

Inclusivity & Belonging

in the Caring and Non-Profit Workforce

Staff Perspective



Workforce Planning Board
of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin

March 2026

Our Vision: We envision the continuous development of a leading-edge workforce.
Our Mission: Engage partners to find solutions to local workforce development needs.

We would like to express our sincere thank you to all those who took the time to take part in the development of this report, sharing their insight into the caring and non-profit sectors.

The material contained in this report has been prepared by the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin (WPBWWD) and draws from a variety of sources considered to be reliable. We make no representation or warranty, express or implied, as to its accuracy or completeness. In providing this material, WPBWWD does not assume any responsibility for liability.

The research staff used AI software to do the initial organization of ideas and themes from the survey's customized questions. The researcher then reviewed the organization of these comments to ensure the sector can easily use the data. AI was also used for initial text editing to improve clarity.

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Using This Report

The data in this report comes directly from our Caring Workforce Survey of staff in the caring and non-profit sectors, conducted in November 2025. Quotes are straight from participants and reflect their perspectives about working in the sector.

This report covers how included staff feel within workplaces and whether they feel like they belong. This also includes information on how staff prefer to receive training and which forms of appreciation and recognition staff appreciate most. Managers and HR professionals can use this knowledge to evaluate their own workplaces and create better environments for attracting, retaining and strengthening their staff.

Who Provided Input?

This is what we know about the 160 people who provided feedback.

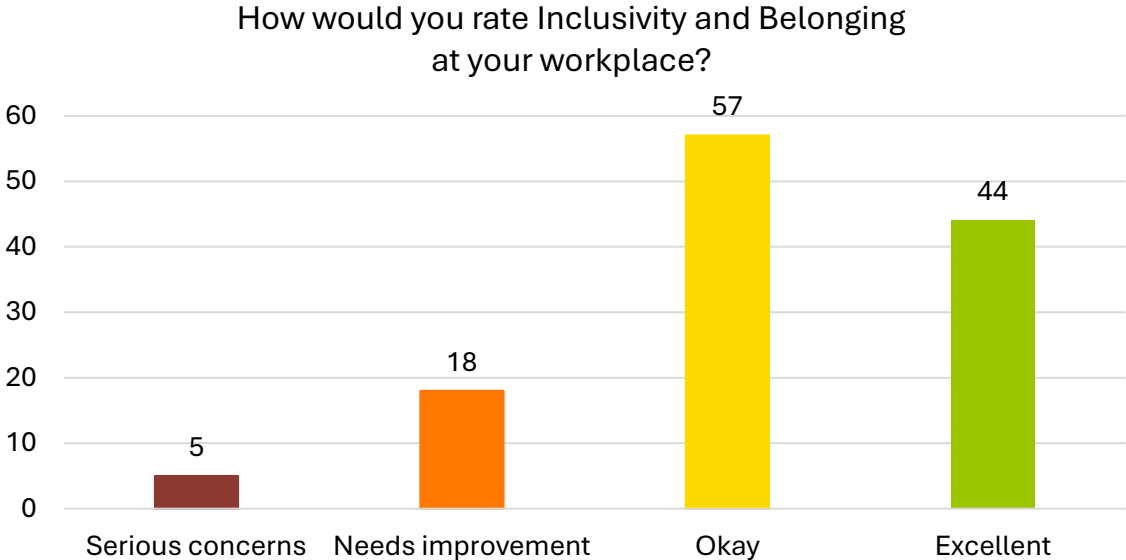
Where they work

- Waterloo Region (83 people), Guelph-Wellington (68) and Dufferin County (18). Some worked in more than one geography
- Social & Community Services (68), Childcare (55) and 38 in other caring sectors.
- Almost 80% worked in non-profit companies with 20% in for-profit care.
- 52% worked in companies with fewer than 50 people. Large organizations tended to be in Childcare, Social & Community Services, and Health organizations.
- 84% reported being non-unionized.
- Most staff knew how their organization was funded. The most identified program funding came from the provincial and federal governments.

