useable Questions (akin to evaluation questions) guide the evaluation, outlining what change is of interest, and for whom, and inquiring as to the program's contribution (Wilson-Grau, 2019). The evaluation team formulated five Useable Questions:

In the past 5 years:

1. What operational and workforce changes have living wage employers in Calgary experienced?
2. How did Calgary-based living wage paid employees' personal and professional quality of life change?
3. How did public, private, and social good organizations participate in collective advocacy efforts in Alberta?
4. What changes to Calgary's local economy were experienced by private, public, and social-good sectors in Calgary?
5. What changes to income/cost of living policy and decision-making were implemented by governments/funders in Alberta?

For each of these changes, how did VCC's Living Wage Initiative contribute?

For definitions of terms see Evaluation Design in Appendix A.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This section describes the identification and selection process of relevant literature and a subsequent review and synthesis of key themes from the chosen literature. The purpose of the review is to provide context to the Living Wage Initiative Outcome Harvest's approach and to demonstrate how it fits into the larger field of study.

## **Mapping the Process**

Using the University of Victoria's general library database and Google Scholar, researchers entered search terms "Living Wage AND Evaluation" and "Living Wage AND Impacts" which provided a significant volume of articles. I excluded non-empirical articles that did not focus on living wage impacts or were estimations/speculative. Also excluded was research specific to calculating and communicating living wage methodologies as this review was focused on outcomes. Eighteen articles were included in this review, ranging in publication date from 1999 to 2023. Eight of the included studies explored impacts on employees who receive a living wage: qualitative studies used interviews (Flint et al., 2015) or interviews and focus groups (Cunningham, et al., 2023), and quantitative studies used surveys (Carr, et al., 2020; Fairris, 2005; Fairris et al., 2015). Some used a mix of both survey data and interviews (Niedt, et al., 1999; Wills & Linneker, 2012). Twelve studies explored impacts on employers who pay a living wage, quantitative studies used surveys (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Fairris, et al., 2005; Grant & Trautner, 2004), qualitative studies used interviews (Arrowsmith et al., 2022; Carson, et al. 2022; Ptashnick & Zuber, 2015; Zeng, et al., 2017; Zeng & Honig, 2017), and mixed-methods studies used both qualitative interview approaches as well as economic/employment data (Niedt, 1999) or surveys (Swaffield, et al., 2018; Wills & Linneker, 2012; Wills & Linneker, 2016). One study used quantitative and qualitative survey analysis focused specifically on the impacts of the living wage on the economy (Brener, 20015), and one study used quantitative experimental design focused on the impact of living wage messages on consumer behaviour indicators (Guerrero, et al., 2020). Several relevant evaluations have been published, one focused on surveys and interviews with living wage advocates across Canada to inform best practice (Pei et al (2015), one reviewing the Rainforest Alliance strategy on living wage (Ton, et al., 2024), and one reviewed the living wage special initiative in the UK (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2014).

## **The Foundation**

While the idea of a living wage has its origins in labor movements as far back as the early 1900s, the current landscape and conceptualization of living wage have seen a surge in popularity and interest in its potential to address poverty for individuals who are employed, with implications for employers, communities, economies, and the broader society (Parker, et al., 2016). Early efforts around advocating for living wage were taken up by early trade unions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Evans & Fanelli, 2016). Modern-day resurgence, originating in the U.S.A and now globally, has led to implementation of living wage laws, and/or campaigns that drive voluntary participation since the late 1990's (Evans & Fanelli, 2016). One of the earliest studies on the effects of a living wage was in Baltimore in 1999 (Niedt et al., 1999).

Governments and social activist groups across the globe have enacted and engaged in living wage campaigns to promote fair and decent wages, albeit with varying scope and implementation. Campaign activities included some or all of the following: calculating and publishing the living wage for a specific region, building partnerships and collaborations to advocate and advance living

wage utilization in government policy and business practice, and the provision of a voluntary accreditation or certification program for employers paying a living wage, including information and branding/recognition resources to demonstrate their commitment. In London, UK, in 2005 grassroots activists started to organize and demand living wage pay, leading to a longstanding and now institutionally backed living wage campaign through the Living Wage Foundation (Living Wage Foundation, n.d.). In New Zealand, a grassroots movement led to the launch of their living wage campaign in 2012 (Living Wage NZ, n.d.). In Canada, organizing efforts around living wage has been more localized at a provincial level. The first was in British Columbia in 2001 – where a coalition of groups started organizing to launch the BC Living Wage Families Campaign, modeled after the London, UK efforts (Evans & Fanelli, 2016). Ontario and Alberta have followed suit, with local advocacy groups working to coordinate living wage efforts provincially (Evans & Fanelli, 2016). These provincial networks have some level of coordination among municipalities to use the same methodology and publish rates collectively at the same time. One evaluation shared findings that advocates across Canada spoke to the importance of networks in supporting their advocacy, having connections with others in similar campaigns, and learning from what has worked and not worked (Pei, et al., 2015). Diversity of membership within campaigns also enhanced the available skills, experiences, resources, and expertise available (Pei, et al., 2015).

For those provinces without coordinated networks, Living Wage Canada and the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives provide support to municipalities to calculate and publish their living wage rates. There are also larger living wage groups of international scope, like the Global Living Wage Coalition established in 2014, a group that conducts research, provides resources on living wage and methodology, and lists rates calculated across the globe (Global Living Wage Coalition, 2024).

Overall, there is a fairly consistent definition of the living wage as the hourly (weekly, or annual) rate that an individual should be paid to not only meet their basic needs but also be able to save and participate in society, affording them dignity and decent work. The inconsistency in living wage is relative to the methodology used to calculate the rate. In Canada alone, there are four prominent calculation methodologies. Living Wage BC (Living Wage BC, n.d.) and the Alberta Living Wage Network (Alberta Living Wage Network, n.d.) both developed a calculator that allowed municipalities across the province to publish rates with the same methodology. The Ontario Living Wage Network utilizes the National Living Wage Framework, developed by the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, as its methodology (Ontario Living Wage Network, n.d.). In the U.S. and Canada, living wage rates are published specific to a city or municipality, and in the UK, they have a rate specific to London; however, elsewhere globally the rates are calculated countrywide.

In some places, a living wage is implemented by way of policy or law, making it mandatory for certain employers, while in other places it is a voluntary program that employers can opt into by way of certification or accreditation. Voluntary programs are more commonplace, except in the U.S. where living wage pay is more often implemented by municipalities as Living Wage

Ordinances - policies that mandate a living wage be paid for a specific group of workers (often government employees, and their contractors' employees) (Bernstein, et al., 2005). Voluntary or opt-in approaches are more common in the UK (Living Wage Foundation, n.d), New Zealand (Living Wage NZ, n.d.), and Canada (Living Wage Canada, n.d.a), with each providing an employer certification or accreditation program. In terms of poverty reduction, living wage campaigns often seek to engage many partners who are accountable for ensuring employees receive fair wages, governments who make policies and provide benefits that impact the cost of living, businesses who determine what to pay their employees, and community organizations/researchers who calculate rates to inform fair pay policies.

There are several theories and conceptual frameworks that are used within the literature, dependent upon the focus of the research. Researchers exploring living wage in terms of its impact on businesses explore economic theories, such as social exchange theory, psychology concepts focused on motivation and consumer behavior, and impacts on employers and economic indicators (jobs, GDP, growth). From a different vantage point, researchers exploring living wage in terms of its place within business ethics and accountability, explore concepts within Environmental, Social, and Governance principles (ESG), sustainability, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). From a justice standpoint, where the focus is on living wage impacts on poverty reduction and individual/community wellbeing, researchers used concepts and theories related to social change, policy and advocacy, and quality of life indicators. For example, Ptashnick & Zuberi (2015) found that certified voluntary living wage employers saw their commitment as a signal of their values, and those of their clients, of fairness and economic justice. The International Labour Organization (ILO), a tripartite UN Agency that brings together actors around labour standards and policies, has had longstanding recognition of living wages as a condition of labor that promotes justice, and is required for maintaining peace and harmony in the world (International Labour Organization, 1919). The ILO conducted research that led them in early 2024 to publish a formal definition of living wage and endorsed living wage policies - stating decent wages are central to economic and social development and to advance social justice, that they reduce poverty and inequality and ensure a decent and dignified life (International Labour Organization, 2024). The ILO does caution for the need to have rigorous estimation approaches to inform living wage policies that consider workers and their families, as well as the economic context, and that operationalization is incremental, and thoroughly planned (International Labour Organization, 2024).

## **Main Themes of the Literature Review**

The main themes that surfaced in the literature are organized below into several categories, including employer challenges and benefits, employee challenges and benefits, and impacts on the economy and consumers.

### **EMPLOYER CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS**

Overall, there were mixed findings for employers relating to financial challenges. While all had some level of cost incurred by paying a living wage, Arrowsmith et al. (2022) found that the size of the organization and the number of the employees who they increased wages for (either to bring some up to living wage, or others to maintain wage differentials) played a role in how significant those costs were. Arrowsmith & Parker (2023) found that employers had to navigate the dual impact of paying staff more as living wage rates increased at the same time as a more expensive operating context (i.e., higher rent, utilities, COVID supply chain challenges). The literature was varied in terms of how employers coped with these costs. Some employers took a reduced profit (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Brenner, 2005; Fairris et al., 2015; Linneker & Wills, 2016), and some raised prices (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023). One study found that while smaller firms reduced both hours and jobs, larger firms increased the number of jobs provided (Linneker & Wills, 2016). Other studies found little evidence to suggest employers coped by reducing hours or jobs (Brenner, 2005; Fairris, 2005; Fairris et al., 2015; Zeng et al., 2017), or raising prices (Brenner, 2005; Carson et al., 2022). Despite the costs incurred, some employers were able to manage without issue (Linneker & Wills, 2016; Niedt, et al., 1999). Some employers reorganized or implemented skills enhancement to improve efficiency and productivity (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Fairris et al., 2015), and others utilized non-salary benefits to offset the living wage requirements and prove eligibility for certification (Ton, et al., 2024). Certification schemes may be enhanced when there is some form of incentivization, for example, farm producers who can secure higher prices from buyers than their uncertified competitors (Ton, et al., 2024). Without this security, certificate holders were reluctant to commit to long-term wage improvement plans without guarantees of financial contribution to it (Ton, et al., 2024). The inconsistencies in the evidence and study findings point to the varied circumstances in which different employers operate, each implementing a unique business model to accommodate their needs.

