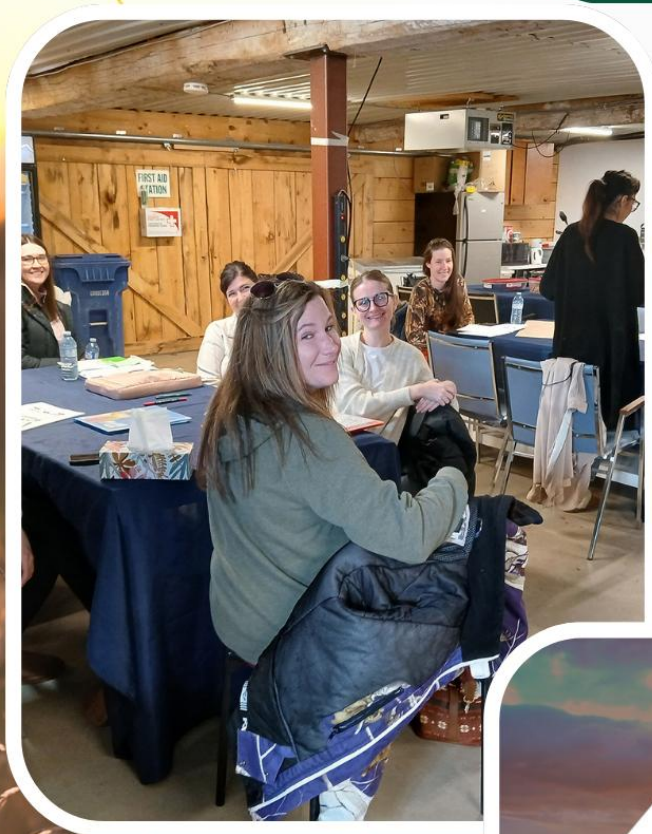


# Evaluation Report 2025



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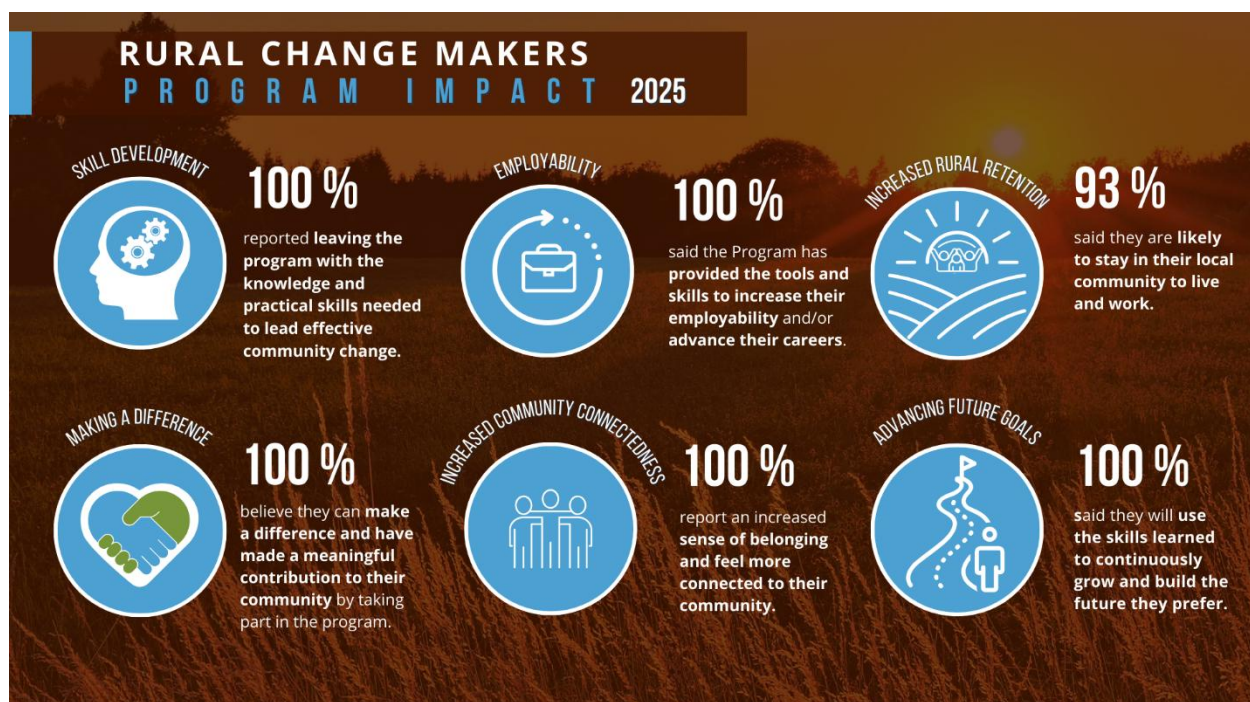
## SUMMARY