About their job

- 57% reported being a front-line worker who delivered service, support or programming.
- 43% were managerial/supervisory, human resources, support or another role.
- 86% of respondents were full-time and 79% were permanent employees.
- Contract employees were almost evenly split between having a likely renewal and planned end dates.
- 49 respondents had less than 4 years in the sector. 102 reported having 5+ years. Many of the responses come from staff with more experience. 47 people had 15+ years in the sector.

Rating Inclusivity and Belonging



Survey respondents were asked two follow-up questions to their rating:

- A. **How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?**
- B. **What else could your workplace do to make you feel more included and that you belong?**

We received several responses along the lines of “I don’t feel included”, but many more were optimistic. Themes among the suggestions for improvement included:

1. Recognizing Diversity
2. Input Opportunities & Feeling Heard
3. Recognition
4. Collaboration
5. Communication
6. Events & Activities
7. Leadership
8. Autonomy & Individual Strengths

The theme with the most positive comments was Collaboration. **The topic with the most suggestions for improvement was ‘Recognizing Diversity’.**

Read the respondent quotes in each of the following sections for context and advice on how to bring positive change to your workplace.

1. Recognizing Diversity

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- Accommodates holidays outside the regular ones. Thinks about how to make longer leaves possible for working (someone travels "home" and works flexibly)
- Respecting cultures, diversity, food preferences and scope to speak and present your personality and roots
- Opportunities for self-expression
- We have a mainly Queer workforce and everyone feels safe and seen
- DEI awareness and workshops
- Commitment to anti-bias culture of all domains
- Allow the staff to bring and celebrate our culture and respect



Recognizing Diversity (continued)

What else could your workplace do?

- They claim to support all races and religions, yet I need to fight with upper management for the ability to take a day off to celebrate a holiday in my religion because they want me to use my wellness days (not allowed according to OHRC)
- Allow me to at least take unpaid time off to celebrate my religion's holidays.
- Actually implement anti-racism policies
- Don't treat diverse employees as tokens who are only used when it makes the organization look good, implement policies to reduce retaliation against employees raising concerns
- Accommodate my disability request or help with a solution. Management needs to show up and know what's happening in the department
- Ensure ALL departments are included when we think of the whole organization. It's easy to focus on the biggest ones only
- Provide better protection when discrimination does take place and follow through on consequences for staff regarding this behaviour
- Celebrate or introduce different cultures in the center
- Celebrating cultures as a team
- Make more seats at the table for more diverse staff
- Equity is important - it is a powerful message being sent all over the region, but it seems to have zoned in on cultures and groups rather than looking at everyone as an individual and having the same expectations for everyone. Sometimes we feel that we have more expectations and others are getting away with things that we don't
- I think our whole organization would benefit from diversity training to be supportive
- More emphasis on supporting women through perimenopause and menopause. ... I don't think there is a true appreciation for what women are going through and that is seen in generational views. ... There is a constant need to defend being sick with a particular reason (stomach flu, migraine) which everyone accepts but imagine saying "I don't feel like myself" which is the number one reported symptom of Perimenopause/Menopause
- Offer part time employees similar benefits (sick, health) to full time employees, pro-rated
- Include me as part of the employee staff list, as I'm not currently listed as part of the permanent staff

2. Input Opportunities & Feeling Heard

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- Touch base meetings, weekly check-in times from my supervisor
- Insights surveys, feedback loops, regular 1:1 connection with lead and others in the organization
- Regular feedback, pulling together as a team
- We have 2 surveys a year that go out to all staff, a third party compiles all the data and it is shared with all management and staff so we can see where we are excelling and areas we need to support and grow
- Well-being check-ins
- I am asked for my ideas and opinions - it is fully considered and not brushed aside
- My workplace does a pretty good job at ensuring a sense of belonging by encouraging discussion from everyone, giving everyone an opportunity to participate in community events, and recognizing individual contributions
- I am often consulted for my opinion on various matters involving the organization. I feel that my input is valued
- Create open communication about different topics and value everyone's opinions
- By valuing my contribution and creating a fairly respectable workplace culture
- Included in most of the decision-making
- Management listens and cares
- Seek opinions, ideas
- Openness to feedback and new ideas. They embrace change and are not afraid to explore new territory. We are learning to reflect, together
- Asks for my input. Looks to me for leadership. Promotes my expertise to others

Input Opportunities & Feeling Heard (continued)

What else could your workplace do?