Despite the financial challenges described above the literature demonstrated that the benefits that paying a living wage facilitated were sufficient to meet or exceed those challenges. Employers who pay a living wage experienced benefits including reduced turnover (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Carson et al., 2022; Fairris, 2005; Fairris et al., 2015; Linneker & Wills, 2016; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015; Wills & Linneker, 2012; Zeng & Honig, 2017; Zeng et al., 2017), and lowered absenteeism (Fairris, 2005; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015). Workforce benefits were directly tied to cost savings for some employers (Carson, et al., 2022; Fairris, et al., 2015; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015). There were exceptions, including Brenner (2005) who found that turnover somewhat increased for employers after the living wage ordinance was implemented, and Swaffield et al., (2018) who found higher turnover among leadership as a result of narrowing wage differentials and perceived lack of fairness.

There were reputational benefits for employers who gained a positive image with the public and pro-social consumers (Carson, et al., 2022; Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2024; Wills & Linneker, 2012), providing them a competitive edge for hiring quality candidates (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2024; Carson et al., 2022; Wills & Linneker, 2012).

Living wage employers experienced positive organizational culture, with employees demonstrating higher morale (Brenner, 2005; Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2024; Swaffield, et al., 2018), and higher investment/engagement in their work (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Brenner, 2005; Carson, et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2017), with improved employee productivity (Carson et al., 2022; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015). Some literature focused on paying a living wage as a way for employers to communicate their concern for staff wellbeing (Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015), and others that it was the ‘right’ thing (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2024). Arrowsmith & Parker (2023) found that larger organizations were more likely to accrue benefits that arose from better recruitment, retention, and employee motivation. Higher wages and hours were found to improve the stability (Niedt, et al., 1999; Wills & Linneker, 2012), and the quality (Carson, et al., 2022) of the workforce. The above reputational benefits were not present when living wage implementation resulted in a narrowing of wage differentials, as employers had to navigate tensions that emerged from a perceived lack of fairness (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Carson et al., 2022; Cunningham, et al., 2023; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015). The external reputation of living wage might be promoted through using living wage as a marketing and Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, as one study posited based on their findings that living wage messages increase consumers’ perceived value of goods/services and can generate more favorable consumer responses (Guerrero et al., 2020). Some employers were driven to accredit as a result of others in their sector paying a living wage, that it was a trend to follow (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2024).

In summary, the literature shows that for businesses, there is a financial cost to implementing a living wage, particularly over time with increases in costs of living; these impacts may be greater for larger companies. Further noted was that businesses should consider the potential conflicts that can arise if wage differentials are not maintained. For many employers, the costs of implementing a living wage were not seen as significant barriers, as the costs were outweighed by the benefits, including positive internal and external reputation that can facilitate attractiveness to customers and high-quality candidates, organizational culture impacts that facilitate high employee morale, dedication, and productivity, and the subsequent cost savings and workforce reliability that come from lower turnover, less absenteeism, and quality employees.

### **IMPACTS TO EMPLOYEES**

Fewer studies focused on the impact of a living wage on employees. The studies that were reviewed demonstrated that overall, there are financial and workplace satisfaction benefits that arise for living wage employees.

Mandated Living Wage Ordinances have a direct impact on increasing wages for low-income employees (Fairris, 2005; Fairris, et al., 2015; Niedt, et al., 1999). There was less evidence of the extent to which voluntary certification programs increased wages for low-income workers. One study reported that most employers in the certification program were already paying a living wage when they joined (Grant & Trautner, 2004), while others highlighted employer’s experiences with offsetting wages, navigating pay scales, and facing financial implications to both gain and maintain

their certification (Arrowsmith et al., 2022; Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Ptashnick & Zuberi, 2015). More quantitative data on actual wage increases for employees of voluntary living wage employers would help to fill in this gap.

When comparing individuals who receive a living wage to those who do not, studies found that living wage paid employees experienced higher psychological well-being on average (Flint et al., 2014; Wills & Linneker, 2012), and that non-living wage paid employees were likely to hold more than one job (Flint et al., 2014) or have trouble paying household expenses (Wills & Linneker, 2012). Hours played a large role in whether living wage pay was sufficient to bring individuals out of working poverty conditions (Brenner, 2005; Linneker & Wills, 2016; Swaffield, et al., 2018).

Through a quantitative survey data analysis, Carr et al., (2021) identified a trend of increased job satisfaction and positive attitudes occurring for individuals around the living wage rate mark. Some literature found that employees who were paid a living wage felt better about or more affinity towards their workplace (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2024; Linneker & Wills, 2016; Swaffield, et al., 2018; Zeng & Honig, 2017) and helped employees enjoy a higher quality of life (Zeng & Honig, 2017). One study found that household make-up (i.e., dependents, non-employed, or low-income earning family members) was a barrier to living wage employees being lifted out of the household poverty threshold (Swaffield, et al., 2018). One study found that employees who received a living wage had increased income, felt less worried about finances, and had resources to put some money into savings and participate in recreational activities (Swaffield, et al., 2018).

In summary, the literature overwhelmingly points to financial and workplace satisfaction benefits for employees who receive a living wage, with some evidence that they experience higher well-being than their non-living wage counterparts. Household make-up, and the number of hours employees can secure are factors in whether their living wage pay can lift them out of poverty. While living wage ordinances have demonstrated an impact on numerous workers in specific geographical areas, there was limited evidence in the literature on the impact voluntary living wage certification programs have in generating higher wages for workers. However, there was a clear indication that employers who voluntarily pay a living wage might reap more reputational benefits from their commitment to pay fair wages on their own will, and they experienced the same workplace benefits as employers who are mandated to pay a living wage.

## **Summary**

The existing literature has explored how living wage pay has impacted employers (business sustainability), the economy (jobs, hours), and employees (quality of living). While much of the literature above is reactively seeking to provide empirical evidence on how actors are being impacted by living wage ordinances and voluntary programs, some researchers are more explicit in their focus on the overarching goal of poverty reduction and the role that living wage can play in advancing a more just and equitable society (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2023; Carr et al., 2021; Swaffield, et al., 2018; Wills & Linneker, 2012; Zeng et al., 2017)

The majority of these research studies began with a specific hypothesis about change – asking whether an outcome occurred, or to what extent. Very few engaged methodologies and/or analyses that would surface unanticipated outcomes. Using Outcome Harvesting in this evaluation provided an opportunity to explore impacts without a pre-set bias or hypothesis, eliciting a broader perspective of change to surface unanticipated outcomes. Additionally, the majority of the literature was considered primary research, and not evaluation. Evaluation provides a more specific look at not only the outcomes but also the program's contribution – supporting a judgment on the merit and value of the program in a particular context. While the research available about living wage is a useful advocacy tool to provide an empirical knowledge base to inform interventions, evaluation proves useful in providing evidence that the intervention is creating the type of change it seeks.

## Methodology and Methods

This chapter describes the evaluation methodology, and methods used to collect and analyze the data. This evaluation received HREB approval (certificate # is 24-0104).

### Methodology

The Outcome Harvesting methodology was designed and refined over time by Ricardo Wilson-Grau in collaboration with many colleagues (Wilson-Grau, 2019). It draws from Outcome Mapping the definition of an outcome as a behavior that represents social change and is situated within the Utilization-Focused Evaluation theory (Patton, 2008) that ensures participatory processes focused on the usefulness of findings (Wilson-Grau, 2019). Outcome Harvesting works backward, collecting evidence of impacts or changes that have occurred over a specified time (e.g., 2,3, or 5 years) and identifying a program's contribution to those outcomes (Wilson-Grau, 2019). It can be a tool for evaluations of many types, whether formative, summative, developmental, or ongoing monitoring (Wilson-Grau, 2019).

#### CLASSICAL OUTCOME HARVESTING STEPS

Wilson-Grau (2019) and colleagues outline six distinct, yet adaptive, steps to Outcome Harvesting (seen in Figure 1). Step 1, **design**, engages users to define the scope and purpose of the evaluation, steps 2-3 include **a document review** (secondary data) and **human source engagement** (primary data) to build a set of outcome descriptors the intervention plausibly contributed to, step 4 engages informants to **substantiate** (i.e. verify, refute, provide context to) the outcomes based on their lived experiences, step 5 moves from describing to explaining, by using qualitative analysis to organize raw data into



FIGURE 1. OUTCOME HARVESTING CYCLE (WILSON-GRAU, 2019 P 9)

something intelligible and interpreting data to provide evidence-based answers to the Useable Questions, and step 6 is the completion of the cycle where a plan is developed to promote the use of the learnings. Because of its utilization focus, Outcome Harvesting steps are not meant to promote a rigid process, they should be adaptable to the unique evaluation context, thus no two Outcome Harvests will be the same (Wilson-Grau, 2019).

### ADAPTED OUTCOME HARVESTING STEPS

KRD Consulting group and several evaluation colleagues have adapted the Outcome Harvesting steps slightly (Figure 2) to increase learning utility and have practiced these adaptations in various local contexts for over a decade (see Community Wise Resource Centre, 2017; Carya & ECCC, 2017). The adapted steps have generated significant learning value and enabled robust evaluative thinking. The plan and design phase are separated into two steps, as participation in the first includes broad planning around the project timeline and purpose that requires the client or commissioner of the evaluation, and the second includes a more collaborative approach with primary users (the commissioner and possibly others) to identify evaluation roles, scope, questions, data collection, and analysis methods. The third step of ‘Harvesting’ involves a thorough review of secondary data (pre-existing documents) to surface evidence of outcomes the program likely contributed to.