The Rural Ontario Institute's (ROI) Rural Change Makers program (RCM) is aimed at strengthening leadership capacity of rural young adults to facilitate collaborative problem solving and mobilize collective action around complex community issues. Good Roots Consulting supported ROI to design and develop an evaluation framework capturing lessons around program delivery and outcomes for participants. ROI has continuously grown this framework to align with program evolution derived from youth and participant feedback.

In the Spring of 2024, 36 rural young adults (aged 18-35) were recruited to participate in the program. In August 2024, ROI welcomed a fourth cohort of emerging leaders to the change maker program. During a welcome session change makers completed the first in a series of evaluations: Pre-program, Pre-Community Economic Development (Pre-CED - herein referred to as Mid Program) and Post Program evaluations. In addition, Rural Change Makers completed supplemental evaluations as part of their program journey including personal resource inventories, Disc profiles, Leadership Style evaluations, Ignite Action Lab evaluations and complimentary RBC Funder evaluations.

Results from program evaluations are used to track participant progress and overall program impact. Supplemental evaluations are confidential - used solely for individual participant growth development during skills training and curriculum delivery – and are not included in this report.

This report presents participant evaluation results from pre, mid and post program surveys. Of the 36 participants accepted into the program, 26 completed Pre-Program Evaluations, 16 completed pre and post surveys and 15 participants completed all three program surveys. In total, 22 participants completed the Change Makers program. Results shared within this evaluation report are based on 15 participant matched responses for all program surveys.



## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Change Makers masterfully applied their training and skills to create meaningful outcomes in their lives and communities. Some graduates applied their skills to existing projects, some to new ones, some advanced their careers taking on new leadership roles or employment opportunities and some developed plans for social enterprises and business start-ups. The efforts of change makers, personal and professional, work together to ignite positive developments and create opportunities for social good, and economic stability at the individual, institution and community level.

FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF CHANGE MAKER OUTCOMES WITH MANY 2025 GRADUATES ADVANCING MORE THAN ONE GOAL.



9%

### of change makers

advanced their careers taking on new leadership roles or moving from under-employment.



55%

### launched or grew

community economic development initiatives & projects.  
**27%** within municipal or First Nations governance.



50%

### of change maker community projects

and activities were incorporated into paid employment or successful receipt of project funding.



36%

### undertook

life-stabilizing activities and plans for future educational goals.



14%

### cultivated new

initiatives and projects in the arts and culture sector.



14%

### started or grew

new businesses or entrepreneurial pursuits.

## Program Outcomes

The program resulted in improved outcomes for participants in areas such as new knowledge and skills for collaboration and community development, increased belonging and community connectedness, strong belief they can make a difference and have made meaningful contributions, improved leadership confidence, increased employability, advancement of future goals, and strong likelihood to remain in their rural community to work and live.



**New knowledge and skills:** 93% of Change Makers agreed (97% cumulative average) that they were leaving the program with the knowledge and practical skills needed to lead effective community change. When asked to share the most useful pieces of knowledge, skills, and/or ideas that they were taking away from the program, Change Makers expressed the value of goal setting, being accountable to plans, and how to be a community advocate. They expressed an understanding of the importance of effective collaboration to lead solutions in complex settings and the value of learning from other like-minded youth.



**Leadership competence:** Skill development is intrinsically tied to leadership confidence with 100% of class participants feeling confident in their ability to be an effective leader while facilitating a group meeting in the community. 93% of change makers expressed confidence in planning a fundraising event post program (87% mid program) and 93% stated they are aware of opportunities to engage with other community leaders.



