



Stewardship Report

2025



Rural
Ontario
Institute

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ABOUT

RURAL CHANGE MAKERS HAS BEEN A TRULY TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE. 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.

Chirag Parcha, 2025 Rural Change Maker –
Founder of Official Humans of Canada

The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI)

RURAL CHANGE MAKERS IS DELIVERED BY The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) - a charitable not-for-profit whose mission is to build vision, voice and leadership in rural and northern Ontario. We do this by offering leadership programs, providing leaders with data and analysis to make informed decisions, and by connecting leaders so they can share innovative practices around opportunities and challenges.

The Rural Change Makers program (RCM) is a transformative program for emerging leaders 18-35 years old from rural Ontario. The goal of the RCM program is to develop young leaders, equipped with critical skills, to build stability and identify and overcome challenges with their communities. In doing so change makers catalyze social, economic and community development capacity within rural sectors and create meaningful change. Seminars, self-directed learning and transformative skills building combine hands-on experience, introduce local rural community-economic development solutions and expose participants to contacts and networks that would otherwise take considerable time to accumulate.

This **Stewardship Report** highlights the impact of supporters in caring for the next generation and building strong leaders, rural communities and economies through investments in young Change Makers.



RURAL CHANGE MAKERS PROGRAM & IMPACT

Since 2012 ROI has been developing young rural leaders through youth leadership programming. The Rural Change Makers (RCM) Program is the culmination of a Youth Engagement Showcase, Municipal Youth Internship and successful 2019 pilot.

LEADING CHANGE

80+ EMERGING LEADERS - from over 60 rural communities including a collective of 24 First Nations in NW Ontario.

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

Building meaningful local rural development outcomes reflective of the values, priorities and diversity of people, places and industry of rural Ontario communities.



Rural Change Makers are making a difference in many sectors and industries including rural health care, and the trades. Some have entered the agriculture sector for the first time through cultural diversity initiatives or new food security businesses. They are diversifying activities on existing farms through new value-added products and renewing age-old customary practices like falconry for livestock/crop protection. Others are taking on management of the family farm or serving farm families through leadership of on-farm childcare programs.

Change Makers are doing incredible things. They are leading rural economic development solutions, policy initiatives, mental health and wellbeing organizations, addressing rural housing solutions and contributing to labour and workforce developments. They are also increasingly taking on leadership roles in municipal sectors and First Nations, holding public service positions and serving on boards and councils. Their care for the next generation is undeniable through child welfare initiatives, advocacy, youth engagement, and climate action projects. They are thoughtful and passionate leaders advancing the arts and dedicated to building inclusion in rural communities through gender-diverse projects and initiatives that create welcoming spaces and networks for neighbours new to rural Ontario.

VOICES OF CHANGE



“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,” Josee Labelle, Labour Market Indicators Advisory Table for the Boréal Service System Manager.

“I made advancements in my career, working on building safer communities,”
Zeel Parma



“The RCM project has truly inspired me to create change within my community. As a future physician, we are expected to become community advocates without being told how to do this. With this program, I now have concrete knowledge, skills, and resources to hone my role as a future leader within my practice community,” Natalee Schors, Rural Change Maker and future physician.

“This program is very important for anyone that wants to help their communities grow,” Ropheka Adofo, Rural Change Maker and Planner with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Housing, Thunder Bay.