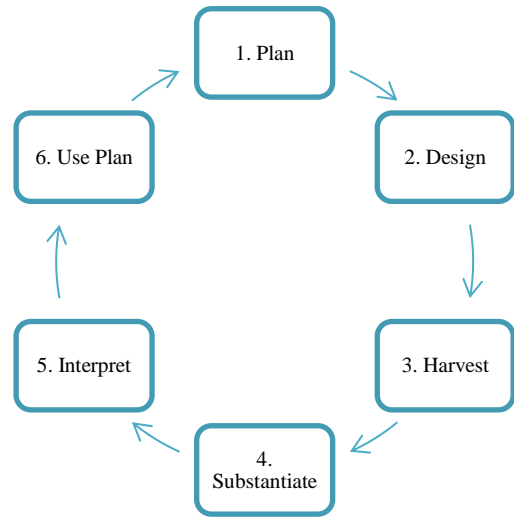


FIGURE 2 ADAPTED OUTCOME HARVESTING CYCLE

Identifying outcomes from pre-written data can provide unbiased evidence of changes that have occurred and prevent engaging with human sources for information that already exists (Wilson-Grau, 2019). The adapted cycle relies on secondary data alone in this step to minimize confirmation or expectation bias that could occur from introducing perspectives of people who are close to the program. Steps 4, 5, and 6 are the same as Classical Outcome Harvesting.

## Methods

Table 1 provides a summary of the activities, methods used, and outputs for each step, followed by a short description of the methods utilized in each.

TABLE 1. STEPS, METHODS, AND OUTPUTS

Steps	Methods/Activities	Outputs
1-2: Plan and Design (Apr 2024)	KRD facilitated a session with the evaluation team	Scope & roles Purpose and Uses Evaluation Questions Plan for harvesting

3: Harvesting (May-Jun 2024)	The evaluation team submitted secondary data KRD reviewed and analyzed data to build outcome statements KRD facilitated a session with the evaluation team to review statements and plan for substantiation	15 pre-substantiated outcome statements List of informants for substantiation Recruitment plan
4: Substantiating (Jul – Aug 2024)	Primary data collection through individual interviews Primary data analysis through thematic review and refinement of Outcome Statements	Substantiated Outcome Statements
5-6: Interpretation, Use Planning (Sep – Oct 2024)	KRD facilitated interpretation and use planning sessions with the evaluation team	Final Outcome Statements Causal maps Utilization plan

**STEPS 1-2: PLAN AND DESIGN**

In April 2024, KRD facilitated a brainstorming and decision-making session with representatives from Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN) and Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) to clarify the program and evaluation scope and roles, the intended uses and users of the evaluation, and to formulate a set of Useable Questions that outlined what changes the primary users were most interested to learn about. Evaluation and program roles are outlined below, and evaluation uses and questions are seen earlier in Chapter 2.

**EVALUATION ROLES**

As a participatory methodology, Outcome Harvesting necessitates that those who need the findings for decision-making and action – Primary Harvest Users - are engaged throughout the evaluation process (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). VCC and ALWN were identified as primary users for this evaluation, their participation was promoted by electing representatives from both to be on the evaluation team, guiding the process from beginning to end. VCC representatives included Lee Stevens and Tessa Penich, and the ALWN representative was Ryan Lacanilao. KRD staff on the evaluation team included Jolene Fawcett as Harvester, and Roman Katsnelson as support. The harvester is a term used in Outcome Harvesting, it is equivalent to ‘evaluator’ and is the person(s) who guides the process from beginning to end (Wilson-Grau, 2019).

Secondary users/audiences are those who have an interest in the evaluation findings and may use them but do not need them imminently for decision-making (Wilson-Grau, 2019). Funders, the external VCC evaluator, ALWN members, other living wage networks, and advocacy groups were noted as secondary users/audiences.

**PROGRAM ROLES**

Program roles include change agents (individuals who did the work or implemented activities), social actors (individuals, groups, or communities who experienced change as a result of the program), and boundary partners (individuals, groups, or communities who witness change among

social actors) (Wilson-Grau, 2019). In the facilitated session, the evaluation team outlined actors for each role and discussed the types of changes for which actors they were most interested to learn about, this prioritized the formulation of Useable Questions which guide the remainder of the data sources for steps 3 and 4. For a list of actors and their roles, see Appendix A - Evaluation Design.

### **STEP 3: HARVESTING**

#### SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION AND SOURCES

VCC and ALWN members on the evaluation team were tasked with gathering and submitting secondary data to be reviewed for evidence of changes that were experienced. Data was eligible if it was written or otherwise recorded (i.e., documents, photos, videos, etc.), was relevant to one (or more) of the Useable Questions, and was documented within the time scope of the evaluation (Mar 2019 - Mar 2024). In total 498 documents were submitted, including emails, blog posts, reports/publications, meeting minutes/notes, policy/Living Wage briefs, and media articles. Secondary data was either publicly available or under the stewardship of VCC or ALWN. To ensure confidentiality, data was stored in a confidential SharePoint folder, and any sensitive data was stripped of identifying information before submission.

#### BUILDING OUTCOME STATEMENTS

Building Outcome Statements starts with ‘harvesting’ the data for outcomes, logging evidence of ‘observable change in behavior, relationships, activities or actions’, with specificity on what exactly changed, for whom, when, and where (Wilson-Grau, 2019). The harvester reviewed all 498 documents and, in an Excel workbook (Appendix B), logged 228 ‘evidence descriptors’ where there was evidence of a change relevant to the Social Actor and type of change outlined in one (or more) of the Useable Questions. The harvester then conducted a thematic analysis of outcome descriptors to identify patterns or groupings of changes for social actors, which resulted in a set of 15 Outcome Statements to serve as a hypothesis of change across the five Useable Questions. In July 2024, the evaluator presented the Outcome statements to the evaluation team who verified saturation.

### **STEP 4: SUBSTANTIATION**

#### PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

The harvester conducted individual semi-structured interviews with various people, asking them to substantiate (i.e., verify, refute, adapt) each of the Outcome Statements that were relevant to their program role (i.e., social actor, boundary partner) from their lived experience perspective. In the interview, the Harvester shared the purpose of the evaluation, the program context, and the role from which the interviewee was being asked to speak. The harvester also shared the process of Outcome Harvesting and the development of outcome statements, and what would be expected from them in substantiation. The evaluator read each outcome statement individually, asking the interviewee to share their sense of it. Follow-up questions included ‘Tell me more about...’, ‘What

do you think contributed to that change?’ and ‘Why was that important?’. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

#### RECRUITMENT

Substantiation requires recruiting individuals who hold sufficient knowledge to provide information about the outcomes in question (Wilson-Grau, 2019). The previous defining of program roles assisted the evaluation team in identifying which groups should substantiate which outcome statements (See Appendix A – Evaluation Design). The evaluation team utilized targeted recruitment/sampling of living wage employers, ALWN members, and Living Wage Allies, as there was sufficient contact information available for these groups. Further, there was a desire to ensure diverse representation and engagement with previously unheard perspectives. The Harvester sent out an email request to those nominated including the consent form and sign-up link to participate. Recruitment of Living Wage Employees, Customers, and Contractors was not targeted as we were not privy to contact information. To recruit these groups, the Harvester shared a poster with a sign-up link to be distributed by living wage employers (Appendix C).

In all, 19 interviews were conducted. Network members/living wage allies interviewed (n=7), represented rural and urban geographies, municipality, and non-profit staff, most of whom had longer-standing involvement with the living wage work. Living wage employers interviewed (n=6) represented both non-profit and business sectors, from small, medium, and large organization sizes. Living wage-paid employees interviewed (n=6) represented professional services and non-profit sectors from a variety of organization sizes (small, medium, and large). Some interviewees were recent graduates and newly employed, while others were longer-standing employees. All interview participants signed a consent form and received a copy for their records.

#### PRIMARY DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed for themes that refuted or pointed to a necessary edit to the initial outcome statement. Participants' experiences and stories brought about more depth and understanding on the nature and importance of the change experienced and VCC's contribution to the change. Several Outcome Statements were edited for clarity, a couple were removed due to insufficient evidence of contribution, and two were merged as they presented the same example of change. The final version resulted in 12 Outcome Statements, each with more detail shared in the Findings section of this report.

#### **STEP 5 & 6: INTERPRETATION & USE PLANNING**

In September 2024, KRD facilitated an interpretation session with the evaluation team, presenting the substantiated outcome statements and generating dialogue to surface the significance of the outcomes and VCC's contribution to them. The session was inspired by Contribution Analysis methods which aim to facilitate purposeful, deep, and systematic consideration of the various influences on outcomes by seeking links or causal pathways between program activities and witnessed changes (Kane, et al., 2017). It recognizes the myriad combinations of factors that can contribute to outcomes and interrogates contribution (Apgar & Levine, 2024). In the session, we

asked the evaluation team to identify what program elements could have helped achieve the outcomes, what other factors may have played a role, and what lessons emerged. The facilitated dialogue surfaced additional perspectives on how change occurred, and what program aspects or other outside influences have supported those changes. The significance of the outcomes is a critical path to ensuring the evaluation holds relevance to primary users (Wilson-Grau, 2019). To surface the outcome's significance, we asked the evaluation team to reflect on the findings in relation to their broader objectives and strategies. The dialogue was supported by including visuals that depicted VCC's vision, mission, and goals of the Enough for All strategy. Throughout the sessions, we drew connections between the outcomes, and the broader VCC context to orient them into a larger narrative of change. In October 2024, KRD facilitated a session with the evaluation team to confirm the final results for accuracy, and to identify a plan for utilization.

### **Reliability and Validity: Establishing Credibility**

As Outcome Harvesting is time-consuming and resource-intensive, the evaluation team developed a detailed, clear, and feasible evaluation plan based on their existing capacity. The lead evaluator was conducting Outcome Harvesting for the first time and thus engaged KRD Consulting Group's principal consultant, an experienced Outcome Harvester, to provide feedback throughout the evaluation.

