



Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada: Myths vs Realities

Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) plays an important role in addressing labour market shortages, enabling small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to continue delivering essential goods and services to Canadians. However, in 2024, Ottawa introduced new restrictions to the program including capping at 10% cap on the number of low-wage positions held by temporary foreign workers (TFWs), increasing provincial wage thresholds for high-wage positions to 20% above the provincial or territorial median wage, and imposing a refusal to process Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) applications policy for low-wage positions in census metropolitan areas with an unemployment rate of 6% or higher.¹

Many small businesses are still dealing with labour shortages. While national job vacancy rates are approaching pre-pandemic levels, those levels were already a source of concern for many small businesses at that time. For small businesses in particular, labour shortages can force them to turn down contracts, reduce hours of operation, overburden existing staff, and potentially close. This is why some small business owners have turned to the TFWP to fill persistent vacancies. However, it has become more difficult for them to hire or retain TFWs with recent changes to the TFWP.

Misconceptions about the use of TFWs have led to misunderstandings about their impact on the Canadian labour market. This snapshot aims to debunk common myths about TFWs and their role within SMEs in Canada.

Myth 1: Canadian businesses are “addicted” to hiring temporary foreign workers

TFWs in Canada under the TFWP barely make up 1% of the labour force in Canada (see Figure 1).² Small business owners turn to the TFWP out of necessity, not convenience. In reality, very few Canadian businesses hire temporary foreign workers (TFWs). When they do,

it is typically a last resort after exhausting all options to hire locally as hiring a TFW is far from simple—the application process is lengthy, costly, and highly regulated.

Figure 1 - TFWP and IMP workers as a share of the total labour force (%)³



In 2021, only 13% of small businesses facing shortages reported attempting to use TFWs to resolve staffing issues in the preceding 2 years.⁴ While TFW usage remains limited among small businesses, labour shortages continued to pose a significant challenge. In 2025, over half (53%) of SMEs still cite labour shortages as a major barrier to growth.⁵ Last fall, as access to TFWs was being restricted, 74% of businesses that used the TFWP strongly agreed that it would be difficult to fill positions previously held by TFWs.⁶ The recent restrictions would exacerbate their staffing and labour shortage concerns.

Temporary foreign workers are filling a fraction of the jobs that employers cannot otherwise staff. They are filling critical gaps. At the same time, their presence highlights systemic challenges in the domestic labour market, including skills mismatches, stigmatization of certain sectors and occupations, geographic distribution of labour, and barriers to labour mobility. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated workforce strategy that goes beyond short-term solutions: one that strengthens domestic talent pipelines, supports skills development, and provides incentives for workers to access opportunities outside their immediate communities. Without such workforce strategies, which connect available Canadians with available jobs, employers turn to TFWs as a last resort.

Myth 2: Temporary foreign workers are stealing Canadian jobs

Temporary foreign workers do not compete with Canadian labour, they complement it. TFWs are hired to fill gaps where Canadian workers are not available. Across sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and hospitality, employers face job vacancies that go unfilled despite active recruitment efforts within Canada. Small businesses want to hire Canadians, and put in their best efforts to do so, but often struggle to find local jobseekers that are willing and able to fill open positions.

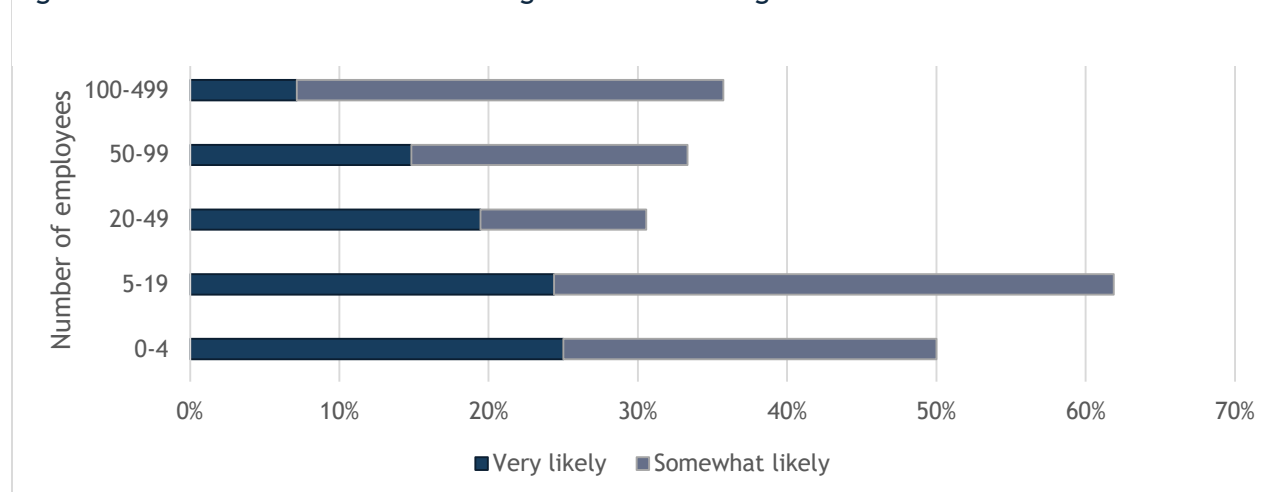
In such cases, TFWs can be a lifeline for small businesses. Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) evaluation of the TFWP found that for 89% of employers, access to TFWs improved their ability to stay in business.⁷