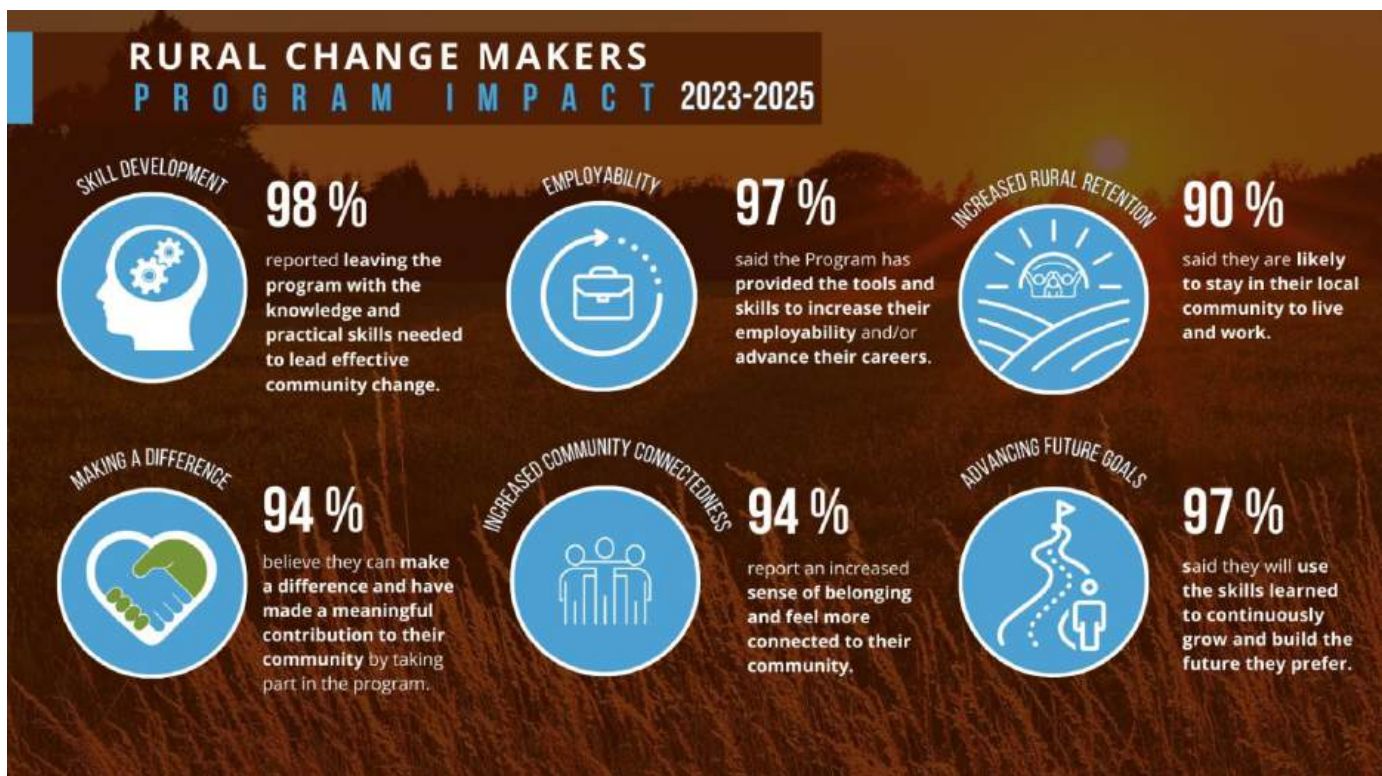


I worked on life stabilizing activities (wellbeing, education) and I made advancements in my career,” Rural Change Maker Skye Kakekagumic, Sandy Lake First Nation.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Change Makers have masterfully applied their training and skills to create meaningful outcomes in their lives and communities. 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.

Alumni, report that the RCM prepared and inspired them to take on leadership roles in their communities and comment that **“The program gave me the tools and skills needed to make a difference in my community in a big way,”** RCM 4 Change Maker Christina Radadatz. The most significant indicators of success are showcased in the achievements of Rural Change Makers, and increased rural retention of alumni, with **90% reporting they are more likely to stay, live and work in their rural communities** following the RCM program (**up 18% since 2022**).



Rural youth have told us there are fewer opportunities for them in remote and rural locales, with some First Nation's youth having to travel and stay away from their families in neighbouring communities to access a high school education or health supports. ROI is committed to opening doors of opportunity for rural youth to learn, lead and contribute – providing freely accessible programming and creating an inclusive governance table where we all belong. The program is continuously growing to refine and expand program opportunities and bring about positive change for youth and regions.

“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 Partners.

BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

ROI is committed to the next generation of leaders and ensuring seminar and skill development focus on mastery of and confidence in core leadership skills; exposure to innovative problem solving; discovery of key rural issues of importance including the economic, political, social, cultural, and physical environment; exploration of local community-economic opportunities; and personal and professional development. In addition to comprehensive evaluations providing critical program feedback, Change Makers themselves also guide co-design of the program. They form important committees that inform communications, event and fundraising activities as well as complete a special leadership session culminating their program journey where graduates actively design the curriculum framework, implementation of SMART goals and complimentary activities.

MILESTONES RCM 3 & 4

Over 50 young men and women participated in the Rural Change Maker program from 2023-2025 and achieved the following highlights and milestones:



1. **Program Completion of 2 Cohorts:** RCM 3 (September 2024) and RCM 4 (October 2025).



2. **Completion of 16 Seminars and Learning Labs:** 8 in 2023-24 and 8 in 2024-25 (Virtual Webinar Sessions).



3. **2 Ignite Sessions:** Huron County Region (January 2024), Durham County Region (March 2025). Applying learned skills, inspiring action through in-person, group activities; and developing SMART action plans.