**Increased community connectedness:** 100% of participants reported agreement with having a sense of belonging and connection to each other and their communities after participating in the program (93% strongly agreed mid program, 98.8% cumulative average). Key regional program partners including Opiikapawin Services (representing 24 remote First Nations), Community Futures Huron, Haliburton-Minden Hills Community Collective, Four County Labour Market Planning Board, Trenval Business Development Centre, Renfrew County Community Futures and Renfrew County Economic Development were critical in fostering community connections for change makers as they embarked on community projects. The strong network of regional program partners has helped to increase the sense of connection and expand the networks of youth by leveraging resources within local networks to support change makers in community building.



**Making a difference:** 100% of participants completed their learning journey feeling hopeful about the future of their rural community, 100% believing they can make a difference in their community, and 100% felt they had made meaningful contributions to their communities. 87% strongly agreed to having a sense of belonging in their community following the program.



**Increased rural retention of youth:** Community connection, a sense of belonging and the belief that one can and has made a positive difference are powerful motivators that encourage rural retention of youth. Participants often express their deep sense of place and hope for the future of their community during learning labs. Following the program, 93% of participants agreed (90% cumulative average) they are likely to stay in their local community to work and live. Up 6% from matched mid-program evaluations (87% mid program) and an increase of 4% since the previous cohorts (89% RCM 3). This is a strong testament to the power of belonging in leading community building.





**Improved employability:** After completion of the program, 100% participants agreed (87% strongly agreed in both mid and post surveys with 9.2/10 average strength of agreement post program) that the Rural Change Maker Program had adequately provided the tools and skills to increase their employability or advance their current work or volunteer activities. 9% of change makers moved from underemployed to employed. 14% grew or started new businesses and 9% advanced their careers moving into new leadership roles.



**Advancing Future Goals:** Change makers bring their own unique dreams, experiences and goals with them to the program as they build their futures. 100% of participants agreed; 93% strongly agreed in both mid and post surveys (average rate of agreement post program 9.6/10) that participation in the program complimented their future goals and they would use the skills they learned to continuously grow while building their preferred future.



**Youth awareness and commitment to lead community change:** Change Makers expressed (100%) an increased awareness of the issues facing their community and 93% reported awareness of opportunities to engage with community leaders (73% strongly agreed mid program and 80% post program).

## Evaluation Reflections: 2023 - 2025

# COLLECTIVE IMPACT Most recent 2 change maker cohorts (2023-2025)



### SKILL DEVELOPMENT

98% of Change Makers reported that they were leaving the program with the knowledge and practical skills needed to lead effective community change.



### INCREASED RURAL RETENTION

90% of Change Makers said they are likely to stay in their local community to work and live.



### INCREASED COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

94% believe they can make a difference and have a sense of belonging within their community.



### ADVANCING FUTURE GOALS

97% said the program increased their employability or advanced career and future goals.

36 -40% OF CHANGE MAKERS UNDERTAKE LIFE-STABILIZING ACTIVITIES AND FUTURE EDUCATIONAL GOALS EACH YEAR.



### COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

55% of change makers launched or grew community economic development initiatives & projects in 2025.

27% of those within municipal or First Nations governance.

50% of projects were incorporated into paid work.

### BROAD SECTOR IMPACT

32% led cultural, literacy and environmental initiatives to benefit their communities in 2024 and 23% entered the Ag sector.

14% started initiatives and projects in the arts and culture sector in 2025.

9% led non profits supporting mental health, wellbeing & diversity.



### CAREER ADVANCEMENT & NEW BUSINESS

18% of change makers accelerated and advanced their careers moving into new leadership roles in 2024.

9% moved from under-employed to employed.

14% started new businesses in 2025

## STRENGTHS & AREAS FOR GROWTH

Participants completed a **community leadership self-assessment tool** to help them explore and reflect upon their own strengths and areas for growth as a community Change Maker. The tool assessed 7 competency areas which successful community leadership teams possess. Average participant scores increased in all 7 areas.

Competency area	Pre average (/10)	Post average (/10)	Average point change
1. Understanding myself and others	7.9	9.1	1.2
2. Community development	7.7	8.9	1.2
3. Big picture or systems-thinking	8.4	9.3	0.9
4. Commitment to continuous improvement	7.9	9.1	1.2
5. Agent of change	7.9	8.8	0.9
6. Catalyst for citizen responsibility	8.4	9.1	0.7
7. Quality of life advocacy	7.7	9.0	1.3

Across the 7 competency areas, the specific measurement items where we saw the largest self-assessed improvement among participants were:

### 1. Understanding myself and others

- I understand my areas of growth as a leader (2.3 point change)
- I understand my strengths as a leader (2.1 average point change)
- I am comfortable facilitating the use of a variety of leadership tools in a group setting (1.9 point change)

### 2. Community Development

- I understand and practice outcome-based leadership (2.1 point change)
- I can describe different approaches to planning (2.1 point change)

### 3. Big Picture or Systems Thinking

- I apply techniques that encourage innovative thinking (1.5 point change)
- I practice strategic foresight by watching for signs of change (e.g., trends, weak signals) (1.2 point change)

### 4. Commitment to Continuous Improvement

- I have a learning plan that will help me develop as a leader (2.8 point change)
- I practice reflection as a way to enhance my effectiveness (2.3 points change)

### 5. Agent of Change

- I can apply appropriate facilitation tools (2.1 point change)
- I can explain the role of a facilitator (1.6 point change)

### 6. Catalyst for Citizen Responsibility

- I can apply a community development process for leading change within my community (1.5 point change)
- I can facilitate consensus building. (1.3 point change)

### 7. Quality of Life

- I can describe approaches used to measure economic development (1.9 point change)
- I can describe approaches used to measure quality of life (1.7 point change)

## PROGRAM FEEDBACK

Participants shared the following **success factors** related to the program that contributed to the changes they had experienced:

- The community of likeminded Change Makers
- The in-person Ignite session which helped to strengthen connections,
- The authenticity and care of facilitators and understanding of ROI
- The rich learning content

*“My favourite part was getting to know everyone from different backgrounds - those from southern Ontario, northern Ontario, remote Indigenous communities, and India. It was incredible having the opportunity to talk with everyone in person about their life experiences, backgrounds, experiences in rural Ontario, community projects, etc. I think it has really broadened my perspective and will benefit my advocacy skills in the future, all the while making beneficial networking connections,”* **2024-25 Rural Change Maker.**

*“The Rural Change Makers program has been highly transformative for me, significantly strengthening my confidence to lead projects and facilitate group discussions. Through its interactive and practical approach, I gained not only leadership skills but also a deeper understanding of effective collaboration in diverse and complex settings. I particularly valued the program’s focus on important societal realities, including Indigenous training initiatives, strategies to support individuals transitioning out of poverty, and best practices for cross-cultural engagement. These insights have enriched my perspective and equipped me to approach workforce and community development projects with greater empathy, strategic thinking, and cultural awareness,”* **2024-25 Rural Change Maker.**

*“I still remember the very first day I learned about the Rural Ontario Institute and its inspiring mission. This journey has been truly transformative. I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made it possible for us to be part of ROI. It has been a privilege to learn, connect, and contribute within such an impactful initiative,”* **2024-25 Rural Change Maker.**

*“Rural Change Makers has been a truly transformative experience. It has helped me, along with many other changemakers, grow and evolve in ways that words can hardly capture. The program has not only shaped us to become great leaders, but also inspired us to serve communities selflessly, foster collective growth, and create a future where everyone thrives,”* **2024-25 Rural Change Maker graduate.**

*“Your vision, determination, and heart for rural Ontario are shaping stronger communities for generations to come — reminding us that rural doesn’t mean small, it means strong, connected, and full of potential. Congratulations 2025 Change Makers!”* **County of Renfrew and Renfrew County Community Futures Development Corporation, RCM Program Partner.**

“

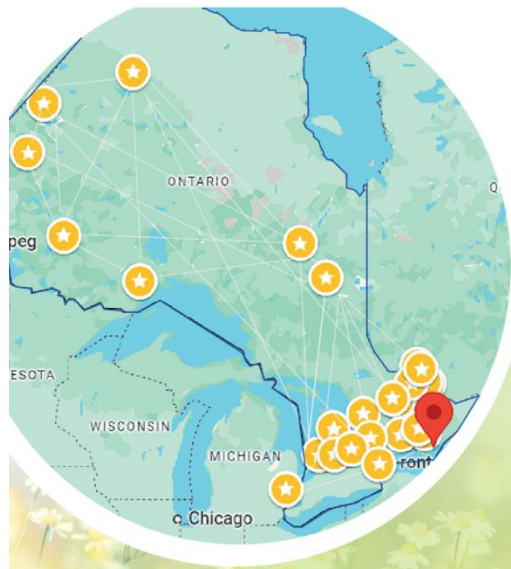
This has been a confidence building experience for me as I was able to plan and implement a community initiative from start to finish.

”



## INTRODUCTION

The Rural Ontario Institute's Rural Change Makers program is aimed at strengthening the leadership capacity of rural young adults to facilitate collaborative problem solving and mobilize collective action around complex community issues. Participants represented more than 25 rural Ontario communities, including a collective of 24 remote First Nations in northwestern Ontario.



## RCM 4 IMPACT MAP

### Change Maker Community Impact

**27 EMERGING LEADERS** - from over 25 rural communities including a collective of 24 First Nations in NW Ontario, Timmins, Southwestern, Eastern and Central Ontario Communities

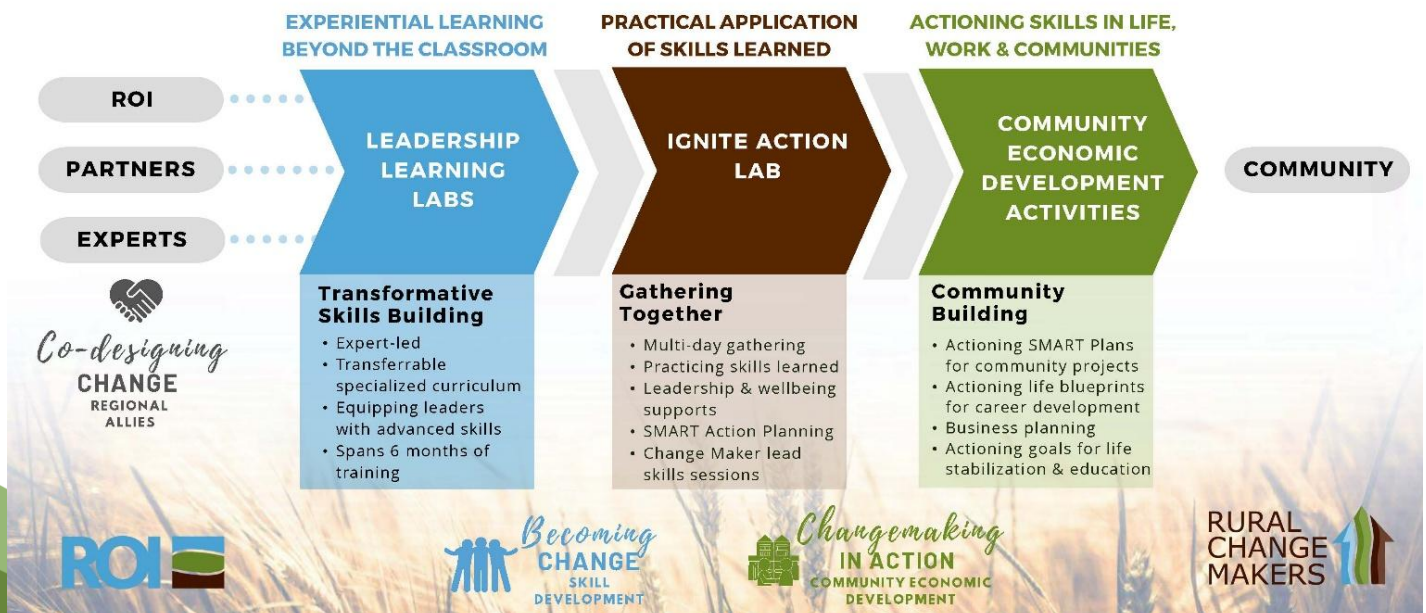
*A **robust social ecosystem** and cross pollination of inter-regional, cross-sector networks creating over 2500 connections.*

***Building meaningful local rural development outcomes** that reflects the values, priorities and diversity of people, places and industry of Rural Ontario Communities.*

#LEADINGtheFUTURE

Change makers completed a series of evaluations during their program journey that complimented the following model.

## PROGRAM JOURNEY



## RESULTS

26 participants completed Pre-Program Evaluations, 16 completed pre and post surveys and 15 participants completed all three program surveys. In total, 22 participants completed the Change Makers program. Participants were asked to choose the answer that best represented their agreement with a series of statements related to intended program outcomes, such as leadership competencies and community connectedness. Results shared below represent statement agreement averages of matched mid and post program survey results across several indicators.

Statement	Post Average (1-10)	% participants Agree (mid)	% participants Agree (post)
I am likely to stay in my local community to work and live.	8.2	87%	93%
Average 90%			
The Rural Change Maker program and community development project has strengthened my knowledge and skills to effectively lead community change.	8.7	100%	93%
The Rural Change Maker Toolkit and Learning Labs have given me the tools and skills I need to engage with my community.	9.3	100%	93%
I have learned tools through the Rural Change Maker Program that will benefit me in my community development activities.	9.4	100%	NA
Reported leaving the program with the knowledge and practical skills needed to lead effective community change.		Average 97%	
I believe I can make a difference in my community.	9.5	100%	NA
I believe I have made a meaningful contribution to my community through my community development project.	8.6	NA	100%
Belief they can make a difference and have made a meaningful contribution to their community by taking part in the program.		Average 100%	
I made new connections with people in my community.	8.5	100%	100%
I feel more connected to my community and the people in it as a result of my community development project.	8.3	100%	93%
I have a sense of belonging in my community.	8.9	100%	100%
Report an increased sense of belonging and feel more connected to their community.		Average 98.8%	
The Rural Change Maker Program has adequately provided me tools and skills to increase my employability and or improve current work or volunteer activities.	9.2	100%	100%
Average 100%			
The Rural Change Maker Program has adequately prepared me to consider future leadership opportunities in employment or education, entrepreneurial pursuits...	9.0	100%	N/A
I will continue to use the skills I have learned through the Rural Change Maker program to continuously grow, learn and build the future I prefer.	9.6	100%	100%
Average 100%			

### Evaluation Criteria

0 to 2 Strongly Disagree, 3 to 4 Disagree, 5 Neutral, 6 Agree, 7 to 10 Strongly Agree

This report presents participant evaluation results from the pre and post surveys, and community leadership self-assessment tool. In total, 22 participants completed the Change Makers program in its entirety. Out of those participants, the following participated in each of the evaluation tools:

Tool	# of participants (N=22)
Pre-survey	26
Mid-survey	16
Post-survey	16
All 3 surveys	15
Matched Surveys	15
Matched Self-assessment	15

## KEY PROGRAM INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Results from Mid (Pre Community Economic Development) and Post Program Evaluations Indicate the following outcomes reflecting 6 key program performance indicators. *Results are averaged on a scale of 10.*

### 1. SKILL DEVELOPMENT

97% of participants reported they are leaving the program with the knowledge and practical skills needed to lead effective community change. **93%** of participants reported **agreement**.

Key Indicators	Average Mid	STDEV	Average Post	STDEV
I have learned tools through the Rural Change Maker Program that will benefit me in my community development activities.	9.4	0.8	NA	NA
The Rural Change Maker toolkit and learning labs have given me the tools and skills I need to engage with my community.	9.0	1.3	9.3	1.6

Other Indicators of Skill Development	Average Mid	STDEV	Average Post	STDEV
I expect my community development project to strengthen my knowledge and skills for leading effective community change.	9.3	0.7	8.7	1.3
I am confident in facilitating a group meeting in my community.	8.7	1.3	NA	NA



<b>Other Indicators of Skill Development</b>	<b>Average Mid</b>	<b>STDEV</b>	<b>Average Post</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
The Rural Change Maker Program has prepared me to apply a community-led approach to planning and action.	8.9	1.3	9.6	0.7
The Ignite Action Lab gave me the opportunity to experiment with tools and techniques for facilitating community engagement.	9.2	1.5	NA	NA
I have gained important skills and tools to ensure the talents, strengths and resources in my community are considered and mobilized to collectively participate in change.	9.1	1.3	NA	NA

## 2. EMPLOYABILITY

**100%** of participants reported the program has provided the tools and skills to increase their employability and/or advance their career. 100% of participants agreed and 87% strongly agreed.