Adhering to the professional evaluation standards is an important way to achieve credibility and reliability of findings, this evaluation sought to adhere to these standards, including **utility** (intended users own info and it meets their information needs), **feasibility** (process and findings are realistic, prudent, diplomatic, and frugal), **propriety** (legal, ethical conduct and due regard for welfare of those involved and affected by results) and **accuracy** (reveals and conveys information adequate to determine merit and worth of a program (Yarbrough, et al., 2011). Some examples that highlight our attempts to adhere to these principles are shared below:

- To avoid missing unanticipated outcomes, Wilson-Grau (2019) urges the harvester to look closely at actual identifiable outcomes without focusing on predefined outcomes or objectives. In this evaluation, the main harvester had the benefit of being external to the program, thus starting with less confirmation or expectation bias in the harvesting step.
- In this evaluation 228 outcome descriptors were logged. In classical Outcome Harvesting, each of those would be substantiated, creating an overwhelming and cumbersome process. To promote feasibility, we utilized the adapted harvesting approach, conducting a thematic analysis of descriptors which resulted in a smaller set of initial outcome statements, that while broader, are still verifiable through substantiation. Developing broader statements that encapsulate evidence of change can provide more learning value than verifying many statements that may be too simple to surface meaningful findings or may be too narrow for individuals to see themselves in (Abboud & Claussen, 2015).
- The credibility of the outcomes was established by engaging a diverse group of informants through substantiation and going through a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts to

assess whether the outcome has been sufficiently verified, or if there is insufficient evidence that warrants the removal of the outcome from the findings or editing to increase accuracy. Sufficient evidence was conceptualized as all, or nearly all were able to verify the outcome. If there was one voice dissenting, the outcome may still be included in the findings, with a note that highlights the counter-perspective.

## **Limitations**

The outcome harvesting process is limited in that only those outcomes that informants know can be captured. Despite our efforts and intentions, we could not recruit any government representatives, contractors, or customers of living wage employer establishments, and we had minimal involvement with employers and employees from low-wage business sectors. The latter is important in light of the literature and evaluation findings that suggest there may be greater financial hurdles for employers and possible negative impacts for employees (like reduced hours) that could be occurring in Calgary. As we only engaged with current living wage employers, the findings may lack fulsome data around challenges that may have led to some employers halting their certification or not being able to pay a living wage. Answering question 4 about changes to Calgary's local economy was difficult with a qualitative methodology. A more quantitative approach would have been more appropriate to answer that question. In some places contribution to the outcomes remained as a hypothesis, with some suggestion of connection, but not enough evidence to definitively conclude. In particular, there was scant evidence of understanding to what extent VCC's Living Wage Initiative influenced government policy and decision-making, as we were not privy to those social actor's perspectives in this evaluation.

## **Evaluation Findings**

Findings refer to the collection of information formulated as answers to the Useable Questions (Wilson-Grau, 2019). This evaluation resulted in a set of 12 outcome statements, shared in the following section with details on the **outcome** (what changed, for whom, when), the **significance** (why the change is important for the program), and a discussion on VCC's **contribution**.

**USABLE QUESTION 1: IN THE PAST 5 YEARS, WHAT OPERATIONAL AND WORKFORCE CHANGES HAVE LIVING WAGE EMPLOYERS (LWE) IN CALGARY EXPERIENCED, AND HOW DID VCC'S LIVING WAGE INITIATIVE CONTRIBUTE?**

OUTCOME STATEMENT 1.1 – ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATIONS (FINANCIAL & ADMINISTRATIVE)  
Organizations in Calgary that were either seeking initial certification or maintaining certification on an annual basis had to make several organizational adaptations to comply with the calculated living wage rate for the municipality. The first type of adaptation was **financial**. While many employers were already paying a living wage to most of their staff before certification, they did have to increase the wages of certain roles, typically those considered low-wage sector jobs like summer students, reception, contractors, retail, or kitchen staff. One employer adjusted wages

across the organization to maintain existing compensation bands. Another employer offered health benefits as an option in place of a wage increase, as they could not afford to provide both. To accommodate staffing costs, businesses adjusted prices of goods and services strategically to maintain a viable business model. Non-profits reported adjusting their budget lines and programming, or, if they were mid-contract, accessing undesignated funds to accommodate wage increases. The second type of adaptation was **administrative**, where employers reported changes to their communications activities, including updating their public and private documents (i.e. websites, brochures, employee handbooks, and notices of wage increases). Many spoke to updating their pay policies upon initial certification, and spending time annually tracking and managing their operational planning to ensure they follow the new rate as it is published.

"Just because you work at a nonprofit doesn't mean you don't deserve to make a fair wage. From a philosophical perspective [it] shows you are willing to put your money where your mouth is, it's not just talk." ~ Living Wage Employer

"Sure there's budgetary impacts, there's operational impacts, but in a human-centered organization, where we're in direct service delivery, we're here not only for the people we serve, but for the people that are serving them". ~ Living Wage Employer

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Employers shared that the rate being published annually supported them to stay relevant with their compensation over time. Employers in low-wage sectors face more financial and administrative adaptations than sectors that are already paying above a living wage. Further, the size and previous structure of the organization played a role in the scope of adaptations that were made. Two low-wage sector employers shared their successes despite financial and administrative adaptations. Low-wage sector employers increasing wages to become certified or maintain certification has a bigger impact on poverty reduction than certifying organizations that were already paying a living wage. This outcome is important in the broader principle VCC shares in the Enough for All Strategy, which is to promote shared leadership and to involve different partners in the solutions to poverty reduction (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2020). The ALWN certification program provides employers a platform to be part of poverty reduction efforts.

#### OUTCOME STATEMENT 1.2 – ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS (CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, REPUTATIONAL)

After certification, living wage employers in Calgary experienced cultural, reputational, and economic changes. Cultural changes included the positive feelings that arise for employers by living according to their values. Employers saw paying a living wage as a tangible action representing their values and reported an improved organizational culture, with one stating it's just "a better feeling." While the living wage played a role in the positive organizational culture, it was seen as just one factor. Living wage employers often go above and beyond a living wage, whether in pay, additional benefits, or things like snacks, development opportunities, and positive relationships. Reputational changes included employers being seen in a positive light. Nonprofits

were seen as ‘walking the talk,’ by ensuring they pay staff enough that they do not perpetuate the very issues they seek to address.

Businesses shared that their living wage commitment impacted their reputation with customers who are more willing to pay higher prices at an establishment that shares similar values as they do. Organizations had a competitive edge for hiring experienced staff, both in volume and type of applicants and their willingness to accept the role. For employers who are in industries that typically pay minimum wage (\$15 per hour), the large gap between that and the 2023 living wage rate of \$23.70/hr was noted as a contributing factor to being able to hire more talented employees. With a smaller gap, there may be less of a competitive advantage to hiring quality staff. Nonprofits felt their commitment to a living wage set them apart, reinforcing their mission. Economic changes included higher employee retention and subsequently financial savings from not having to constantly hire and train. Hiring and retaining quality staff also made employees more dependable: they were readily available and less likely to call in sick. Retention supported employees to grow in their job skills, productivity, and effectiveness over time, ultimately providing a better service and, in turn, promoting customer retention.

Living wage employers all reported experiencing organizational growth over the 5 years. It was not verifiable that paying a living wage caused their organizational growth, but the above benefits were part of the picture.

"I don't hear the same amount of stress when it comes to money around work. We are able to hire better employees, have less turnover, it's just a better feeling"

~ Living Wage Employer

“We are still alive, our business is a huge risk to begin with, taking on higher wages is another huge risk. Two and a half years later we are doing fine, if anything sales and profits have gone up. We are slowly proving the business model in the market, if we can do it, I don't understand why other companies can't” ~ Living Wage Employer

#### SIGNIFICANCE:

The benefits experienced by employers strengthened their commitment to maintain their certification and to implement needed adaptations. Paying employees a sufficient wage has a ripple effect on poverty reduction when enough workers are involved. The Enough for All strategy works toward an inclusive, caring community; the positive benefits employers experience reinforces their demonstration of care for their employees. This furthers VCC’s impact by encouraging more employers to act. Some expressed a desire for larger companies like Starbucks or Walmart to become living wage employers, which would significantly impact low-wage workers and help reduce poverty on a broader scale.

#### OUTCOME STATEMENT 1.3 – ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES (OPERATIONAL, ECONOMIC, REPUTATIONAL)

Several negative outcomes occurred for living wage employers. Economic challenges were present due to significant increases in the living wage rate year over year, in particular the steep increase in 2022 to \$22.40/hr from the previous year’s rate of \$18.60/hr. The steep increase had a bigger

impact on employers who had many staff, and/or were just barely paying the previous rate. Inflation and the rising cost of living both influence the living wage rate and amplify the costs that living wage employers incur, as such employers must increase wages amidst a more expensive operating context (e.g., higher rent, costs of supplies, etc.). Nonprofits experienced challenges in increasing wages during existing funding contracts where the budget is set, with some accessing coveted undesignated funds that could have been used elsewhere to increase staff wages. While most employers noted that operational challenges were minimal, they all did report using time, resources, and planning to sustain their business or service model amid the emergent economic challenges. Reputational challenges for businesses included losing the occasional customer who was not willing to pay more for the service/product or disagreed with the organization's commitment. One business owner thought this might protect them from contracting customers with misaligned values. Businesses had to compete in a market with other non-living wage employers who, in their devaluing of labor and lower prices, have skewed customer's perceptions of the value of goods and services. Nonprofits struggled to be competitive for funding as other, non-living wage employers could put more funds into programs. Employers worked to inform funders of the value of the living wage, and a realistic budget that comes with their commitment. Over time, this barrier appeared to lessen as funders began to see the value of fair wages and shift decision-making around proposals (see Outcome statement 5.2).

#### **SIGNIFICANCE**

Though living wage employers are deeply committed to paying fair wages, it may prove unsustainable for them to continue shouldering the impact of an increased cost of living. If employers are not able to keep up with living wage pay, more workers will be living in poverty, lessening VCC's impact on poverty reduction. The above outcomes show that to date, at least for those employers interviewed, these challenges were not significant enough to prevent them from paying a living wage. However, understanding the above challenges and continuously making the ALWN employer program feasible for as many businesses as possible is an important way to ensure more employees are not living in poverty.

#### **CHANGES FOR LIVING WAGE EMPLOYERS: SUMMARY AND VCC'S CONTRIBUTION**

In response to the question of what workforce and operational changes living wage employers experienced, the findings show that to receive certification, employers made financial and administrative adaptations. Being certified led to reputational, cultural, and economic benefits which reinforced their commitment to being certified. Employers also faced challenges around reputation, finances, and operations, but reported that these were not insurmountable and that the benefits outweighed the challenges that arose. The timeframe for these outcomes varied: some employers spoke to making adaptations right around the launch of the living wage certification program in 2021, whereas others joined later in 2022. Employers were not able to specify in detail the timeframes by which they started to experience the outlined benefits and challenges. A common theme found was that the economic challenges were most prevalent in the wake of the

annual release of the new living wage rate, as each year increased. The large jump between the 2021 and 2022 rates was noted as particularly challenging.