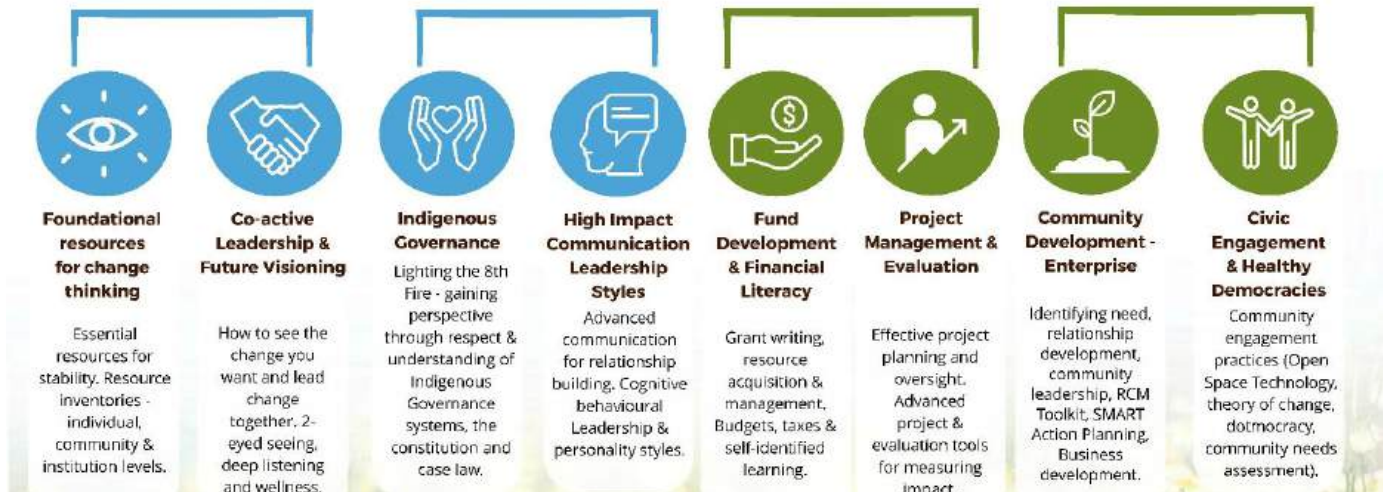


4. **Over 40 Local Community Change Making Projects and Advancements Including:** career leaps and new employment, multiple business and social enterprise projects, educational toolkits and municipal policy blueprints and community engagement in strategic planning, non-profit leadership, housing and food security projects, park clean up initiatives, energy equity and skilled trades, elder and youth initiatives, new media projects including documentaries, podcasts, literary and Pride events, youth summits and environmental stewardship movements.



5. **7 Core Competencies:** RCM participants developed skills in 7 core competency areas including community development; understanding change; the importance of trends, forecasting and foresight; and systems thinking skills like theories of change, social innovation, and Bridges resources for change.

SKILLS BUILDING



The Rural Change Maker program was delivered to 2 cohorts of emerging leaders between September 2023 and October 2025. During the 16 seminars and learning labs, cohort 3 and 4 participants developed skills across 8 core sessions above and developed competence in the following concepts:

RURAL COMMUNITY BUILDING FUNDAMENTALS

- Introduction to Community Building
- Importance of Community Building
- Tools for Community Leadership
- Outcome Focused Leadership
- Measuring Impact: Evaluation Fundamentals
- Essential resources for Change
- Inclusive Fundraising and Financial literacy

COMMUNITY- LED DEVELOPMENT

- Supporting Individual and Community Change
- Project Planning Using a Community Development Approach
- Business Development and Social Enterprise
- High Impact Communication
- Personality and Leadership Styles

COMMUNITY – LED TRANSFORMATION

- Indigenous Governance and the Importance of 2-eyed Seeing
- Civic Engagement
- Tools for Working with Community Groups
- Project Management
- SMART Action Plans, Life Blueprints and Stability (personal, institutional and community levels)

PROGRAM JOURNEY



COMMUNITY CHANGE MAKING - IMPACT

Through engagement, discovery and action participants add to their “toolbox of skills” and apply them in their lives, careers, businesses and communities. Guided by SMART Action Plans and Life Blueprints - action-based leadership plans – Change Makers undertake community economic development, career and business activities within the rural landscape of Ontario. 2023-2025 Change Maker graduates (RCM3 and RCM 4 cohorts) made a difference in the following ways.

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



18%

of change makers

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



23%

of RCM 3's entered the ag-sector in 2024

9% led non-profits in mental health & wellbeing.

