

# Mobile Work in the Clarenville-Isthmus

Findings from research conducted by the Community Impacts Team of the *On the Move Partnership* in Newfoundland and Labrador

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## What is Mobile Work?

Employment-related geographic mobility (E-RGM), or mobile work, involves long-distance commuting across municipal, provincial, or national boundaries to get to and from a place of work. Mobile workers can travel to their place of work by car, bus, or plane, and may commute daily or remain at their place of work for extended periods of time. E-RGM also includes multiple or transient worksites, as in the case of homecare workers, and mobile workplaces, such as cargo ships, trains, planes, trucks and fishing vessels (Temple Newhook et al., 2011).

**The Community Impacts component of the *On the Move Partnership* sought to identify: 1) how communities are impacted by E-RGM, 2) how various actors have responded to these impacts, and 3) the influence of context (e.g. legislation, corporate policies, proximity to worksite, labour policies, etc.) on E-RGM and related impacts and responses.**

Results from the Community Impacts component are based on 182 semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants and stakeholders across Newfoundland and Labrador from 2012 to 2018. 25 interviews were conducted with stakeholders in the Clarenville-Isthmus region.



Figure 1: Map of the Clarenville-Isthmus region. Interviews were conducted in the towns indicated.

## Mobile Work in the Clarenville-Isthmus Region

**Communities in the Clarenville-Isthmus region are source communities for mobile workers.** Residents in the region are engaged in multiple forms of mobile work, including commuting to sites of large projects such as Bull Arm (Hebron), the Come-By-Chance refinery, and the nickel processing facility at Long Harbour. Mobile workers and their families were found to reside permanently in the region, including in the following communities of study: Arnold's Cove, Sunnyside, and Clarenville. Communities in the region are also source communities for fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) mobile workers employed in Alberta and Ontario and offshore fisheries workers who travel by water to locations such as Labrador and Iceland. Study communities where mobile workers and their families reside included Arnold's Cove, Sunnyside, and Clarenville (Figure 1).

**Some communities in the Clarenville-Isthmus are also host communities for mobile workers.** Mobile workers commute to worksites in the region from their homes in Avalon communities, including from St. John's. Some individuals living in rural com-

munities outside of Clarenville, such as in the Bonavista Peninsula, were found to commute into Clarenville for work. Because of this, some communities in the Clarenville-Isthmus, like Come-By-Chance, are also host communities for mobile workers, including drive-in/drive-out (DIDO) and bus-in/bus-out (BIBO) commuters.

As the region has been a hub of industrial activity in the province for several decades, it was suggested that transient work has been part of the regional identity for a long time. Mobile workers and their families appear to move into and away from communities coinciding with the boom and bust cycle of local industries and the availability of employment. In terms of shifts, offshore fisheries workers are employed for several months at a time at sea. Alberta workers are employed seasonally or worked the following rotations: 20 days on/10 off, 6 weeks on/6 off, 4 weeks on/2 off, 2 weeks on/2 off, or 7 and 11/ 11 and 7. DIDO and BIBO workers travel to and from work by car and/or bus daily.

# How has mobile work impacted communities in the Clarenville-Isthmus Region?

Study Participants noted several changes in the Clarenville-Isthmus Region that they believed were the result of E-RGM. These impacts have been grouped into the following themes: Economic, Infrastructure and Services, Social-Cultural, Sustainability, Planning and Governance, and Environmental.

## Economic

Since the downturn in oil, some residents reported losing jobs in Sunnyside. Stakeholders worried that some families in the region, particularly those that built expensive homes or made several large purchases, might be struggling with debt. For instance, fears were expressed about spending on large homes, particularly by youth who were believed to be less inclined to think long-term about their financial situations. Some also felt that individuals who were employed in big projects were unwilling to work locally for less than they could make away. As a result, the service sector in the region struggled to find workers. The Clarenville Chamber of Commerce was discussing immigration and temporary foreign work as an option to offset the boom bust cycle of employment.