An astounding half of small business owners who use the TFWP feel that the restrictions imposed on the program last fall make it somewhat or very likely their business would close, threatening not only their livelihoods but also the Canadian jobs that depend on them (see Figure 2). In fact, 52% of small business owners using the TFWP reported that TFWs enabled them to continue employing Canadians and 76% stated that TFWs enabled them to meet customer demand for their goods and services.⁸

"I have 3 TFW cooks right now that I desperately need to keep my restaurant running. Two of them are not able to renew and I am having a difficult time finding replacements. I might have to close down a couple days of the week."

- Hospitality business in British Columbia

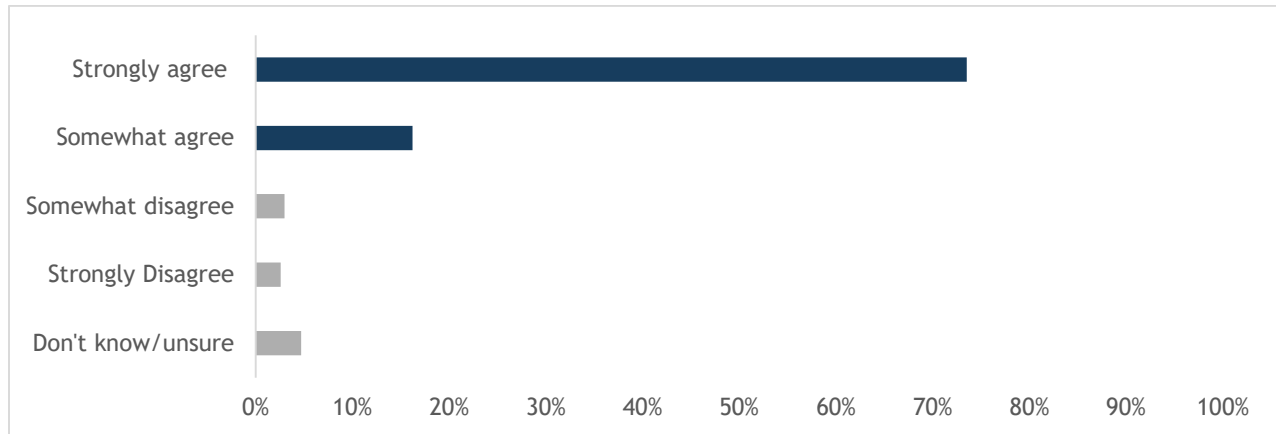
Figure 2 - Half of small businesses using the TFWP see higher risk of closure due to restrictions



The majority of small businesses (74%) strongly agree it would be difficult to replace TFWs with Canadian workers.⁹ Even among businesses that received a negative Labour Market

Impact Assessment, meaning they were denied the ability to hire TFWs, 63% reported difficulties finding Canadians for the position offered.¹⁰

Figure 3 - 90% of SMEs would struggle to fill positions previously held by TFWs



The TFWP itself is structured around ensuring TFWs are not replacing Canadians. Employers are required to receive a positive LMIA before they can hire a TFW. The LMIA assesses the impact of hiring a TFW on the Canadian labour market. As part of their LMIA application, Canadian employers must include proof of having undertaken a comprehensive recruitment campaign to hire a Canadian worker. This requires at least three different recruitment activities and must last a minimum of four consecutive weeks. The large majority of employers applying for an LMIA are unable to fill roles locally, as shown by the fact that 85% of applications receive a positive decision.¹¹ A positive LMIA, as defined by ESDC, confirms that there is a genuine need for a foreign worker and that no Canadian citizens or permanent residents are available for the position; importantly, it signifies that hiring a TFW will not negatively impact the Canadian labour market.