14% of RCMs entered the health care sector in 2025.



50%

of RCM4 change maker community projects

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



36%

of change makers undertook

life-stabilizing activities and plans for future educational goals each year.



32%

cultivated new

literacy, diversity, and environmental initiatives in 2024. **14%** in the arts and culture sector in 2025.



14%

started or grew

new businesses in 2025, 9% in 2024.

9% moved from under-employed to employed.

Business

GreenSky Farms Vertical farming & Good Food Baskets - Wabigoon Lake
Ojibwe Nation
Bay Leaf Restaurant - Belleville

Social Enterprise

Ikkiran Group - Timmins
 Supportive community plans for people experiencing homelessness & food insecurities.

Environment & Safety

Backyard Ecosystems - Huron County

Park Clean-up & Safety - Timmins

Agriculture

Working the Family Farm - Durham

Henderson Apiaries - Beekeeping and value added enterprise in St. George.

Cultural Preservation & Social Inclusion

Film Documentary - Poplar Hill First Nation

Alice Munro Festival of the Short Story - Huron County

Pride - Brant County

Faces of Resilience - Southern ON

Children & Youth

OnFarm Childcare - Durham

Youth Program - Sachigo Lake First Nation.

Elder-youth Programming - Poplar Hill First Nation

Non-Profit Organizations

And Then I Was Free - Mental Health & Addictions Supports
Belleville International

Committees

Rural Ontario Youth Summit - Planning Committee

Energy Equity

Working with Wataynikaneyap Transmission Project - Bringing power to remote First Nation Communities in Northwestern Ontario.

Community economic development activities**2024-2025 Change Makers**

Official Humans of Canada - Celebrating the stories of Canada, one Human at a time!
Social Enterprise!

Blueprint for collaborative governance in Head - Clara - Maria Township – empowering small, rural Ontario municipalities to lead with community-driven, collaborative strategies. *Employment Aligned!*

Wellspring Farm and Digital Farmers' Market - Social enterprise plans for local food box & food redistribution program in the Timmins region. *New Business!* Digital trade and agricultural marketplace expansion for local farmers in the Timmins area. *Community Building!*

Travelling Metis – art and podcast project ensuring the stories and history of Métis elders and people are preserved for generations to come. *Arts, Culture & Heritage!*

Paving The Way Project - supporting the entrance of women into the trades. A collaborative project to create clear pathways for young women entering/re-entering the trades, provide supportive networks for tradeswomen and to motivate, educate and encourage hiring of young tradeswomen. *+ Career Advancement!*

Youth Pride in the Park - Prince Edward County – creating safe and affirming spaces, connecting youth to resources, increasing community awareness and encouraging collaboration among community members, businesses and organizations. *Community Building!*

Municipal Community Service Projects – Actioning new network resources in municipal Poverty Reduction Strategies bringing Bridges Out of Poverty training to community partners and members at large, and repurposing technology for community members in need. *Employment Aligned!*

Uplift Youth Summit – municipal youth summit creating opportunities for engagement, belonging and leadership with children in the region of Eganville. *Employment Aligned!*

Lead Local: Womxn of Haliburton County – inclusive and welcoming community-driven engagement movement and forum designed to amplify the voices of women across the region and help shape local municipal strategic planning. Co-hosted by change maker entrepreneur and business owner of **Reform & Restore Wellness Hub**. *Business Aligned!*



Deep River Wellness Hub - Development of centralized multi-service resource hub in eastern Ontario providing harm reduction, pre-natal resources and mental health and wellbeing supports to community members. *Community Building!*



Community Safety and Wellbeing – employment related community safety engagement and planning in remote Northwestern Ontario First Nation. *Career Advancement!*



Development of an Environmental Consulting Business - supporting private and public sector projects with culturally informed land use practices centred around traditional knowledge and environmental expertise. *Future Building!*



Employment related housing security work - Using skills and training to support housing security projects in Huron County including local Housing Symposium. *Employment Aligned!*



Advancing the arts – planning first record launch and tour of local southwestern Ontario band blending storytelling, humor, and songwriting. *Arts, Culture & Heritage!*



Behind the Curtain of Health Care - dedicated to inspiring youth to explore and pursue careers in the healthcare industry, providing accessible educational resources and support to students, educators, and community partners. *Community Building!*



Bop a Stay – short term accommodation initiative bridging the gap between housing abundance and housing insecurity among seniors and newcomers in Thunder Bay, ON. *Community Building!*



Brighton Young Professional Network - fostering growth and creating opportunities for young professionals in Northumberland County, Ontario.
Employment Aligned!