VCC's contribution to these outcomes lies primarily in its vital role in the development of ALWN and the employer certification program. Another contribution is VCC's annual publication of the living wage rate for Calgary, which certified employers reported helped them plan more easily. The strength of the Network using a consistent and well-documented methodology gave employers confidence in the number, reinforcing their commitment to getting or maintaining certification. Support from ALWN to calculate specific employers' living wage rates (inclusive of benefits) permitted some employers to overcome economic barriers to participation. Further, a grace period for making adaptations was appreciated.

The branding and informational resources from the ALWN certification program played a key role in enhancing cultural and reputational benefits. Many employers proudly displayed their certification on their windows and promotional materials to help customers understand the value of their services. Employers shared that with these materials they could easily communicate their living wage commitment internally with staff, externally with funders, and publicly to customers. VCC contributed knowledge, time, and expertise to the development of the ALWN certification program, including the communications tools that promoted recognition, collaborating with Network members, and researching other jurisdictions. The largest number of employers in the program are from Calgary, possibly because of their prior experience with VCC's local employer program before the launch of ALWN.

**USEABLE QUESTION 2: IN THE PAST 5 YEARS, HOW DID CALGARY-BASED LIVING WAGE PAID EMPLOYEES' (LWPE) PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL QUALITY OF LIFE CHANGE, AND HOW DID VCC'S LIVING WAGE INITIATIVE CONTRIBUTE?**

**OUTCOME STATEMENT 2.1 – EMPLOYEE JOB SATISFACTION**

Employees who received a living wage experienced **job satisfaction** in their professional lives, including feeling **valued by their employer** and **engaged and committed to their work**. Employees expressed gratitude for good pay and spoke to their desire and commitment to give back that value to their employer in performance and effort. Another outcome employees experienced was having a **choice in their work**. Employees were able to leave multiple part-time positions that were often shift work for more stable full-time work in a sector/field that they wanted. Employees shared that with this newfound stability in a role that aligned with their interests, they were taking time to further their education and skills in that role. Employees in nonprofit and retail appreciated being paid higher than others in their sector, whereas employees in

"Previously I was a server, and not making a living wage, the hours were late nights and weekends. Now being Monday-Friday 9-5 is really predictable, I can live the life I want. I am grateful as this aligns with my career goals. I am also able to do an additional course on top of working and boost my skills." ~ Living Wage Paid Employee

professional services were paid comparably to their peers. With one exception, employees reported that they were satisfied in their roles and that living wage pay was one factor in this job satisfaction.

### SIGNIFICANCE

This outcome demonstrates the important role a living wage plays in employees' job satisfaction, which in turn contributes to the cultural, economic, and reputational benefits that employers experienced in Outcome 1.2. For example, employers shared that they benefited from high employee engagement and that staff were more reliable and available and called in sick less frequently. Such benefits reinforce employers' commitment to pay a living wage, in turn contributing to employees' job satisfaction and choice

in work as their wages keep pace with the cost of living. For employees, being able to choose work that is adequate and meaningful for them is important to their overall employment success and enjoyment. This promotes the principle that the E4A Strategy outlines as 'dignity for all', where individuals are not required to risk their health and safety to make ends meet (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2020). Employees having a choice in their work supports dignity, as evidenced by stories of leaving roles that were a burden on individuals' health and work-life balance to living wage-paid roles that alleviated those concerns. This outcome supports VCC's Employment Lever of Change, which promotes a living wage and opportunities for skills development and education. This outcome shows that paying a living wage is one way that businesses and nonprofits can create meaningful employment opportunities.

"My employees don't have to work 2 or 3 jobs, that is a positive outcome. I need people to be there. Not having to work several jobs is positive on their worklife balance and mental health" ~ Living Wage Employer

### OUTCOME STATEMENT 2.2 – BENEFIT TO EMPLOYEE'S PERSONAL LIVES

Living Wage Paid Employees in Calgary **experienced less stress outside of work, increased economic independence, and improved overall physical and mental health.** Employees reported they had **less stress around money** and making ends meet, especially as their wages would keep pace with increasing costs of living (e.g., rent, taxes, food, etc.). Having stable work on a consistent schedule lessened stress for employees, and freed up time and energy, which some used taking educational courses, volunteering, caregiving, or spending time with family and friends. Employees spoke to having more **economic independence:** several were able to move out from their parent's home and be less reliant on them, and many spoke to participating in activities they previously couldn't like recreation/physical activity classes, and small trips away. Several employees shared that they could start paying back their student loans or could put away some money into savings. Less stress, job satisfaction, and being able to take care of their needs and participate in activities that they wanted to, contributed to **improved mental and physical health.**

"In terms of mental health, it [living wage pay] is relieving, I have some money to keep myself supported, even help out my family as well. ~ Living Wage Employee

“Just having a bit more income to help support my personal life, things at school, definitely has helped my parents don’t have to worry about supporting me, I can pay for groceries, textbooks, etc.” ~ Living Wage Employee

## SIGNIFICANCE

Individual and community well-being are core to VCC’s poverty reduction work. These outcomes speak to the benefits that living wage pay can create for individuals to enhance their wellbeing and contribute to the E4A goal for all Calgarians to have sufficient income and assets to thrive. According to VCC’s Beneath the Surface report (2023), individuals working in the food, arts entertainment, and retail industries experienced a decline in wages in 2022 compared to previous years. This decline came at a time when Calgary’s living wage was calculated as 20% higher than the previous year, and with a stagnant minimum wage that had not increased since 2018. As wages declined or stagnated, the cost of living and inflation went up, creating an affordability crisis. Despite employment, many were facing poverty, causing issues for individual and community wellbeing outcomes that VCC aims to promote. Even living wage paid employees felt the financial crunch, as the lag between the increasing cost of living and the published annual rate was noticeable. However, these outcomes suggest that receiving a living wage can provide individuals with sufficient income to thrive. The ripple effect of positive impacts beyond professional into the personal lives of employees validates the efforts and focus on Employment (including living wage pay, and opportunities to develop skills) as a key lever of poverty reduction. The evaluation team also discussed that this has the biggest impact on low-wage sectors. An architecture firm would have to make fewer financial adaptations compared to low-wage sector businesses and nonprofits who face more barriers to sustaining wages and competing in a market that devalues labor.

“The living wage increase I got did alleviate my bills, but then again, my bills went up. So yeah, it matched it, I guess, and a little bit more, that’s for sure. So there was some alleviation there.” – Living Wage Employee

“I mean, there’s lots of other stressors, but yeah, not having money as a stressor when other things are going on is important. So it’s not the compounding piece, because other stuff does come out of course.” ~ Living Wage Employee

“When I started here, the difference in wage and everything, I felt like that gave me a big breath, it’s affordable and everything. I notice the difference, even just feeling that comfort that now you can start saving something extra” ~ Living Wage Employee

## SUMMARY AND VCC’S CONTRIBUTION

Because VCC’s work is targeted at a systems level, it can be hard to measure the living wage’s tangible impacts on individuals. The interviews with living wage paid employees provided narrative and lived experience perspectives. The evaluation found that overall, employees who are paid a living wage experienced job satisfaction: they felt engaged and valued by their employer, and like they had a choice in the work that they do. Personally, employees experienced more economic independence, less stress outside of work, and overall better mental and physical health.

Each employee had a specific timeframe on which they had been employed, and no significant themes emerged for when these outcomes occurred once employees were being paid a living wage.

VCC's contribution to the first set of outcomes for living wage employers has indirectly contributed to the outcomes for employees who receive a living wage. Employees noted that while a living wage allowed them to meet their needs, they struggled to move into a higher income bracket. They often faced higher costs of living for some time before the annual rate was published and wages increased. At the sensemaking session, it was discussed that ideally, the living wage rate is the minimum an employee is paid, with employers going above and beyond that rate when possible. VCC also recognizes the important role of government in maintaining affordability, and in turn promotes wellbeing, which informs its policy advocacy work.

**USEABLE QUESTION 3: IN THE PAST 5 YEARS, HOW DID PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND SOCIAL GOOD ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATE IN COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY EFFORTS IN ALBERTA, AND HOW DID VCC'S LIVING WAGE INITIATIVE CONTRIBUTE?**

**OUTCOME STATEMENT 3.1 – NETWORK ESTABLISHMENT**

Several Alberta municipalities and non-profit organizations collaborated to establish the Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN), which was launched in 2021 and aimed to coordinate living wage work across the province. Leading up to the launch over several months, governance structures and decision-making processes were developed and implemented to provide oversight and fiscal management for the Network. Several founding members contributed financial resources and secured external funding to hire a Network coordinator and a contractor to develop the living wage calculator. Initial members and Network staff conducted research and engagement to support this early work. One member piloted the initial calculator. To this work, members provided in-kind contributions of time and expertise.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Before coordination, the LW calculation and release were done ad hoc across the province, with municipalities using different methodologies and publishing at different times with no unified message. Before 2021, VCC calculated the rate manually which was cumbersome and time-consuming. The new calculator allowed for efficiency and effectiveness. The development of an agreed-upon and consistent methodology that was rooted in research and evidence provided validity to the numbers. Many municipalities using the calculator with a consistent methodology to publish their living wage rate enabled comparability across the province and facilitated emerging hypotheses on community affordability. Governments and policymakers are often overwhelmed with many different messages and issues, and there is greater impact when many relevant parties come together with one message and voice on the same issue. The capacity and ability for collaboration that the Network built by uniting partners

"For [living wage] to have any relevance or impact you have to have a consistent methodology. You can actually say 'hey look we did this all the same way' then you can start to actually speculate or make hypotheses on why the numbers are different."  
~ Living Wage Ally

around a shared purpose is important, as many systemic problems like poverty and affordability require cross-sector collaboration. The collective effort and success of establishing a coordinated provincial Network can inform other efforts to coordinate on issues and provide a sense of hope that such coordination is possible.

