



TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN SQUAMISH, BC: A BRIEF OVERVIEW



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INTRODUCTION

Temporary foreign workers (TFWs, also called migrant workers) are people who migrate to Canada from another country with a “temporary” work permit.

Work permits can be either open, allowing them to work for any employer in Canada, or closed, which ties them to one specific employer, position, and location. **This report addresses temporary foreign workers with closed work permits and their families living or working in Squamish, B.C.** These permits are typically valid for one, two, or three years.

Temporary foreign workers make up approximately 6% of working adults in Squamish. In Squamish, over 105 employers in a diverse range of sectors hire temporary foreign workers for jobs in the high-wage and low-wage Temporary Foreign Worker Program streams – from mechanical engineering to housekeeping, and everything in between. Notable industries include the service and tourism industry and construction. For construction, companies based in the Vancouver area hire temporary foreign workers, who then work on projects in Squamish, among other places. Squamish is also home to temporary foreign workers employed in Whistler. Many hotels and fast-food restaurants in all Sea to Sky communities hire low-wage temporary foreign workers.

This brief report is grounded in work conducted as part of the Squamish Welcome Centre’s Support Program for Migrant Workers, which launched in 2023 and is funded by the Government of Canada through MOSAIC.

Our program offers one-on-one appointments, workshops, and recreational activities for closed work permit holders and their families in Squamish. Most of all, it provides a centralized location where people who are part of Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program can go, ask questions, be heard, and get support navigating a diverse range of challenges – from registering for MSP to reporting and responding to abuse in the workplace. In 2024, we enrolled 60 new program participants and assisted a total of 123 temporary foreign workers through 256 one-on-one appointments.

Living in Canada as a temporary foreign worker comes with unique challenges and uncertainties. This specialized program is here to help navigate those difficulties with dignity and respect.

The following pages outline the landscape of temporary labour migration to Squamish, touching on community demographics and some of the unique barriers and challenges temporary foreign workers face.

COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

A Growing Community

Temporary migration to Canada has increased substantially in the past 20 years. In each year since 2007, more people have come to Canada through temporary migration programs than as permanent residents. Nationwide, the number of people coming to (or reapplying to stay in) Canada as temporary migrants per year doubled from 692,244 in 2018 to 1,156,038 in 2022.¹

This trend holds true in Squamish, too. From 2021 to 2022, the number of job positions for which Squamish-based employers approved to hire a temporary foreign worker through the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) process tripled.² LMIA positions are only one part of the picture – programs such as the Francophone Mobility Program and Streams within the International Mobility Program allow for workers to be issued “LMIA-exempt” closed work permits.

StatsCan data about immigrants in Squamish³, count only those with permanent residence and naturalized citizens – not migrant workers, study permit holders, people with working holiday visas, or people without status.

There are more than 517 people with closed work permits specifically for businesses in Squamish, accompanied by about 341 working spouses.⁴ Taking into account spouses, people living in Squamish and working in Whistler, people living elsewhere and working in Squamish (i.e., for construction companies), care givers in a pilot program, and children: **We estimate there are more than 1,549 people in the migrant worker community in Squamish.⁴**

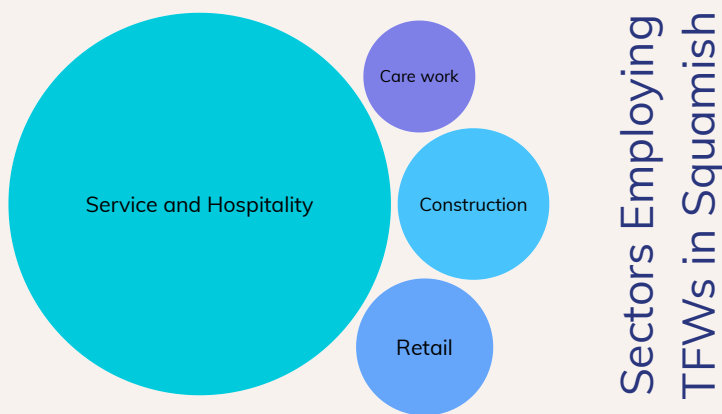


~1,549 People

This is a conservative estimate based on an analysis of available data as of December 31, 2024. The exact number of people living or working in Squamish as temporary or migrant workers is unknown and is likely much higher.