Youth Amplifier and Advocacy - supporting connection, belonging, community development and empowerment among First Nation youth in Thunder Bay region. *Employment Aligned!*



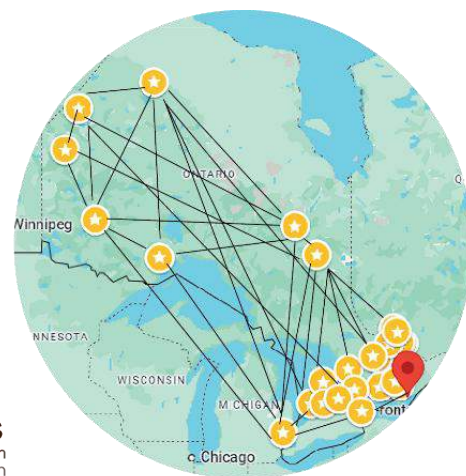
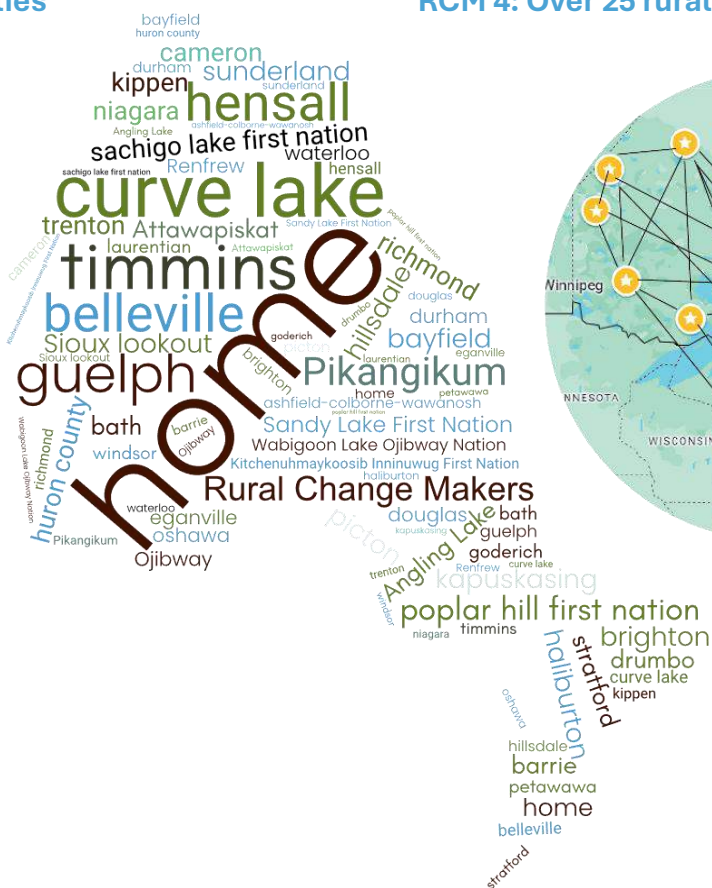
Labour Market Indicators Advisory Table –
collaborative business development and employment
services programming in Parry sound, Hurst, Timmins,
Sault St. Marie, Moosonee (James Bay Coast), Wawa,
Parry Sound and North Bay regions. *Employment
Aligned!*

2023-2025 RURAL CHANGE MAKER REGIONAL IMPACT

RCM 3: Over 31 rural communities



RCM 4: Over 25 rural communities



LOOKING AHEAD

Community engagement, feedback and participant, partner and program evaluations affirm the value of RCM to rural youth and to rural, northern, and Indigenous communities across Ontario.

As rural Ontario grows and diversifies, so too does the RCM program with program elements and curriculum adapting to feedback, priorities and trends. Some critical elements remain constant, such as gathering for an Ignite Action Session and initiation of SMART or Life Blueprint goals during the 6-month community development phase of the program, while some core aspects are changing.



GOING FORWARD: face-to-face experiential learning opportunities are expanding to include regional community youth exchanges during graduation and a bi-annual Rural Youth Summit. Additionally, change makers lead key program committees - Communications, Ignite Planning, Summit Governance Committee and Fund Development - guiding critical program delivery aspects. New in 2024 was the Change Maker led “[Rising Up Rural](#)” podcast series, sharing the stories and plans of Change Makers and marking important program milestones.



Specialized mental health and wellbeing supports have also been added to the program providing on-site youth supports for life stabilization during in-person gatherings. Regional program partners are also wrapping safety and wellbeing supports around change makers, in addition to knowledge sharing, community resource connectivity and lending expertise to curriculum delivery.