#### OUTCOME STATEMENT 3.2 – INCREASED LIVING WAGE AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Several groups across Alberta collaborated to increase awareness and provide education on the living wage. ALWN members calculated the Living Wage rate with the new shared methodology and strategically coordinated communications to publish those rates as part of the ALWN Launch in 2021 and annually thereafter. The ALWN leadership council developed information and materials that were utilized centrally at the Network level, as well as locally in each municipality through social media posts, blogs, reports, and mainstream news/media stories. Members reported living wage data to their local government, partners, and the general public, sharing the living wage rate, what it meant, and how it compared to other communities. ALWN developed and supported the utilization of training and education materials for members hosting and participating in events, networking, and conferences. More recently, the Network began expanding communications to more audiences, including employees and employers. Network members facilitated opportunities for living wage employers to share their own stories and experiences.

"Having the [living wage] strategic communications materials released generally to all of us individual members so that we can then use it to share locally is the keystone of it all." ~ ALWN member

"Being a member of the ALWN supports us in building a knowledge base and filtering/supplying it back to our network and advocating for better wages in the community. Having conversations and launching the living wage every year, creates a spark within the community" ~ ALWN member

"The living wage told the story of what everybody's feeling... everybody is feeling the affordability crisis, now we have something to help us talk about it." – Living Wage Ally & ALWN Member

#### SIGNIFICANCE

The living wage rate became a useful indicator and opportunity to discuss affordability, as it showed how high the cost of living was across Alberta, and highlighted the large gap between what people were making on minimum wage and what they would need to be paid to meet a modest standard of living. Some members noted that for the public, awareness of the living wage rate offered validation, telling the story of how people were feeling. The power of many voices highlighting a collective issue was significant. Municipalities published their rate at the same time, which led to a surge of media attention and public discourse around the affordability crisis and fair wages. This annual publication sparked conversation and kept fair wages in the public's consciousness. The consistent message across the province helped to shift narratives around poverty, positioning it as a systemic issue, not a matter of individuals not working hard enough.

While there has been a growing awareness of the living wage, ALWN members shared that more work needs to be done to minimize the confusion between living and minimum wage. There is also the challenge of others focusing on the number, and not the larger story, as members identified that it can be hard to have a nuanced conversation with a quantitative number.

#### OUTCOME STATEMENT 3.3 – RECRUITMENT OF MEMBERS AND EMPLOYERS

Several groups of actors in Alberta collaborated to recruit municipalities to join the Network and living wage employers to become certified. Network members supported the strategic planning and **development of a member model** that included a pay-what-you-can fee structure, onboarding materials about the living wage, and a flexible participation model where members are not required to be living wage employers or publish the rate that they calculate. ALWN members also supported the development of the living wage certification program, including parameters for certification, an employer guide outlining expectations and how to apply, and recognition materials (decals, branding, etc.) once certified. To support program design, ALWN conducted research and engaged with living wage employers to understand the impacts of paying a living wage on business operations and to establish a feasible fee structure. ALWN members and their Living Wage allies reached out to prospective Network members and/or employers to broaden participation. Living wage employers leveraged existing relationships and attempted to recruit other employers by sharing program benefits.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Establishing structures for employers and municipalities to participate has been important in supporting the growth of both groups in the Network. For ALWN members, the pay-what-you-can model supports financing the Network, encourages members to be engaged, and lowers barriers to participation. Since its inception with original founding members in 2019, and the public launch in 2021, the Network has grown substantially. Municipalities and community organizations are drawn to become members because they see the potential for living wage work to aid their poverty reduction plans. The Network provides analytical and administrative support for smaller communities that may not have the resources to calculate or develop resources to publish their rate. There are times when communities join but decide not to publish the calculated rate if it is very high and they anticipate pushback from the government and/or employers who cannot feasibly pay a living wage and face reputational challenges. The Network has intentionally focused on diverse representation, aiming to engage rural communities that are often excluded. As more communities joined, the Network benefited from diverse perspectives to inform the work. As the Network matured and gained capacity, in 2022 the methodology was adapted based on community feedback to calculate the rate for three family types and release a weighted average.

When municipalities became comfortable with the calculation, they often took on active recruitment of local employers. ALWN has developed materials to engage employers and celebrate those who sign up. The number of employers certified grew from zero at the launch of the ALWN certification program in 2021, to the current list of 133 across Alberta at the time of this report.

These recruitment outcomes bolster the impact of the living wage work by providing concrete ways for private and public actors to participate. This is important, as the living wage movement assigns responsibility for poverty reduction to multiple actors: employers to pay a fair wage, governments to provide benefits and policies to lower the living wage, and funders to support budgets that accommodate living wages for nonprofits. Existing members noted that there is a tension in recruitment between the focus on recruiting and ensuring value for employers to participate and the core purpose of the living wage as a poverty reduction tool.

#### OUTCOME STATEMENT 3.4 – DIRECT ACTION TO ADVANCE LIVING WAGE UTILIZATION

Members actively supported efforts to promote living wage utilization by securing additional funding and contributing their own financial and in-kind resources to sustain the Network and its activities. One direct action ALWN members collectively took was the development of election priorities ahead of the 2023 Provincial Election. However, members reported they were not certain how these were used in each community. The Network established a policy subcommittee to ideate and implement policy/advocacy efforts at a Network level. The capacity of this team was challenged, as this work was done off the side of members' desks, and many ideas were not fully implemented. Direct action to advance living wage utilization in political or policy spaces was enacted locally and often siloed from other municipalities' efforts. The consultant hired by the Network developed an employer feature in the calculator, allowing employers to input various figures, like tax-free dental benefits, and experiment with different compensation scenarios. While this exists as a tool to empower employers in their compensation planning, it is not clear to what extent it has been utilized.

“I think the [ALWN Council] was a little bit more focused on finding employers, which again, I think it is one of the main goals of the organization. I understand why that was everybody's goal, but I still wish there was a little bit more work to lower the living wage because I think it's getting harder and harder to pay as it's probably going to skyrocket again this year.” ~  
Living Wage Network Member

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Policy changes (i.e., higher government benefits, regulations on costs for insurance, rent caps, etc.) were seen as key to avoiding the unsustainable cycle where rising wages lead to higher costs of living, forcing employers to raise prices and creating a continuous loop. Another challenge is that as the living wage increases, some employees move into higher tax brackets, losing benefits and needing to earn even more, perpetuating the cycle without truly improving their income. Keeping the living wage within a certain threshold helps provide economic benefits to communities and avoids these negative trends. Government policy and legislation have a direct impact on individual and community affordability, for example, childcare benefits, or utilizes rebates, which have the potential to lower the living wage rate. Additionally, a lower rate can reduce tension between advocates and businesses, who may feel unfairly labeled as "greedy" while struggling in a difficult market. Moving beyond awareness and recruitment activities to more collective policy/advocacy efforts was seen as desirable for many ALWN members, however, they noted that they have yet

to actualize a collective approach. Some attributed this to capacity constraints, as members are doing this work off the side of their desks and the ALWN staff have limited hours and need to prioritize Network maintenance. One member hypothesized that other tensions may be at play, as some favor a low rate to recruit employers, and others favor a higher rate as it is a stronger advocacy metric. Other barriers to advocacy were related to the position the member holds – policy-focused organizations can more readily adopt political stances in public spaces, whereas municipalities may have limited resources for advocacy, or be constrained by the political context. Conversely, municipalities may have more direct access and power to influence policy and decision-making. When a municipality has a champion, or someone with the time, capacity, and resources to advocate for the living wage there is higher potential for transformation. This was evidenced by one municipality that successfully made several policy changes to further LW use. ALWN subcommittees were seen as supporting strategic decisions and planning, including the funds that the Network secured to sustain activities.

#### **CHANGES IN COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY EFFORTS: SUMMARY AND VCC'S CONTRIBUTION**

The changes to collective advocacy efforts include early coordination efforts that enabled the development of the ALWN. ALWN members, Network staff, and their living wage allies worked collectively to increase awareness and education of a living wage, to recruit members and employers to maximize impacts, and with varying success influencing policy through direct action.

VCC contributed to these outcomes through their pivotal work in the early days of convening partners around the common goal of coordination. In 2019, an ongoing discussion between VCC and the Town of Canmore was met with initial funding that supported the Network to hire staff and a calculator developer. Edmonton Social Planning Council provided fiscal agent support to enable the Network to receive external funding. In 2019, the ALWN leadership council was established to guide Network activities including research and engagement that informed underlying assumptions for the methodology, and to ensure it had relevance in Alberta's context. VCC supported by sharing their previous work on living wage and leveraging their partnerships and position as an organization focused on advocacy, policy, and research. Trust and relationships were identified as key elements to this early success. VCC brought its partners to the table and supported holding the larger direction of the Network as a poverty reduction initiative. As staff were hired into the Network VCC was able to step back from its convening role, while maintaining a presence on the leadership council. As a Network member, VCC contributed their expertise and time to developing strategic communication resources. These benefited municipalities, especially those lacking the time, capacity, or skills to develop them but who used them in advocacy or recruitment. These resources contributed to the ability of members to take direct action locally, based on their unique context and position. As an experienced policy advocacy organization, VCC possessed the skills, capacity, and organizational mandate to drive this work as part of its poverty reduction initiative. They have the freedom to bring ideas forward and have the reputation and trust in the community to advance core living wage messages, which interviewees shared kept the

issue as a relevant topic. VCC also provided a strong media presence, regularly speaking in news outlets, podcasts, and through social media apps, offering different narratives to public discourse. VCC contributed time and expertise in the development of the election priorities through subcommittee work. VCC contributed to recruitment through their previous living wage work, as well as the breadth of their partnerships. The highest volume of employers certified is in Calgary, which the evaluation team attributed to VCC's prior employer program as well as their established work in the community. VCC's involvement with local allies, including the BeLocal movement, created more opportunities to educate and provide information to aid the recruitment of more living wage employers.

