



**VERMILION / YWCA**  
ENERGY CALGARY

**SKILLS TRAINING CENTRE**

The construction sector is one of Canada's largest industries employing over one million Canadians, over ninety percent of those being men. Skilled carpenters make up to five times the minimum wage and yet in Alberta, only 27,000 women are employed in this industry. Many women are working for minimum wage or in "service-industry" jobs, which often do not pay well. In 2008, the national average income for women was \$31,000, with a vast majority (56%) working more than one job in order to make ends meet. In Alberta, women's total incomes equated to 55% of men's.

The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre was officially launched in January 2008, to address this disconnect. The 16 week integrated pre-employment/pre-apprenticeship construction training program was created to help underemployed or unemployed women develop skills, gain experience and achieve successful employment within the construction industry. The program takes a holistic, experiential approach to help women develop the skills and capacity to step out of a dependency model and into a profitable career. Supported by Vermilion Energy, provincial funding and private donations, 3 - 5 sessions are offered each year, with up to 30 full time participants per session.

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While all program applicants share the common goal of improving their lives, they also bring very different backgrounds, education, and experience. The majority of female applicants are between the ages 16 and 34 (61%), born in Canada (81%), with the highest level of education attained being high school or less (83%). With no standard education or experience required for application, it was important to determine each applicant's suitability for the program. This is one of the reasons that The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre decided to first implement TOWES testing during the application process. TOWES is the only formal assessment available in Canada that accurately benchmarks the three Essential Skills required for success within training and the workplace. TOWES can be written by all applicants regardless of educational background or previous experience and the results provide the Centre with insight into the applicants' foundational skill set.

Referring to the Essential Skill profiles developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), most trades occupations require skills at a minimum of level 3. Jane Cooper, Program Manager, has also found that applicants with scores below this benchmark in all three Essential Skill domains (*Reading Text, Document Use and Numeracy*) are more likely to struggle with course content. Jane, who has been involved in the program from the beginning, explains, “We found early on that an applicant's TOWES test results can often provide us with an indication of how successful a participant may be in this program. If an applicant's results are low in one specific domain, we then know where they would benefit most from additional support.”



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*This case study was supported by the Bow Valley College Office of Applied Research and Innovations.*

This coincides with previous TOWES research completed within the apprenticeship system demonstrating that having the required Essential Skills during technical training leads to successful program completion. The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre, designed as a pre-apprenticeship program demonstrates that having the required Essential Skills and identifying skill gaps are important during any point of the training.

Many program applicants also face a number of challenges and barriers outside of the program requirements. Jane and her team have also noticed that a combination of low TOWES scores and significant personal barriers mean a less likelihood of program completion. Trainees with high TOWES scores and numerous barriers are often successful, as they are still able to manage program content and balance personal life situations.



The program consists of four diversified components: Shop Class, Nutrition and Strength Training, Communications Workshops and Work Experience. This approach addresses the vast array of skills, knowledge and experience required for a successful career within this sector. Essential Skills are integrated into all four program components, however it is the Shop Class and Communications Workshops that focus specifically on these skills. Shop Classes support direct hands-on experience by teaching trainees how to calculate area, read safety labels and take measurements, while completing an in-class construction project. Communications Workshops focus on workplace culture including reading bulletins and memos or navigating points on a map. This also demonstrates that Essential Skills are transferable and used in daily life.

TOWES testing provides additional benefits for The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre upon program completion. Comparing pre and post test scores provides the team with program quality accountability. Trainees are also eager to demonstrate skill gain. Score improvements, on average increased by 20 points (International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 500 point literacy scale). For some trainees, skill improvements are significant; one trainee increased her overall score by 77 points. Jane explains "Skill improvements build trainee confidence but they also impact their future workplace success." For those who successfully complete the program, Jane notes that approximately 30% continue to pursue a full apprenticeship, while 70% move directly into the workplace.

**From applicant assessment, identifying skill gaps, to program completion and future workplace success, TOWES is a proven resource in The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre "toolbox" for success.**



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Essential Skills Profiles (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC)

Statistics Canada (2010). Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report. Economic Well-being.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre Information Booklet

TOWES NAIT Case Study

**If you would like to know how Essential Skills & TOWES can work for you, contact the TOWES Department, Bow Valley College, 403.410.3200, [www.towes.com](http://www.towes.com)**

**For more information about The Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre, contact the Centre, 403.705.7526, [www.ywcaofcalgary.com/trades](http://www.ywcaofcalgary.com/trades)**