Curriculum is also advancing to expand the 14 core foundational skills with the addition of municipal governance, complimenting Indigenous governance learning to bridge cross-cultural understanding of different governance systems and other world views and create cohesive leadership practices. Also new to the 2026 curriculum is succession planning, policy development, inclusive democracies, fierce conversations for difficult negotiations and dedicated business/entrepreneurship training.

NEW IN 2026



Entrepreneurship & Business Development
Expansion of business, social enterprise and entrepreneurial skills building.



Policy Development
Policy development from imagination to actualization.



Municipal Governance & Healthy Democracies
Municipal governance - structure, practices and procedures supporting healthy & inclusive democratic participation.



Succession Planning & Fierce Conversations
Enhanced communication training for difficult conversations and succession planning.



The co-design of the Rural Change Maker Program is informed by change makers and the perspectives of hundreds of rural, remote and Indigenous youth, leaders and community members through extensive outreach and consultation of the Young Rural Resilient project - a youth led project of the change maker program.

Bridges essential resource training, future visioning, two-eyed seeing, Co-active Leadership training, financial literacy, civic engagement, sustainable project management, evaluation and high impact communication continue to lay the foundation of critical leadership skill building – applying a cognitive behavioural approach to communication and community leadership.

Community Economic Development (CED) opportunities have transformed, and change makers define their CED pathways as part of their learning journey. Pathways are unique to individuals and vary, but primarily include:

- Self-guided, new or existing community-led project development, or
- Group-peer-partner new or existing community project opportunities
- New or existing business/enterprise projects
- Career-aligned project work
- Life stabilizing and educational activities
- Mentor-guided learning journeys tied to individual interests and community projects

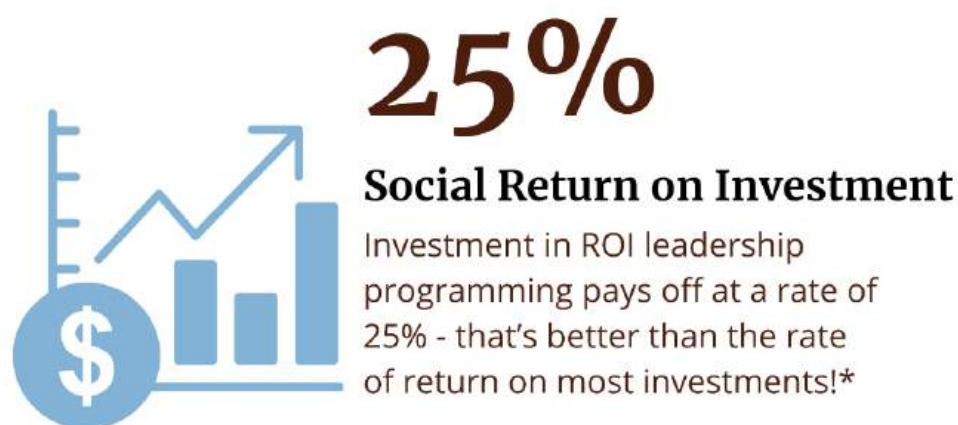
"The future of rural life depends on the commitment, knowledge and leadership of the next generation. The Rural Ontario Institute supports youth and rural Ontario through delivery of the Rural Change Maker Program."

Melanie Bidiuk, Communications and Rural Change Maker Program Manager

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

GEORGE MORRIS CENTRE STUDY & UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH EVALUATION

In 2013, the George Morris Centre completed the study: [Social Return on Investment](#). The study reaffirmed the tremendous value of Leadership Programming to rural Ontario society and the economy. Social return on investment is a method to track and capture the impact a program has on the lives of its participants. The social return on investment from ROI leadership programming is 25%. That means for every \$1 invested, the social return on investment is \$1.25.



*According to the 2013 Social Return on Investment Study completed by the George Morris Centre.

YOUR SUPPORT

The impact and phenomenal achievements of Change Makers shared in this Stewardship Report is a reflection of the contributions of more than 50 regional program and curriculum partners, sponsors, donors and funding partners. The difference we celebrate is made possible **because of you** - the fuller community of supporters so generously giving gifts of knowledge, time, expertise and financial resources. That care for future generations and the wellbeing of our communities is evident in the belonging, confidence, skills and dedication felt by young rural leaders. They are building brighter futures, and you have made all the difference in that.