**USEABLE QUESTION 4: IN THE PAST 5 YEARS, WHAT CHANGES TO CALGARY'S LOCAL ECONOMY WERE EXPERIENCED BY PRIVATE, PUBLIC, AND SOCIAL-GOOD SECTORS IN CALGARY, AND HOW DID VCC'S LIVING WAGE INITIATIVE CONTRIBUTE?**

**OUTCOME STATEMENT 4.1 – LOCAL BUSINESS GROWTH AND CUSTOMER RETENTION**

Local living wage employers experienced positive economic outcomes, including increased customer retention, and business growth. Living wage employers in Calgary shared that their businesses have been doing well over time and that they are not only fine but are thriving and growing. While some employers feared that raising prices would impact their customer base, in reality they experienced customer retention, noting that their other values are what gets customers in the door, including paying fair wages, where people want to support a business that aligns with their values. Employers were less able to quantify the broader economic impact locally, with some noting that they see their employees go out to local restaurants and stay local for vacations, and some bought property in Calgary. Living wage employees also spoke to increased consumer spending, as a result of being paid a living wage and having a bit extra to spend over and above basic needs expenses. Living wage employers noted that the growth they experienced as an organization was influenced by many factors, but that paying a living wage indirectly influenced some of the factors (namely employee retention and performance and organizational culture) that contributed to their success.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Local economic outcomes are influenced by indicators including business growth, unemployment rates, and consumer spending to name a few. The above outcomes are relevant to contributing to a stronger local economy in Calgary. While there is evidence of outcomes that plausibly could impact local economic indicators, quantifying this impact was out of this evaluation's scope.

**CHANGES IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY: SUMMARY AND VCC'S CONTRIBUTION**

Measuring changes in the local economy proved to be challenging for this Outcome Harvest evaluation. The outcomes can serve as indicators in a general sense by drawing parallels to existing research and data about local economies. However, we were not able to directly measure the local economic impacts through quantitative measures. What was clear is that local employers experienced growth and customer retention, positing that the more living wage employers there

are in Calgary, the more the local economy benefits from money and services staying local. VCC's contribution is indirect to these outcomes. VCC supported the Network to grow, which ultimately supported more employers to be certified. Living wage employers interviewed in this evaluation have experienced growth, which benefits the local economy. While we hypothesized that VCC's media engagement and promotion increased public awareness of living wage employers, we can't definitively say whether their communications influenced behaviour change.

**USEABLE QUESTION 5: IN THE PAST 5 YEARS, WHAT CHANGES TO INCOME/COST OF LIVING POLICY AND DECISION-MAKING WERE IMPLEMENTED BY GOVERNMENTS/FUNDERS IN ALBERTA, AND HOW DID VCC'S LIVING WAGE INITIATIVE CONTRIBUTE?**

**OUTCOME STATEMENT 5.1 – ALBERTA CHILDCARE SUBSIDY CUT-OFF AND SHELTER WAGE TOP-UPS**

In 2021, the provincial government announced changes to the Alberta Childcare Subsidy program, expanding benefits to families who earn up to \$90,000 and providing additional income to support childcare costs. Whereas most federally calculated benefits are scaled linearly, this subsidy created a steep cutoff: a family just below the threshold received a much bigger benefit than a family making slightly above the threshold. The impacts of this steep cut-off on employees' wages were researched and communicated by AWLN, and the following year, the benefit scales were fixed. Another policy change occurred in 2023 when the Alberta government provided a wage top-up to shelter workers, bringing wages for frontline workers from \$19.50 up to \$22 per hour.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

These outcomes are important because government benefits and policies have a substantial impact on the calculated living wage rate. For example, the Alberta Childcare Subsidy put downward pressure on the living wage in the majority of municipalities. The exception was in towns like Canmore, which had the highest living wage rates; households in Canmore making a living wage ironically earned too much to qualify for the subsidy. The wage top-up for shelter workers was important as shelter organizations had not received funds to provide a wage increase to frontline workers since 2008. Shelter workers provide much-needed services in challenging and complex work environments, turnover rates have a significant impact on people who access services and on organizational sustainability. The wage top-up supported employers to implement a living wage policy at their organization, as it brought shelter workers' pay up to the living wage rate at the time.

**OUTCOME STATEMENT 5.2 – LOCAL ADVOCACY AND FUNDER DECISION-MAKING**

While there was evidence that municipal governments and funder organizations saw practical and strategic value in using the living wage calculation, opportunities to influence policy were met with varying success. Many municipalities used the living wage rate to drive conversations around poverty reduction and community affordability, including shaping policy briefs or as a frame of reference for their program eligibility guidelines. Municipalities utilized the living wage rate to understand their current state, with one member using the calculator as a tool to communicate the

impact of their affordability measures and to protect existing programming. Several municipalities and funders became living wage employers themselves, using the living wage rate to inform their pay policies. Most municipalities noted that beyond conversations and advocacy, there were no significant policy changes driven by the living wage. One exception was a member who used the living wage rate to successfully influence policy that promoted pay equity in certain sectors and to inform program design and eligibility criteria. One living wage ally shared that they would like to use a living wage for program eligibility; however, it does not provide robust enough data broken down by household size.

An unanticipated outcome was a shift in the charitable sector from a culture of ‘race to the bottom,’ where nonprofits who submitted proposals with lower budgets were more likely to be chosen, to one where funders saw the value in proposals where the budget accounted for paying staff a living wage. One funder noted that they started to give fewer points to those proposals with insufficient administrative costs and saw it as more desirable to fund organizations that were providing adequate salaries to not incentivize low pay.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

The above outcomes point to the difficulty in moving from conversation and awareness to actual policy change that can contribute to poverty reduction. It is important to recognize the success of one municipality and consider how others may be able to facilitate more action to advance living wage utilization. The shift in funder attitudes presents huge opportunities to change the narratives that keep the nonprofit sector underfunded, and operating out of fear or a scarcity mentality. Being a member of the Network permitted municipalities to use time and resources towards living wage utilization.

#### CHANGES TO FUNDERS AND GOVERNMENTS’ LIVING WAGE UTILIZATION: SUMMARY AND VCC’S CONTRIBUTION

ALWN members hypothesize that their research and communications around the Alberta Childcare Subsidy were utilized to fix the steep eligibility cut-off the year after it was enacted. There was no clear contribution or confirmation that the government utilized the Network’s data. However, because the outcome had a significant impact on the living wage rate, and the eligibility fix resembled their research, the hypothesized contribution is included here. Regarding the shelter worker wage top-up, the main contributions to the government policy change were the advocacy efforts of nonprofit leaders. While VCC was not cited as directly contributing to the change, the collaborative efforts as seen in Outcome Statements 3.1-3.3 contributed to nonprofit leaders' confidence and use of the credible and reputable living wage rate that was the number advocated for and eventually implemented.

"It is our consistent hypothesis that our communications helped inform government decisions and policies".  
~ Living Wage Ally

Increased awareness and having the language to talk about poverty-related issues brought living wage more into mainstream discourse, potentially supporting the shift in attitudes and behaviours

of decision-makers. VCC contributed to the ALWN strategic communications materials that were utilized by municipalities and funders to advocate on critical issues.

## **Findings Summary**

The above findings show that several relevant groups came together to establish the Alberta Living Wage Network, a provincially coordinated movement that enabled more municipalities to calculate and publish their living wage rates and brought about a more powerful indicator of community affordability that was comparable across time and between regions. The development of the ALWN Living Wage Certification Program promoted organizations and businesses to pay a living wage, providing them with support and easy-to-access information, as well as recognition materials they could use to communicate their commitment. A coordinated and collective movement increased awareness and education on the living wage, and more generally shifted narratives around affordability and poverty, positioning them as systemic issues that require multiple actors (governments, businesses, policymakers) to tackle. Having centralized research and strategic communications materials about the living wage supported actors to advocate for policies that would lower the living wage rate in their municipality, and to demonstrate the impact of current affordability measures. ALWN members recognized the critical benefit and cost of living policies to keep the living wage rate low, to benefit individual and community wellbeing. Additionally, keeping the living wage rate low provides a greater opportunity for more businesses to participate, and prevents them from shouldering the burden of cost of living increases. There was a desire from ALWN members to do policy and advocacy collectively, to have a greater impact, and to maintain the focus of the work on poverty reduction. Overall, employers who become certified do have to navigate the incurred costs of paying increased wages, in particular as the living wage rate continues to increase each year, all the while they are trying to stay sustainable in a more expensive operating context. Some businesses raised prices, leading to some loss of business, and some nonprofits accessed undesignated funds, which could have been used for other purposes. These challenges did not prevent employers from continuing to pay a living wage. Most employers noted that the positive benefits far outweighed the challenges, as they experienced higher retention of a qualified and reliable workforce. Overall, employees felt more satisfied in their jobs, felt valued by their employer, and were able to choose work that supported their professional goals and personal needs. In their personal lives, employees experienced less stress, more economic independence, and positive physical and mental health outcomes.

## **Evaluation Use Planning**

After reviewing the outcomes and facilitating an interpretation session with the evaluation team, several opportunities for using the learnings were identified:

- ALWN plans to develop some key messages and guidelines around the challenges that surfaced in the evaluation, along with some offers of support and resources to overcome them.

- VCC plans to utilize the findings to support their fund development, to ensure that they can continue receiving the funding needed to drive forward living wage work at a policy level in Calgary. The report provides them with the evidence they need to demonstrate the important role they play in systems-level policy change.
- VCC hopes to use the learnings to shape messages that continue increasing awareness, education, and participation in the living wage movement.
- Previously, ALWN and VCC had relied on previous research to communicate living wage impacts, now they have a robust set of findings and learnings specific to their work that can be used to advocate and educate.
- ALWN and VCC plan to bring the evaluation report to the leadership council to support strategic planning and program development.

## **Recommendations**

The evaluator recommends that VCC develop some indicators to monitor the unintended outcomes that surfaced in the findings. While the program did not explicitly aim to shift funders' attitudes and decision-making, such evidence of change was seen as having immense potential for reducing poverty in the often low-paying social services sector. VCC could seek the perspective of its funding partners to understand how widespread the shift in mentality and decision-making is and to communicate to them the findings from this report that demonstrate the value of employers paying a living wage.

The unintended consequence of the upward spiral of costs and wages necessitates a focus on how to support employers who are shouldering that burden to be able to continue paying a living wage. There was a fervent desire from all interviewees to get larger companies from low-wage sectors, like a large grocery chain, to sign on as living wage employers, as this would impact more employees, most often from demographics that face additional structural barriers to exiting poverty. VCC might consider how to spearhead a direct focus on a large, highly visible, organization in Calgary to influence toward certification.