- Solicit communication and involvement across the board not just upper management
- Bring into decision-making, help me understand more about next steps in mission/vision of the organization
- They could listen to our needs (Ask for more staff input)
- Listen to concerns and take action
- More input into things that are being changed; Listen to all voices
- Make sure doors are open to hear employees when they voice their concerns
- More committees for input from staff
- Consider my input. Stop saying that my position can be filled if I don't want to work my current hours. Consider making changes that benefit the staff that are working in office
- Involve me more in certain areas
- Make sure my opinion matters
- Asking for our opinion trusting that we are the expert and not [necessarily] the managers!
- Eliminate favouritism
- More frequent feedback
- Reach out to supervisors in the centres every day to find out what is, isn't working

3. Recognition

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- Random thank you notes
- Words of affirmation
- Verbal and written support and prompts
- My immediate colleagues remind each other of our value, what we have done well
- Celebratory events:
 - Birthdays, special days, career milestones
 - Staff appreciation days
 - Staff celebrations/staff meeting shout-outs
 - Long-term service awards, some of the leadership team recognizes accomplishments
- Holiday gifts, birthday gifts
- Swag and treats throughout the year
- Gift cards
- Constant conversation and praise
- They include a profile of us on their website

What else could your workplace do?

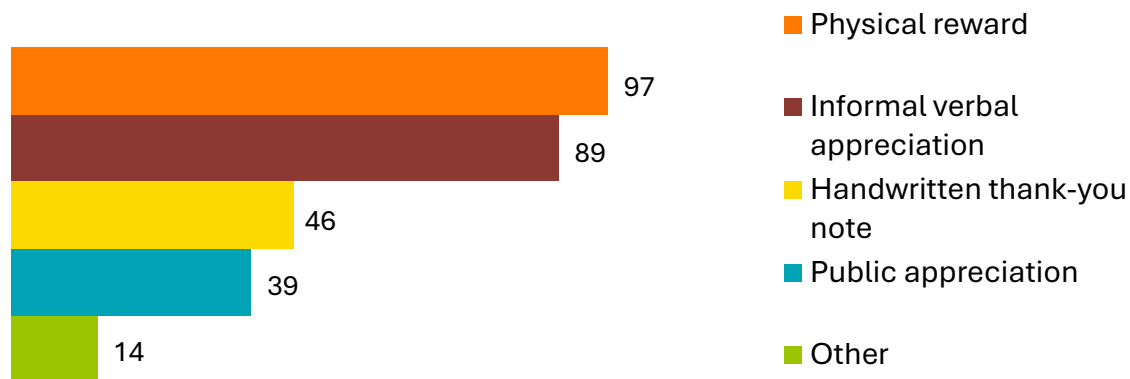
- More thanks that does not feel phony
- Management/directors could show appreciation to staff more than once a year
- Notice us and the work we do, our performance reviews are "individual", yet our successes are grouped
- Public recognition. Recognize best practices and teamwork
- Recognition through incentives, team building days
- Staff events, personal thank you of appreciation
- More interaction/ communication between supervisor and owner to let me know I'm appreciated for what I'm doing

Workplace Appreciation Preferences

As part of the survey, staff were asked about workplace appreciation. They were asked to select **2 preferred workplace appreciation options** from the following list:

- Physical reward - gift card, redeemable reward points, swag (i.e. logo clothing)
- Informal verbal appreciation
- Handwritten thank-you note
- Public appreciation - at a team meeting, on social media, or at a recognition event
- Other (please specify)

Workplace Appreciation



Among the respondents who selected 'Other', most were Frontline staff:

- 9 mentioned money (a raise, bonus, monetary recognition for meeting performance-based funding checkpoints)
- 1 "an email"
- 1 "days off"
- 1 "I like when people give me attention"
- 1 "None"
- 1 "mentoring and support from the Board" (from a respondent in a Supervisory role)

4. Collaboration & Support

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- By allowing me to connect with other teams when it is appropriate and not feel "siloeed" in my role or my department
- Good working relationship within employment services, can feel isolated from broader organization
- Being part of the team, included in decision making, opportunities for social engagement. I feel included through the supportive and approachable team environment. Everyone is willing to share ideas, collaborate, and help each other
- My coworkers make me feel included, we work together daily to support each other and our participants
- There's a strong sense of community. People genuinely care about one another and the work we do. This makes it easy to feel connected, supported, and part of something meaningful
- Staff are friendly and supportive of each other
- From day 1, it was an extremely welcoming environment. I never felt out of place. Everyone was friendly and excited to have me join the team. Everyone took the time to meet with me one-on-one or send me an email welcome. Every individual is checking to see how they can help one another
- Belonging to me is like being in a family and majority of the staff are like a big family
- Warm friendly atmosphere among staff
- The team worries about me personally if I am not at my best. The team celebrates with me if I have success personally or at work
- Culture of kindness and assistance (I can call anyone and they are always helpful, even if we've never connected before)
- Just being open and friendly, always willing to help if needed
- Everyone is very friendly and takes the time to ask how you are doing
- My coworkers and I have a very good relationship. We enjoy spending time with each other
- Warm coworkers and management
- Everyone feels welcome and valued, accepted, supported to be an authentic self
- Staff are kind, caring, take a genuine interest in people as employees, as individuals
- Staff are inclusive to new hires and long-standing employees
- Encouraging staff to communicate and form relationships outside of work hours
- Staff all joke around with each other, have fun
- Patience (most of the time), engaging me in conversations (most of the time), providing time and freedom to learn at my own pace (most of the time). These qualities are inconsistent across staff members
- Kind inclusive language

Collaboration & Support (continued)

What else could your workplace do?

- Recognize the emotional weight we're all carrying. Talk about those emotions openly, giving a name to how we're feeling, why, and putting together a plan for things we can control while helping each other let go of things we can't control
- My board of directors could realize that sometimes my job is very exhausting and stressful
- We need people that understand the stress within the centre everyday that we deal with and the long days that some of us do- extra support is always welcome
- Awareness of impact of high work loads on staff
- Make you feel like you aren't just a number that you are actually a human being and they care about you
- It starts with employees, management, most are kind and caring, but like any workplace there are bullies in the mix that can make work life difficult
- Expand programs, projects, and service delivery to be more integrated with different teams instead of each team doing its own thing and not realizing they're duplicating supports in some instances
- Allow supply staff to meet and determine if we're all on the same page
- Cross-team collaboration
- Find ways for employees across locations to get to know each other
- Certain divisions appear to have no interest in other staff as is evident by the constant closed doors
- Provide support
- Offer support for the classrooms needing it
- Help overcome the imposter syndrome.
- Wellness days

5. Communication

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- Regular staff meeting and communications
- I think we have very open communication. If someone is having a bad day, we all try to offer extra help or actively listen
- Monthly meetings with supervisors from other regions of our company
- Communication is excellent
- Feel more included with my team than the organization as a whole. Regular communication amongst us
- They do not; no communications regarding business decisions

What else could your workplace do?

- Saying good morning each day
- Offer more transparency for future plans of the agency
- Planning, org values communications
- Open communication
- Productive meetings
- Communicate more effectively
- Discuss about everything
- I feel it does a great job at this already. However, sometimes simple things like consistently greeting people in the morning and saying good-bye at night are important and meaningful
- It would be great to have more intentional team connection opportunities. Not just socially, but spaces to learn from one another, share experiences, and give feedback. Continued flexibility and open communication also really help foster that sense of belonging

6. Events & Activities

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- By giving opportunities to connect
- Social events
- We plan social events to prioritize team bonding and sometimes team day events for team building
- Organizing participation, team events
- Lunches are bought sometimes
- Christmas party, attempts at appreciation days
- invited to participate in some group activities
- I think that this goes both ways staff/agency, staff make connections with people on other teams we are also a part of different events together to build connection
- Included in events/communication
- Invited to meetings and social events, despite being relief/part-time
- Invited to some PD opportunities.
- Time to talk with each other. Being invited to outside events
- We do team trivia at the start of every staff meeting and have a scheduled social chat once for 30 minutes - not work related
- Everyone included in all activities inside and outside of work
- Group events and meetings
- Being involved in events and changes within the organization. Friendly conversations. Checking in with one another. Telling each other how glad we are to be a team

What else could your workplace do?

- More team day events to get to know team members
 - More group activities
 - Team building opportunities
 - More team building
 - Continuing to do events and outings for the team, teamwork activities, building
 - Have specified lunch times for individuals, not just have it when you can, as that promotes low self-esteem in the workplace - need to be able to bond outside of work-related issues to make the team stronger
 - Hosting occasional staff gatherings
 - Team building
 - Create inclusive activities for staff
 - Provide team-building opportunities that strengthen connections and collaboration
 - More social opportunities to connect in person or online (as we work in a hybrid environment it is hard to stay connected)
-

7. Leadership

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- Will be implementing permanent floaters for centres allowing more opportunities for staff to take vacation and feel they can take their sick day when they need it
- My direct supervisor/manager is wonderful and is always checking in and advocating for front-line staff members. They are always open to staff thoughts and clearly communicate with staff members
- Good leadership
- Support from my supervisors
- Friendly leadership and staff
- Check-ins regarding more than just progress on projects. Ensuring general well-being and flexibility when "life" happens
- Clear job and responsibilities
- Supervisor is open to feedback and checking in frequently
- Administration follows policy and procedures themselves
- Colleagues and supervisor are approachable and supportive, which helps me feel part of the team
- Supervisor is very inclusive

What else could your workplace do?

- Increased engagement by leadership
- Certain leadership people need to be more approachable and understanding. Leading from a place of trust, not mistrust
- More of a clear outline of workload. In the beginning before i got access to things and learned more systems i felt a bit lost and unsure what to do.

8. Autonomy & Individual Strengths

How does your workplace make you feel included and that you belong?

- Let you make the choices that affect the organization, there isn't micro-managing or 18 different messages from 18 different people about a said topic
- I have a high degree of autonomy, and we have frequent meetings where I can always voice my opinion
- They do a good job of encouraging us to take on ideas if it is something that we are interested in
- Welcoming, trusting to do the role, connecting daily, open to communicate and no competitions
- We all play a role, and our expertise, and we all value that expertise through the utilization of those skills in our own projects
- Builds on my strengths

What else could your workplace do?

- Find ways to nurture and develop skillsets or project proposals that I've expressed an interest in heading
- Be intentional about educating staff
- Giving opportunities for growth



Skill Building Preferences

Part of having individual strengths is recognizing that skills building can develop more strengths in the workforce. The survey asked respondents to rank four options for gaining new skills.

Overall, the most popular first choice option was “**paid professional development & conferences**”, followed by “**informal peer mentoring**” where staff learn from each other. Access to online training resources is the least preferred training mode for the sector.

	1 st choice	2 nd choice	3 rd choice	4 th choice	Colour Legend
Informal peer mentoring – learning from each other	25%	31%	32%	12%	Ranked highest
Training from a supervisor or manager	16%	22%	26%	36%	
Paid professional development & conferences	42%	23%	23%	12%	
Access to online training resources	17%	25%	18%	40%	Ranked lowest

9. Miscellaneous

- They do their best to make the staff room comfortable
- They could build in some teacher storage where educators could store their belongings in the classroom that's out of the way.
- They could create a spot for educators to post family photos, or staff photos of staff working together and having fun
- They could ask our input when ordering supplies and materials
- Photo walls
- Culture stories and recognition of living the values of the org





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