Regarding youth unemployment, a small retailer in Alberta stated the following:

“Many local youths are not willing to take positions in the service area. While we are willing to train new workers, we often find that they do not stay.”

They further highlighted the value of TFWs in addressing this challenge:

“Finding reliable employees with skills and retaining them impacts the work we do.”

Youth participation in many of the sectors where TFWs are employed is extremely low. For example, while only 2% of employed and 2% of unemployed Canadians aged 15 to 24 are in the agriculture sector,¹² 45.4% of TFWs are concentrated in that sector.¹³ Similarly, only 3.6%¹⁴ of unemployed Canadians aged 15 to 24 are concentrated in manufacturing while 8.6% of TFWs are concentrated in that sector.¹⁵

Generational preferences may play a role. A recent survey found that 80% of Gen Z prioritize finding a job that aligns with their values and interests, compared to just 59% of millennials.¹⁶ The hands-on, physically intensive nature of many positions filled using the TFWP makes them less appealing to today's values-oriented youth workforce. Manufacturing jobs are just one example, with 65% of Gen Z respondents in a Food Processing Skills Canada survey saying they would never work in a plant.¹⁷

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: Manufacturing

"I live in a remote town that has limited options for specialized labour. Not having an option to hire temporary foreign workers puts us in a very tough spot as we have not been able to recruit locally or nationally despite our efforts." - Manufacturing business in Ontario

Canada's manufacturing sector faces persistent labour shortages. Slowed production in Canada's manufacturing sector can impact the whole supply chain. Of those who have turned to the TFWP to fill vacancies:

- 61% found the new changes to the TFWP would cause them to be unable to fill orders or render services.
- 88% feel it would be difficult to fill positions previously held by TFWs.

Figure 4 - Median wages among select manufacturing occupations compared to the average minimum wage³⁸



Source: Government of Canada. 2025. *Job Bank*. <https://www.jobbank.gc.ca/home>; Retail Council of Canada. 2025. *Minimum Wage by Province*. <https://www.retailcouncil.org/resources/quick-facts/minimum-wage-by-province/>. CFIB's own calculation.

Further, Canada has a highly educated population. For the total population, Canada's tertiary education rate is 65% compared to the OECD average of 41%.¹⁸ Among 19 year-olds, the national post-secondary enrolment rate is 58% across all levels of income, having grown 25%

from 2001 to 2022.¹⁹ Many TFWs fill positions that require a full-time commitment of more than four months, making them unsuitable for full-time students. Employers need trained staff who have the availability to work for the entire season or period of the contract without interruption. They need predictability and stability.

Over 86% of Canadian youth aged 15-29 live in urban centres.²⁰ With fewer youth concentrated in rural areas, businesses face diminished access to local Canadian labour pools, making TFWs essential to keeping operations running. Rural small businesses struggle to retain workers from a limited local labour pool. A manufacturing business in Ontario that employs TFWs confirms this concern:

“We finally have skilled staff that work hard and are reliable—it has been a struggle to find in rural Northern Ontario for the last 20+ years in business here.”

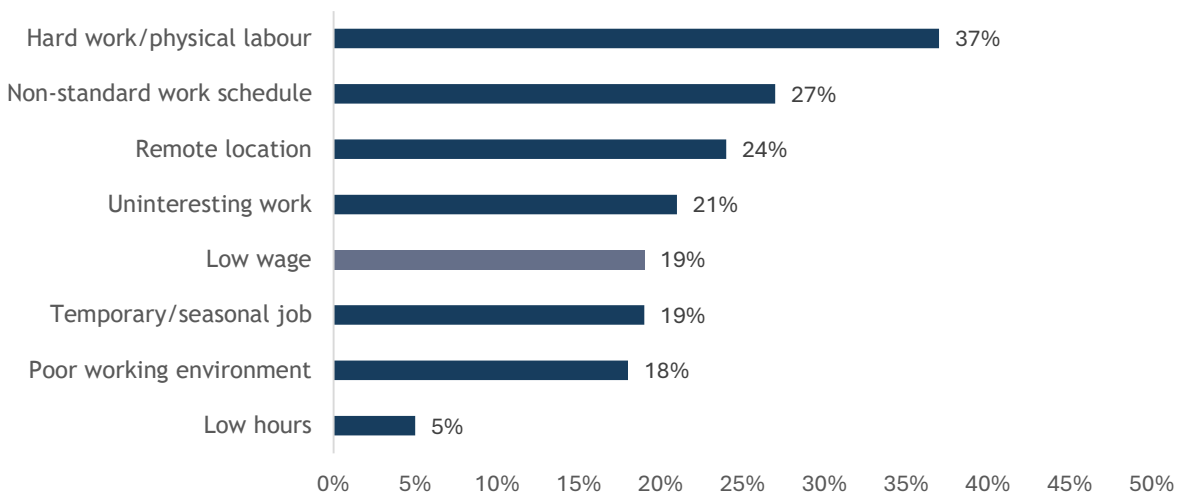
Myth 3: Temporary foreign workers are cheap labour and bring down wages

While TFWs are thought to contribute to wage suppression, the reality is that their wages are comparable to those of Canadians. The TFWP prevailing wage and recruiting requirements play an important role in ensuring that hiring TFWs will not negatively affect wages or working conditions for Canadians. Depending on the stream, employers must either pay the prevailing wage—which is the median wage for that occupation in the province—or wages that are at least comparable to those paid to Canadians in similar roles. These policies ensure fair and competitive compensation.

As a result, 85% of TFWs are paid the same wage as Canadians and only 3.5% are paid less. In fact, a 2017 survey of fish and seafood businesses found that the average top hourly wage was generally the same or higher for companies employing TFWs compared to those that did not.²¹ ESDC’s internal evaluation of the TFWP found “no evidence pointing to a risk for job displacement or wage suppression at the national level in Canada.”²²

Moreover, low wages were not among the top reasons for which Canadians were not interested in applying for the positions offered by employers. Instead, non-wage factors—most notably the physically demanding nature of the work—played a far greater role in shaping their job choices (see Figure 5).²³

Figure 5 - Reasons Canadian workers were not interested in applying²⁴

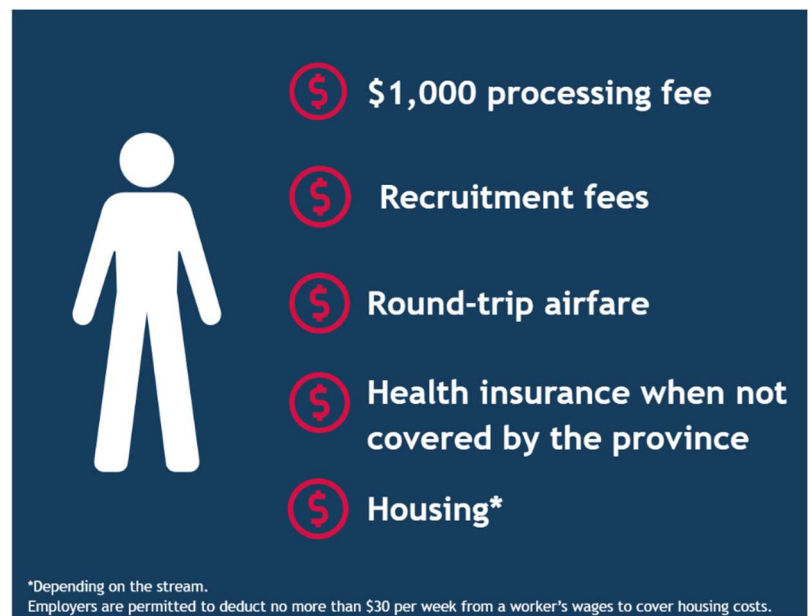


Small businesses have a limited ability to increase wages while staying competitive. Unlike large corporations with deep reserves or governments with borrowing capacity, private-

sector SMEs operate on thin margins and face tight demand constraints. Labour costs are a core component of their pricing models, and significant wage increases are difficult to absorb without risking their competitiveness against larger firms and imports.

Further, the costs and barriers for employers to hire a TFW are significant (see Figure 6). Employers pay a \$1,000 LMIA processing fee per worker, provide private health insurance to cover any gaps in provincial coverage, and in some cases, they must supply housing and cover travel expenses.

Figure 6 - Costs of hiring a TFW in the Low-Wage Stream



Myth 4: Temporary foreign workers affect housing and access to services

While it is thought that TFWs contribute to Canada's housing crisis, we cannot overlook that they are part of the solution as many are helping build homes or are manufacturing materials

to ease supply shortages. A large share of TFWs live in rural areas which do not face the same housing pressures as urban centres. Further, many TFWs live in employer-provided housing, meaning they are not competing with Canadians for scarce housing in major urban cities. The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) and the Agricultural Stream require employers to provide their foreign workers with adequate, suitable, and affordable housing—either on or off site—and many offer housing on their farms.

Labour shortages are a major, and often overlooked, driver of the housing crisis. Public debate tends to focus on the demand for housing while ignoring the ways in which TFWs help relieve bottlenecks in home construction and related supply chains.²⁵ With 22% of residential construction workers set to retire in the next decade, TFWs will be essential to putting roofs over Canadians' heads.²⁶ Among construction businesses that rely on the TFWP, 79% said that TFWs allowed them to meet demand for their services.²⁷

There are many factors beyond the demand on housing from TFWs that have increased the cost of building homes and thus housing prices (e.g., regulatory requirements, development charges and other fees, tariffs on inputs, the former carbon tax, etc.). Labour shortages do not help keep costs under control or projects on time either. Skilled labour is needed in all phases of construction, but serious gaps exist. According to a construction business in Alberta:

“The labour market does not have enough skilled construction painters, as evidenced by our multiple recruitment methods that do not yield candidates.”

In the end, many foreign workers contribute to the supply of housing, directly or indirectly (e.g., manufacturing, transportation, etc.).

Overall, TFWs enabled 76% of SMEs that use the program—across all sectors—to meet demand for products and services, from putting food on our tables to providing care for our children and elderly. TFWs are part of maintaining a fluid supply chain and help their employers deliver services and goods to Canadians.

“As the owner of a daycare with 2 educators and 1 cleaner on staff, I find the new measures highly concerning. I might not have to close my business, but I’ll have to close a group or temporarily stop offering services. I wouldn’t be able to accommodate all the children who have registered with my daycare. This was a frequent occurrence before I found my current employees. Closing a daycare group means 15 parents will be unable to work. The ramifications go far beyond my business.” - Daycare in Quebec

Myth 5: The TFWP facilitates the abuse of workers

The vast majority of employers treat their employees well and the TFWP has strong mechanisms to deter and penalize non-compliance. SMEs support a strong employer compliance regime for closed work permits to protect workers and hold violators accountable. When there is abuse of TFWs, it is a serious issue which must, and can be, addressed.

Temporary foreign workers have the same workplace rights as Canadians under Canada's labour codes, including the right to be paid for their work, the right to a safe and healthy workplace, and the right to be free from abuse and harassment. Importantly, TFWs also have the right to leave their employer. Workers who experience abuse or are at risk of abuse can apply for an Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers, which allows them to change employers without jeopardizing their immigration status. These protections help ensure that workers are not trapped in unsafe or exploitative situations while preserving the integrity of the program.

Further, the federal government's TFWP employer compliance regime protects the health, safety, and rights of TFWs. In 2022, 13 amendments to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations were introduced to strengthen the protection of TFWs.²⁸ A 2025 ESDC report found that 90% of employers were compliant with TFWP requirements in 2024-2025.²⁹ Non-compliance does not necessarily indicate abuse of workers but could refer to offences such as not keeping documentation for the required length of time. The list of non-compliant employers is available publicly, along with the penalty they received and whether they are eligible for the program.

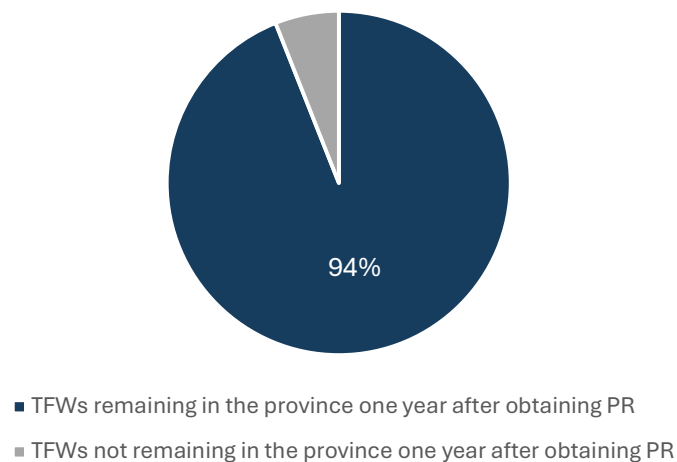
Individual cases of abuse should not be used to undermine the necessity of the TFWP for those who operate in good faith and in abidance with program requirements. Federal and provincial governments have levers to target and go after bad actors.

Conclusion: Temporary foreign workers contribute to Canada's short- and long-term growth

The TFWP supports short-term economic stability by helping address ongoing labour shortages in essential sectors. However, TFWs are not just filling short-term gaps. They also represent an important part of Canada's future workforce as many transition to permanent residency. The share of former TFWs among new economic immigrants climbed from just 8% in 2000 to 49% in 2022.³⁰ According to the 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan, more than 40% of anticipated permanent resident admissions in 2025 will be from those who are already in Canada as temporary residents.³¹

Further, provincial retention rates are high among TFWs who transition to permanent residency, with 94%¹ remaining in their province of landing one year after obtaining permanent residency and 86% still residing there five years later (see Figure 7).³² In comparison, economic class immigrants without prior work experience have a one-year provincial retention rate of 71% and a five-year retention rate of 68%.³³

Figure 7 - TFWs largely remain within provinces after obtaining permanent residency (PR)



Not only are provincial retention rates high, so are sectoral retention rates. This underscores that TFWs contribute to long-term labour market stability rather than serving solely as a temporary fix. The weighted average one-year retention rate across all streams in the TFWP (caregiver, agricultural, high-wage, low-wage) is 67% between 2016 and 2020, reflecting the retention outcomes of 52,380 workers.³⁴ Most TFWs remain active in Canada's labour market after gaining permanent residency: 22% switch industries within one year, and only 5% are not employed, showing that the vast majority continue contributing to Canada's economy.³⁵

Canada's ability to attract, integrate, and retain workers through programs like the TFWP helps keep the country competitive by stabilizing sectors vulnerable to labour shortages. The growth and viability of small businesses are at risk with the recent changes to the TFWP as almost two-thirds of businesses that use the TFWP (62%) felt that their productivity will be negatively impacted, and half would have to scale back business growth plans.³⁶

Recommendations

TFWs in Canada under the TFWP make up a mere 1% of the Canadian labour force yet they are being blamed for many structural and social issues facing Canada. The reality is, restricting access to the TFWP will hurt many small businesses that are already struggling to

¹ Note - Data for the 2011–2015 landing cohort; the 2016–2020 cohort recorded a one-year retention rate of 92.5%.

fill vacancies. For many employers, Canada's TFWP is a vital tool for sustaining industries that are the backbone of our economy. TFWs help maintain production and keep supply chains moving. The evidence shows that the program operates with high compliance, safeguards workers' rights, and ensures fair wages. Restricting access to this workforce would not solve underlying labour market challenges; it would deepen them, leading to production slowdowns, lost contracts, and higher costs for Canadian consumers. Ultimately, government should:

- 1) **Keep, protect and defend the TFWP.** Clarify how the program is structured to avoid misconception. Many Canadians mistakenly believe that employers can easily bypass local workers by hiring through the TFWP, when that is not the case. The TFWP is one of the most tightly regulated immigration streams. By more clearly communicating program safeguards, government can help dispel misinformation, reduce public skepticism, and ensure that policymakers and the public alike understand that the program is designed to protect Canadian jobs while also addressing genuine, proven labour shortages.
- 2) **Let employers make their case** as to why they are unable to hire a Canadian for their position. Blanket refusals to process do not consider unique labour market considerations of small businesses and the positions they are trying to fill. That is not to say that all LMIs should be approved, but rather that applications should be assessed on individual circumstances. A more responsive, case-by-case approach would ensure that the TFWP continues to protect Canadian jobs while also giving employers the tools they need to keep their businesses running.
- 3) **Facilitate retention of TFWs already in Canada** to support workforce continuity.
 - A pathway to permanent residence should exist for lower-skilled TFWs who have maintained their legal status, acquired work experience in Canada, and paid taxes. This would help address chronic labour market shortages, creating long-term solutions rather than band-aid solutions.
 - Facilitate the retention of TFWs already in Canada through a grandfathering clause and create pathways to permanent residence for lower-wage, lower-skilled workers.
- 4) **Lower red tape and administrative burden.**
 - Re-establish the 2-year maximum employment duration for low-wage positions to provide employers with greater staffing predictability and stability, enabling them to pursue more growth opportunities and investment plans.

- Reimburse the employer for the costs associated with the administration and enforcement of the employer compliance inspection, should the LMIA not be issued.
- Streamline the LMIA process.

5) Consult employers and the business community in advance of future reforms.

Overall, government must ensure that Canada's immigration policies are more aligned with labour market needs and the needs of small business.

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