Thank you

RURAL CHANGE MAKER PARTNERS

2023-2025



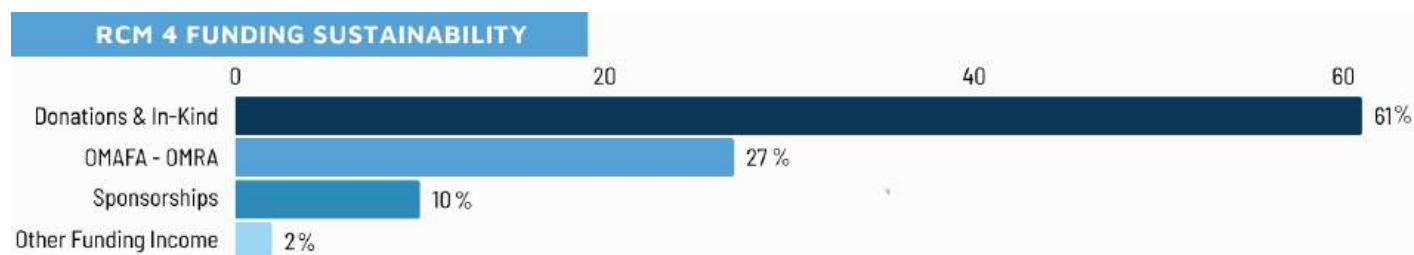
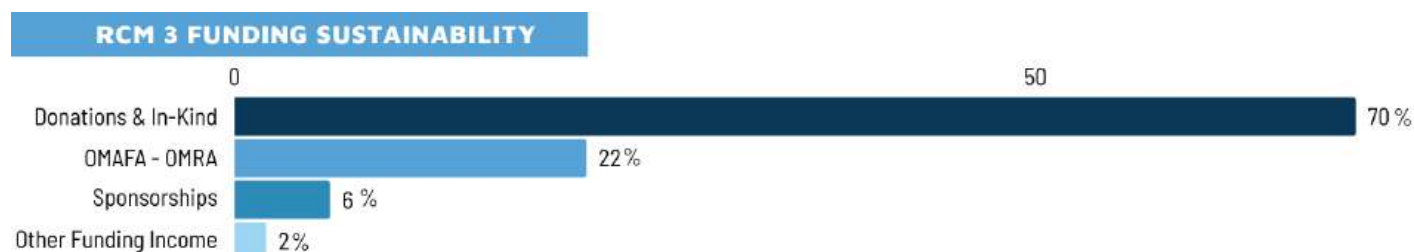
Foundation



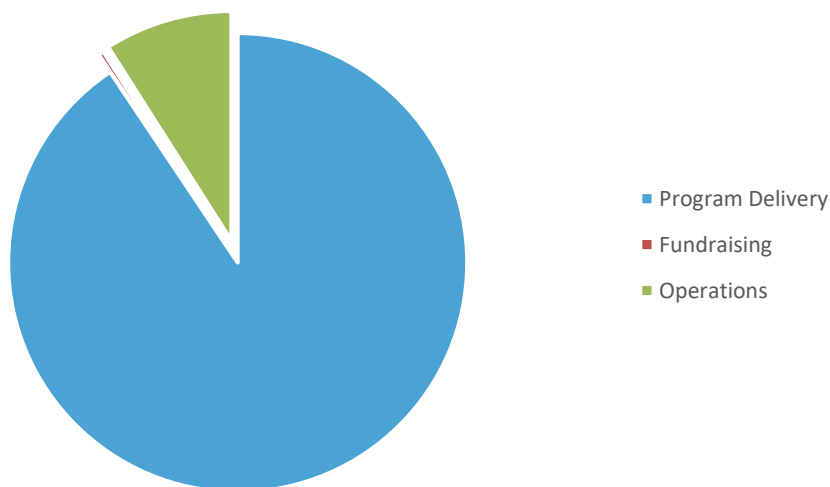
Financial support of the Rural Change Maker program goes directly toward funding leadership development and delivery of the program. It enables an inclusive governance landscape that invites rural youth of all backgrounds and lived experiences to freely contribute to the future of rural Ontario. This is key to reaching rural youth – inclusive, accessible leadership opportunities because the landscape rural youth navigate today is not that of yesterday. We are deeply grateful for all the ways partners are supporting Change Makers. The results are undeniable and powerful. You are creating transformative change alongside rural youth. They want to build their futures at home. They have a sense of belonging and connection to their communities, and belief they are making a difference. They are more connected and tooled up with critical skills, enabling them to build strong futures and communities. Your support is the foundation underneath this growth.

Throughout the history of ROI leadership programming, costs continue to increase and so has our commitment to deliver programs of exceptional quality. This requires investments from many partners within industry and sectors to diversify our funding sustainability model and continue to invest in rural youth. Program delivery accounts for approximately 3/4 of the cost of RCM with operating and fundraising making up the remaining. The program is a successful example of collaborative vision with in-kind expertise, donations, grants, sponsorships and participant fundraising providing support.

RURAL CHANGE MAKER PROGRAM FUNDING SOURCES



Rural Change Makers Expenditures



RECOGNIZING COMMITMENT TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Program sponsors and supporters play a meaningful leadership role in rural community economic development in Ontario and provide tremendous support to RCM. We deeply value and continue to recognize this stewardship, showcasing the incredible people alongside the program at every opportunity.

In each cohort, we acknowledge our sponsors in a number of formal and informal ways including:

- Sponsor spotlights are shone on RCM sponsors in select learning labs and training sessions.
- Sponsor logos are included in printed and online communications - ROI newsletters, selected media releases, on our website and in the Rural Ontario Institute Annual Report.
- Individualized social media posts are used to thank each sponsor, reaching our networks of over 10,500 friends and followers who are highly engaged with content.
- Sponsor brands are displayed in Learning Lab presentations.
- Sponsors receive special thanks (verbally, in printed materials and on signage) at key events:
 - RCM Welcome Session
 - Ignite Retreat
 - RCM Graduation Ceremony
 - Rural Ontario Youth Summit partners and sponsors are also showcased on communication materials (digital and print) highlighted at the Provincial Youth Summit.

"I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made it possible for us to be part of Rural Change Makers." 2025 Rural Change Maker Chirag Parcha.

Hear from Change Makers



"I'm so grateful to the Rural Change Makers program and to Community Futures Huron for the opportunity to receive coaching/education, networking and counseling from true experts in community enrichment. Without their encouragement and guidance, my project and the amazing work of my fellow Rural Change Makers could not have been realized into existence - and this is only the beginning of a lifetime of contribution and paying it forward," **2023-24 Rural Change Maker Krystal Brideau, Huron County.**

"The change I feel inside me is a small step but means a lot because I feel brave, and I am not afraid of embracing positive change. Meeting so many different people at Ignite and experiencing things I have never done before through this program has had a really big impact on me. I'm cherishing this time," **Mahbuba Airin, 2023-24 Rural Change Maker.**

"I am very thankful for everything I have experienced. I definitely encourage people to consider this program," **2023-24 Rural Change Maker Rainelle Keeper, Pikangikum First Nation.**

"Having the opportunity to be a Rural Change Maker has really opened my eyes to what is happening beyond my community. It was refreshing to meet other likeminded young people from communities across Ontario who are experiencing a lot of the same challenges as my community. Sometimes it can feel like there is so much wrong in the world, and that I can't fix everything that is broken, but this program reminded me I'm not alone! I have so many new skills and tools that I can use to engage my community and create a movement for change, and I can do so knowing that so many others are doing the same thing in their communities. I think this program is exactly what I needed to boost my confidence in community development work, and I love that it provides so much opportunity to those with less experience in this realm than me," **2024-25 Rural Change Maker Kiydan Zachariah.**

WHY SPONSOR RCM?



Align your organization with emerging leaders who are needed to move rural communities forward – in businesses, in associations, in organizations, in government, in communities and on farms.



RCM graduates go on to hold many different influential positions within industry and their communities. Many credit their RCM experience as a cornerstone that helped them get there. You make this possible.



Sponsor representatives have many opportunities to interact with each Cohort and keep a pulse on what is changing in rural communities.



Governance and rural issues are high priorities for the province. Together we have an opportunity to shape the future of our sectors and rural communities across Ontario.



Investment in ROI Leadership programming pays off at a rate of 25% - that's better than the rate of return on most investments!

RCM IS POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF GENEROUS SPONSORS, FUNDERS & DONORS



Building tomorrow's leaders for today's rural challenges!

2023-2025

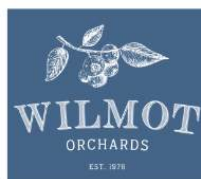
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Empowering Ontario's Rural Leaders of Today and Tomorrow



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Mahbuba Airin, 2023-24 Rural Change Maker.

"I am very thankful for everything I have experienced. I definitely encourage people to consider this program."

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2023-24 Rural Change Maker Krystal Brideau, Huron County.



Make a difference in a young leader's life

scan the QR
code to donate



The Rural Ontario Institute is a registered Canadian charity.

Other ways to donate:

- Cash or cheque donations can be mailed to:
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Guelph ON N1H 6J2
- e-Transfer to
finance@ruralontarioinstitute.ca

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