Local businesses in the Isthmus reported beating sales records during the peak of the Bull Arm project; however, in recent years they had seen sales drop. They attributed this to the slowing down of Bull Arm and the presence of fewer mobile workers. Businesses that were reported to have done well as a result of mobile work in the region include hotels, car dealerships, recreational vehicle dealerships, restaurants and liquor stores. The region had seen some new business growth, but also some businesses close. For example, Sunnyside lost their local convenience store. However, Clarenville was seeing businesses opened by individuals returning from working and/or living away. In some cases, individuals retired from work and decided to open a business; in others, workers were laid off and opened businesses related to their trade, such as welding. Stakeholders believe these individuals see opening their own business as an opportunity to stay on the island rather than be mobile for work.

Hotels along the TCH have been experiencing occupancy rates exceeding their expectations due to occupancy by Muskrat Falls power-line workers. However, many of these business owners have chosen to put a cap on the number of rooms available to mobile workers during the tourism season in order to meet demand.

## Sustainability

Stakeholders raised several questions about the relation-

ships between the sustainability of their communities and short-term resource projects, like Bull Arm. When operational, jobs offered by these projects are often temporary. This was noted as problematic because long-term employment in the region could not be guaranteed for residents. In some cases, stakeholders noted that permanent residents working in Alberta chose not to apply for jobs at local project sites because their job in Alberta offered more stability.

With regards to workers commuting into the region daily, stakeholders wondered whether offering bus services between large projects and St. John's is a challenge to rural communities because there is no incentive for workers to settle in those communities.

Overall, participants wondered whether projects are actually sustaining local communities in the long term—they certainly provide options for youth and families to stay in the communities as long as they are employed; however, once projects end these residents would end up commuting further away or moving out of the communities to be closer to employment opportunities elsewhere.

*You know, you got your kids to grade 12 and then they have to make a choice. So the choice is they either stay home—and they don't work in the woods or go fishing anymore, so what do they do?...Or they go off-island. You know, they go away completely.*

## Social-Cultural

Mobile work in the Clarenville-Isthmus was linked to several social challenges. In terms of community engagement, stakeholders noted that it was difficult to get individuals to volunteer in the community because of shifts and work schedules. For instance, in Sunnyside, it has been difficult to find individuals to run for council. New people coming in for work also impacted community dynamics. The idea of having strangers in the community and people that long-time residents had never seen before was raised as a concern. It was indicated that these individuals were also less likely to be involved in communities in the Clarenville-Isthmus. Stakeholders were also concerned about traffic and safety in the community due to use of roads by drive-in/drive-out mobile workers and the use of illicit substances in communities linked to mobile workers.

The Family Resource Centre in Clarenville noted that there was a need for incoming mobile worker families, including international families, for support. Because many of these families did not have family supports locally, they adapted their program 'Nobody's Perfect' to provide support. The program provides families with a space to communicate and alleviate feelings of isolation.

The impacts of mobile employment on families was a significant topic of interest in this region. From children not recognizing their parents who work away, to stress placed on the partners of mobile workers who stay behind, it was felt that nuclear families struggled with mobile work arrangements. In addition, stakeholders were seeing extended family taking on parenting roles while the parents of children were away working. A health representative in the region stated that they were seeing more referrals or grandparents needing advice on parenting teenagers.

*So on the Bonavista Peninsula, there were a lot of couples that were away working...and it was the grandparents who were left taking care of the children...So we had a lot of referrals from grandparents who needed support on how to manage childcare.*

## Infrastructure and Service

Stakeholders noted several changes in infrastructure and service use/availability linked to the presence of mobile workers in the region. With regards to housing, it was noted that new homes were developed in Sunnyside coinciding with the opening of Bull Arm. This was because, during construction of the Bull Arm site, there was huge demand for rental accommodations and new homes. During peak demand, workers were known to be living in trailers on people's lawns and hooked up to the Town water. This became a service issue for the Town of Sunnyside. Several community stakeholders noted that covering the cost of services and infrastructure used by mobile workers, whose numbers are not counted in census profiles, is very difficult.

Due to the demand for housing, availability of housing decreased and housing was no longer affordable for some residents. Communities saw average rent for homes increase. In the case of Clarenville, at the peak of construction on Bull Arm, some low-income residents were forced out of the community for housing. Because many of these individuals were employed in Clarenville, they were also forced to become mobile for employment as a result.

## Environmental

As the Bull Arm project is nearing completion, one participant expressed concern over the practice of 'bulldozing' sites. They hoped that useable equipment, like washers and driers, would be donated for reuse instead of destroyed.

It was also noted that projects had assisted with some local

environmental concerns. For instance, Hebron sponsored a recycling program at a school in Clarenville.

## Planning and Governance

Mobile work has made community planning difficult in the Clarenville-Isthmus, particularly in rural areas. It was suggested that, due to engagement with mobile work, residents haven't had time to run for council or, if elected to council, have struggled to meet regulations for missed meetings due to their work schedules. Stakeholders found it difficult to work with community groups on long-term economic development goals because many lacked the human capital to engage effectively. They believed this was due to mobile work draining talents from the community.

It was felt that positive relationships had been fostered between companies and communities in the region. For instance, a community liaison committee was established prior to Hebron in order to promote discussion of potential social impacts of the project. Hebron fostered a relationship with a local Regional Action Committee on Housing (REACH) board to monitor the housing impacts of their workers. Hebron has also donated \$5000 a year for use in local housing initiatives and has been known to make donations in the region at Christmas time to organizations such as the Salvation Army, Food Bank, and churches. Some communities, such as Arnold's Cove and Come By Chance, have also received grants in lieu of taxes from local industries. Still, it was felt that more effort was needed from government to develop (or assist communities with developing) strategic plans governing community-industry relations.

A lack of inter-community cooperation in the region was felt to have prevented regional decision-making and cooperation among communities addressing the impacts of resource projects. Though communities did meet to discuss opportunities for regionalization, it was felt that actual sharing of services was not being pursued. Recently, however, communities including Come By Chance, Arnold's Cove, and Southern Harbour have come together to try and establish an Isthmus Regional Development building, to service new businesses, and are willing to work together even though all communities will not be able to contribute equally financially. They feel that they need an industrial partner to fund part of the project but have been unable to secure this funding so far.



Figure 2: Municipal Building in Sunnyside

## How have actors responded to the impacts of mobile work at the local level?

In the Clarenville-Isthmus region, municipalities, community groups, non-profit organizations, the Provincial Government, and industry have responded to the impacts of mobile work.

Sunnyside has developed policies to prevent workers living in trailers. Two RV parks were also developed to address this challenge, allowing the Town to charge water/sewer fees to trailer park operators. One has since closed due to lack of demand. The Town has approached the RCMP about drug-related challenges and traffic signs were being developed to address safety concerns. Sunnyside negotiated to receive recyclable wood from Bull Arm that is sorted and sold to community members as building supplies/firewood for \$25 a pick-up truck load. This money, in addition to a grant in lieu of taxes from Hebron, has been put into a legacy fund that they hope will fund a new community building/recreation centre.



Figure 3: View of Bull Arm from Sunnyside NL.

### About the *On the Move Partnership*

The *On the Move Partnership* is a Canadian research project with international links investigating workers' extended travel and related absence from their places of permanent residence for the purpose of, and as part of, their employment. It is a project of the SafetyNet Centre for Occupational Health & Safety Research at Memorial University. On the Move is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), InnovateNL, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and several universities and partners. For more information, please visit [www.onthemovepartnership.ca](http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca).

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The REACH board and Habitat for Humanity came together to address housing issues in Clarenville. A local church, NewLife Community Church, has also secured land and they plan to build affordable housing units on it for individuals with complex needs.

The Family Resource Centre in Clarenville adapted their 'Nobody's perfect' program to assist incoming families without local family supports. In addition, an online service, 'Strongest Families' has been made available to the families of mobile workers in this region. The program is run by a company in Nova Scotia, but they were contracted by the Provincial Government to take parent referrals from the Resource Centre.

## What else could be done to help communities adapt to the presence of mobile workers?

Stakeholders in the region felt that the region needed an economic strategy that would guarantee economic spin-offs from large projects for local communities. They felt that small-scale developments could help sustain communities and also be sustained by communities after projects are completed.

It was also felt that increased communication between companies and communities would have been beneficial, particularly in developing programs and facilities to support workers and their families. It was also suggested that communication between companies and communities could have helped identify solutions for minimizing waste and other impacts resulting from project closures.

Stakeholders felt increased cooperation between communities in the region in planning for the presence of large resource projects was needed. More broadly, they hoped for economic diversification in the province away from oil and into sectors like agriculture and aquaculture.



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