<b>Key Indicators</b>	<b>Average Mid</b>	<b>STDEV</b>	<b>Average Post</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
The Rural Change Maker Program has provided me with the tools and skills to increase my employability or improve current work/volunteer activities.	8.7	1.3	9.2	1.3
The Rural Change Maker Program prepared me to consider future leadership opportunities in employment or education, entrepreneurial pursuits or within my current job or position.	9.0	1.4	NA	NA

<b>Other indicators of Job Readiness and Employability</b>	<b>Average Mid Results</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
Facilitation tools from the RCM toolkit and Learning Lab materials and evaluations are valuable tools that can support my future goals and work.	9	1.4

## 3. INCREASED RURAL RETENTION

**93%** of participants agreed (90% cumulative average) they are likely to stay in their local community to work and live. Up 6% from matched mid-program evaluations (87% mid program) and an increase of 4% since the previous cohort (89% RCM 3) and **up 22% since the program began** (increase from 71% likelihood in 2021-22 cohorts).

67% of participants reported strong agreement. Two participants expressed neutral opinions mid way through the program and one participant reported disagreement (post program) that they are unlikely to stay in their rural community to work and live.

<b>Key Indicators</b>	<b>Average Mid</b>	<b>STDEV</b>	<b>Average Post</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
I am likely to stay in my community to work and live	8.2	1.7	8.2	1.9

<b>Other indicators influencing Rural Retention</b>	<b>Average Mid</b>	<b>STDEV</b>	<b>Average Post</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
I feel hopeful about the future of my community.	NA		8.4	1.2
I am aware of opportunities to engage with my community leaders.	7.9	1.3	8.3	1.8
I am aware of current challenges facing my community.	8.9	1.1	8.3	1.7

## 4. MAKING A DIFFERENCE

**100%** of change makers believe they can make a difference and have made a meaningful contribution to their community through participation in the program. 100% agreed and 100% strongly agreed mid way through the program. 100% agreed and 73% strongly agreed following completion of the program and their community economic development projects.

<b>Key Indicators</b>	<b>Average Mid</b>	<b>STDEV</b>	<b>Average Post</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
I believe I can make a difference in my community.	9.5	0.8	NA	NA
I believe I made a meaningful contribution to my community through my community development project.	NA	NA	8.6	1.5

<b>Other indicators of Making a Difference</b>	<b>Average Mid</b>	<b>STDEV</b>	<b>Average Post</b>	<b>STDEV</b>
My community development project helped to strengthen my knowledge and practical skills for leading effective community change.	9.3	0.7	8.7	1.3
I am confident in planning a fundraising event in my community.	7.3	1.8	8.1	1.8
I am aware of opportunities to engage with my community leaders.	7.9	1.3	8.3	1.8
I am aware of current challenges facing my community.	8.9	1.1	8.3	1.7

## 5. COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

Change Maker represented more than 25 different rural communities and made over 2400 network connections collectively throughout their 12-month long program journey. These connections introduced participants to thought leaders, industry specialists, knowledge holders, Indigenous experts, community – economic development, workforce, labour, municipal and business development mentors and coaches. Community connections were inspired during skills building and deepened during community economic development projects by participants including community activities in change maker locales.

99% of change makers reported an increased sense of belonging and feel more connected to their community. 100% agreed they made new connections midway through and after program completion. Midway through the program 100% agreed they expected to make new connections through project activities and 93% agreed following program completion. All matched participants expressed 100% agreement with feeling a sense of belonging.

Key Indicators	Average Mid	STDEV	Average Post	STDEV
I have a sense of belonging in my community.	8.6	0.8	8.9	1.1
I expect to or made new connections with people in my community.	9.2	0.9	8.5	1.5

Other indicators of Making a Difference	Average Mid	STDEV	Average Post	STDEV
I expect to OR feel more connected to my community and the people in it as a result of my community development project.	9.3	0.8	8.3	1.4

### RURAL YOUTH SUMMIT

## 6. ADVANCING FUTURE GOALS

100% of change makers said they will use the skills learned to continuously grow and build the future they prefer.

Key Indicators	Average Mid	STDEV	Average Post	STDEV
I will continue to use the skills I have learned through the Rural Change Maker program to continuously grow, learn and build the future I prefer.	9.4	1.1	9.6	0.9