In light of the tension that emerged on collective policy and advocacy efforts, it would be beneficial for ALWN members to identify any barriers and assess their capacity to engage in this work. The findings showed that the collective voice was powerful in influencing public narratives about affordability. This same collective voice may provide more weight to policy and advocacy efforts. This work should be strategic, as one business owner shared their reluctance to be tied to anything too political, for fear of alienating customers. It is recommended that ALWN weigh and mitigate the risks of engaging politically and the potential impact on employer willingness to participate in the certification program.

## **Future Research**

There is a desire for future research or evaluation to surface how VCC influences policy development around income and cost of living in Alberta. As indicated, VCC and ALWN members

have hypothesized that governments are using the living wage information they produce to inform policy development, however, this Outcome Harvest was limited in surfacing whether that is truly occurring or not. Gathering evidence that has indicated the use of living wage research for policy development and identifying voices within government who could speak to that evidence, could be a place to facilitate a deeper understanding of what influences the cost of living and economic policy development, to be able to leverage that learning in advocacy efforts.

ALWN has supported employers to calculate their living wage upon request, and at times those employers do not end up becoming certified despite being eligible. Further, many organizations pay a living wage but are not certified. VCC and ALWN were keen to identify the factors that prevent eligible organizations from becoming certified to support their efforts in program enhancement and to support the Network's efforts to recruit more employers to the program.

VCC and ALWN have done considerable work communicating the living wage rates to the public through social media and mainstream media (i.e., news articles, and radio shows). There is evidence of increased online engagement with living wage releases, but little knowledge of how the public might be utilizing this information; for example, VCC and ALWN are keen to understand whether employees use this living wage information available to advocate directly to their employers for fairer wages. There may be other employee-led efforts that use the living wage information, for example, union organizations. Developing some monitoring or research around this may support VCC and ALWN to assess the impact of their strategic communications work on the public.

## **Conclusion**

This Outcome Harvest evaluation aimed to understand the nature and scope of outcomes that VCC's living wage initiative contributed to in Calgary specifically and in Alberta, over the past five years. The findings in this evaluation tell a story of change. A diverse group of municipalities and communities put formidable effort into driving a coordinated living wage movement in Alberta. These efforts brought the cost of living and affordability crisis to the forefront, providing both credible evidence and information to be used in advocacy, policy, and decision-making, and establishing tangible opportunities for different people to take responsibility for reducing poverty. The success of ALWN members' collaborative efforts demonstrates the power of many groups working collectively toward a common goal with a shared vision.

The findings confirm VCC's belief that a living wage plays a significant role in creating meaningful employment opportunities, and ensuring individuals have sufficient income and assets to thrive. The evaluation demonstrated the need for larger policy efforts to keep living wage rates from continuously climbing each year, which may limit the participation of typically low-paying sector employers who cannot keep up.

Overall, this evaluation revealed the power of a coordinated approach to a complex issue and the real and tangible benefits that come from employers paying employees a living wage. The findings show that the living wage initiative is supporting VCC in its mission to reduce poverty in Calgary through promoting shared leadership, focusing on the dignity of all, and bringing about positive change for individuals and their communities in the realms of employment and health/wellbeing.

VCC and ALWN plan to utilize the findings from this evaluation to inform strategic program planning and decisions to maximize impact and grow the living wage movement. Getting clear on the scope of roles and strategies for change at the Network level to sustain a healthy living wage movement will support strategic planning and aligning partners on a shared purpose.

VCC will utilize the learnings to communicate the value of living wage as a poverty reduction tool, to advance utilization and secure resources to continue and build upon the successful outcomes and impact highlighted in this report.

"Why should you give a darn? Because an entrepreneurial community that's thriving is way more interesting. If you want a Main Street that's not boring, support somebody who's got an idea and doesn't quite have the cash. [Paying a living wage] brings you a more interesting world... it gives somebody the chance to put away even the smallest amount of money that can activate and allow dreams to bloom. And those lead to really great community change."

~ Living Wage Employer

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## Appendix A: Evaluation Design

The planning and design stage yielded Useable Questions, Program and Evaluation roles and scope, and data sources.

### 1) Evaluation Roles:

- Harvester: Jolene Fawcett, KR Consulting Group, University of Victoria
- Harvest Users: VCC, ALWN
- Evaluation team: Ryan Lacanilao, Tessa Penich, Lee Stevens, Roman Katsnelson

### 2) Program Roles: Change Agents (CA): those who administer the intervention, Social Actors (SA): those who experience change as a result of the intervention, Boundary Partners (BP): those who witness change in social actors.

Group/entity	Roles
Vibrant Communities Calgary Staff	CA
Alberta Living Wage Network Coordinator and Staff	CA
Alberta Living Wage Network (ALWN) Members	SA, CA, BP
Living Wage Employers (LWE) – Businesses or organizations that are certified by ALWN	SA, CA, BP
Customers of Living Wage Employment certified establishments	SA, BP
Living Wage Paid Employees (LWPE) - receive a living wage from a certified employer	SA, BP
Family members of LWPE – financially integrated with a living wage-paid employee.	SA, BP
Living Wage Allies - socially minded businesses and poverty-focused advocacy groups	SA, BP
Funders - Calgary Foundation, private donors	CA, BP
Researchers – who collect and disseminate poverty-related data	CA
Municipal, Provincial, and Federal Governments – who receive taxes	SA
Local Economy - the local exchange of goods and services in a specific area	SA
Private/social/public sectors providing individual/community social supports	SA
Low-wage organizations/industries – that typically pay below a living wage	SA

### 3) Useable Questions

1. In the past 5 years, what operational (e.g., hiring, benefits, costs of goods/services, etc.) and workforce (e.g., recruitment/retention/performance, etc.) changes have living wage employers (LWE) in Calgary experienced, and how did VCC's Living Wage Initiative contribute?
2. In the past 5 years, how did Calgary-based Living Wage Paid Employees (LWPE) personal and professional quality of life change, and how did VCC's Living Wage Initiative contribute?

3. In the past 5 years, how did public, private, social good organizations (e.g. socially minded business coalitions, living wage employers, ALWN members, E4A champions) participate in collective advocacy efforts in Alberta, and how did VCC's Living Wage Initiative contribute?
4. In the past 5 years, what changes to Calgary's local economy were experienced by private, public, and social-good sectors in Calgary, and how did VCC's Living Wage Initiative contribute?
5. In the past 5 years, what changes to income/cost of living policy and decision-making were implemented by governments/funders in Alberta, and how did VCC's Living Wage Initiative contribute?

Definitions used in this evaluation for key terms include:

**Personal and professional quality of life:** this refers to the standard of health, comfort, and happiness experienced by individuals, both at work and at home.

**Collective advocacy:** this refers to more than one actor coming together to work towards a common goal or aim related to poverty reduction, such as influencing practices, policies, awareness, and/or capacity building. This can be through formal structures, such as coalitions, or informally, through relationship building or one-time action on an issue.

**Income/cost of living policy and decision-making:** policies, legislations, and practices related to income or cost of living that are implemented and can be measured.

**Operational and workforce changes:** These are both active changes, such as intentional decisions implemented such as benefits provision, work structures (employment status like part-time or full-time, permanent, or temporary), or service provision (operational hours, staff complements, costs of goods/services). They may also be passive, whereby these changes are experienced and not designed, such as staff turnover, recruitment successes or challenges, employee engagement, etc.

- 4) **Secondary Data Sources:** Emails, blog posts, reports/publications, meeting minutes/notes, policy briefs, research summaries, social media, VCC & ALWN Living Wage briefs, and Media mentions. 498 total documents submitted.

#### 5) Primary Data Sources

Outcome	Substantiation Sources	Sources Recruited
1.1-1.4, 4.1	Social Actors & Boundary Partners	Living Wage Employers and Employees; Living Wage Allies
2.1-2.2	Social Actors & Boundary Partners	Living Wage Employers and employees
3.1-3.4	Social Actors & Boundary Partners	ALWN members; Living Wage Allies; Living Wage Employers; Funders
5.1	NONE	Written data should suffice
5.2	Social Actors & Boundary Partners	Living Wage Allies; ALWN Members; Living Wage Employers

## Appendix B: Secondary Data Collection Tool (Outcome Descriptor Log)

The below image shows an example of the Excel spreadsheet utilized to collect evidence of outcomes from the secondary data review. It includes a column to describe the type of change evidenced, the date that change occurred, the source where the change was pulled from (to be able to reference back to if needed), who experienced the change (social actor), who or what may have influenced the change (Change Agent), and three columns for relevant tags that would be utilized for sorting and theming in the analysis and building of Outcome Statements.

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In the past 5 years, what operational and workforce changes have living wage employers in Calgary experienced?

Evidence Descriptor	Date	Source	Social Actor	Change Agent	Tag 1	Tag 2	Tag 3

## Appendix C: Recruitment Poster

**Are you employed or contracted by a Living Wage Employer?**  
**Do you shop at a Living Wage Certified establishment?**  
**We want to talk to you!**



A new research study is seeking participants to share their experience and knowledge on the impacts of Vibrant Communities Calgary's **Living Wage Initiative**

Eligible participants work for, are contracted by, or are a customer of a Living Wage Employer in Calgary

We will be conducting 60-minute long interviews

 In person or online       July 29 - Aug 31, 2024

Your participation will advance learnings on the various impacts of a Living Wage in Calgary

**Questions? Want to participate?**  
**Sign-up!**  
<https://forms.office.com/r/n7G1mfZf58>  
**Or email: [jolene@hellokrd.net](mailto:jolene@hellokrd.net)**



**Note: Participation is voluntary, and interview data will remain confidential**

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COMMUNITIES  
CALGARY

 **KRD**

Research is commissioned by Vibrant Communities Calgary, and is being conducted by KRD Consulting Group. This study has received ethics approval by the University of Victoria Ethics Review Board.

**Principal Researcher:** Jolene Fawcett, Student Researcher, University of Victoria; Strategy and Evaluation Consultant, KRD Consulting Group  
**Research Supervisor:** Dr. Jill Ann Chouinard, Director and Professor, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria