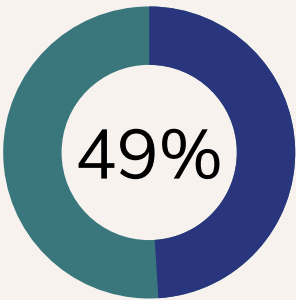
Employment Sectors and Streams

Migrant workers in Squamish are primarily employed in service and hospitality (~70%). Food service, including fast food, is the most common subsector. Construction (11%), retail (9%), and care work, such as health care and early childhood education (5.94%) are also represented.⁴



Many migrant workers in Squamish have work permits through ESDC’s Low-Wage Stream and LMIA-exempt Francophone Mobility Programs, among others.

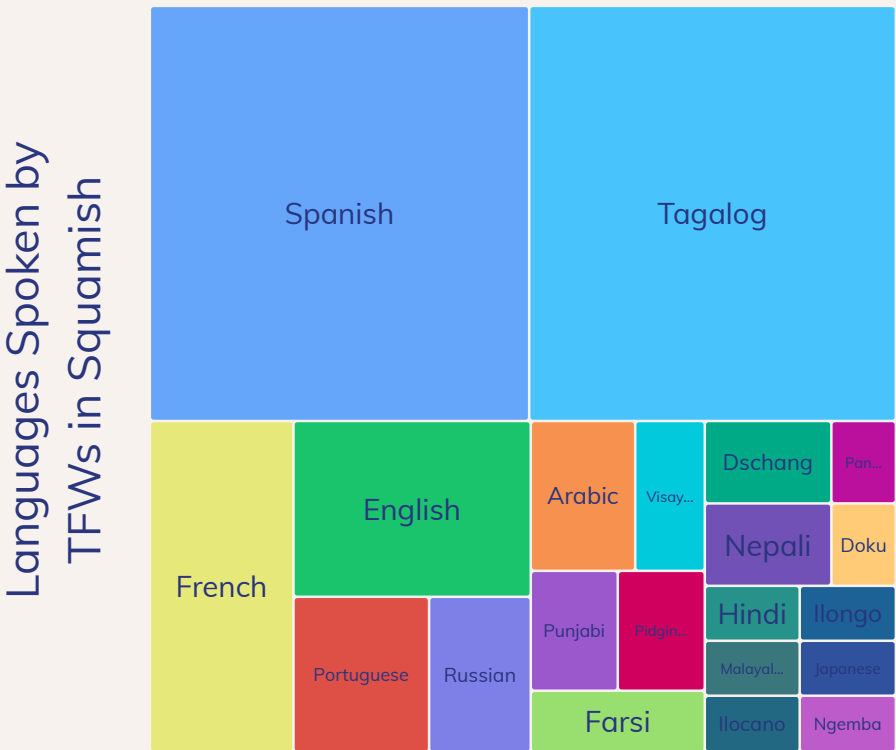
About half of migrant workers in Squamish earn less than \$20.00 an hour.



Countries of Origin and Linguistic Resources

Temporary foreign workers in Squamish hail from more than 18 different countries of origin and speak more than 21 languages as their first language. **In Squamish, the three most common countries of origin are the Philippines, Mexico, and Cameroon.**

This generally follows national trends, where Mexico and the Philippine are both represented in the ten most common countries of origin.⁵ Cameroon, not in the top ten source countries nationally, stands out as a unique and significant source country for Squamish.



QUALITY OF LIFE: KEY TOPICS

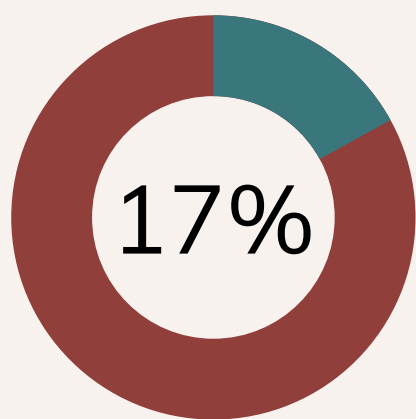
Feeling Welcome, but Struggling to Thrive

A 2023 survey conducted by the Squamish Welcome Centre’s Support Program for Migrant Workers sought to learn more about the demographic landscape of this community in Squamish, as well as about the quality of life experienced by people living in Squamish with closed work permits. A follow-up survey asked additional questions about housing and the cost of living. The survey results are woven throughout this report.⁶

Overall, 60% of respondents to the survey reported feeling welcome in Squamish, and most find the community to be “somewhat” or “very welcoming”.⁶ Most shared feeling happy and settled in Squamish, though only half are making friends – making new social connections is one of the most common self-reported challenges for migrant workers. The generally positive responses about Squamish contrast sharply with a number of self-reported challenges and barriers that decrease quality of life among members of this community, including, but not limited to, challenges with transportation, the cost of living, housing, lack of access to services, language barriers, racism in the community, racism at work and while searching for housing, workplace abuse, and the inability to switch jobs. Select topics are outlined below.

A Living Wage

83% of migrant worker families in Squamish do not earn a living wage, as defined in the 2024 Living Wage for Squamish Report.⁷ Closed work permit holders are not permitted to get a second job or promotion to a better paid position to increase their wage.



Only 17% of migrant workers reported earning a living wage in Squamish in 2024.

Transportation

Over 65% of migrant workers use the local transit system, with the cost of driving (insurance, fuel, car) a common motivator. In comparison, the 2023 Vital Signs Report found that only 11% of residents used local transit.⁸

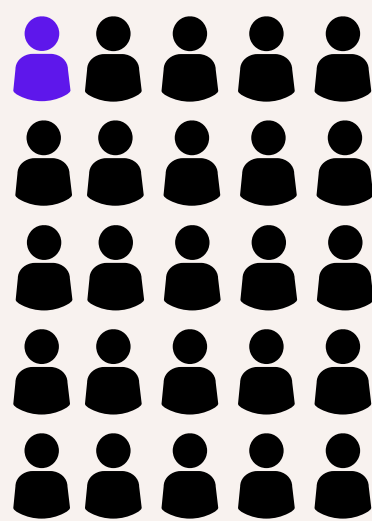
For bus riders, infrequent buses and limited night-busses pose additional challenges, especially for service industry workers whose shifts end after 10pm or begin before 8am.

Healthcare

After finding affordable housing, making new friends, and the cost of living, accessing healthcare is the fourth most common challenge. **Only 12% of temporary foreign workers reported having a family doctor in 2023.**

Housing

In an anonymous survey conducted in late summer 2024, **96% of migrant workers reported spending more than 30% of their income on rent**. Among the broader Squamish population, only 38% spent 30% or more of their income on housing costs.⁸



1 in 25 migrant workers have affordable housing in Squamish.

One-third of respondents pay 70% or more of their family’s combined monthly income in rent, and **12% have housing costs that make up >90% of income.**



1 in 3 migrant workers are paying more than 70% of their monthly income to housing.

“Staff housing” and employer-controlled accommodations are not as common in Squamish as they are in Whistler or in seasonal agricultural work. In Squamish, high rental rates and low housing quality (overcrowding, physical safety, unsanitary conditions, lack of privacy) are frequent concerns for migrant workers.

- 40% are unsatisfied with their housing;
- >20% do not have a lease.

QUALITY OF LIFE: KEY TOPICS

A Spectrum of Vulnerability

The Senate committee report locates types of closed work permits on a scale from less vulnerable to more vulnerable.¹ **Only 1% of workers visiting the Squamish Welcome Centre for support fall in the green “less vulnerable” end of the spectrum.**

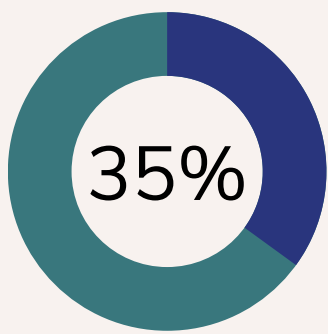
One-quarter (25%) of migrant workers in Squamish have exemptions from the LMIA process, largely through the francophone mobility program, but also through free trade agreements between Canada and other countries and the International Mobility Program.

About half (54%) of migrant workers in Squamish are in the second-highest tier of vulnerability.

Workers who have successfully applied for Open Work Permits for Vulnerable persons after experiencing abuse in the workplace don't fit on this spectrum. While they are less vulnerable in some ways, because they can switch employers, they have already experienced abuse at work in Canada and have other limitations.

Workplace Abuse and Maltreatment

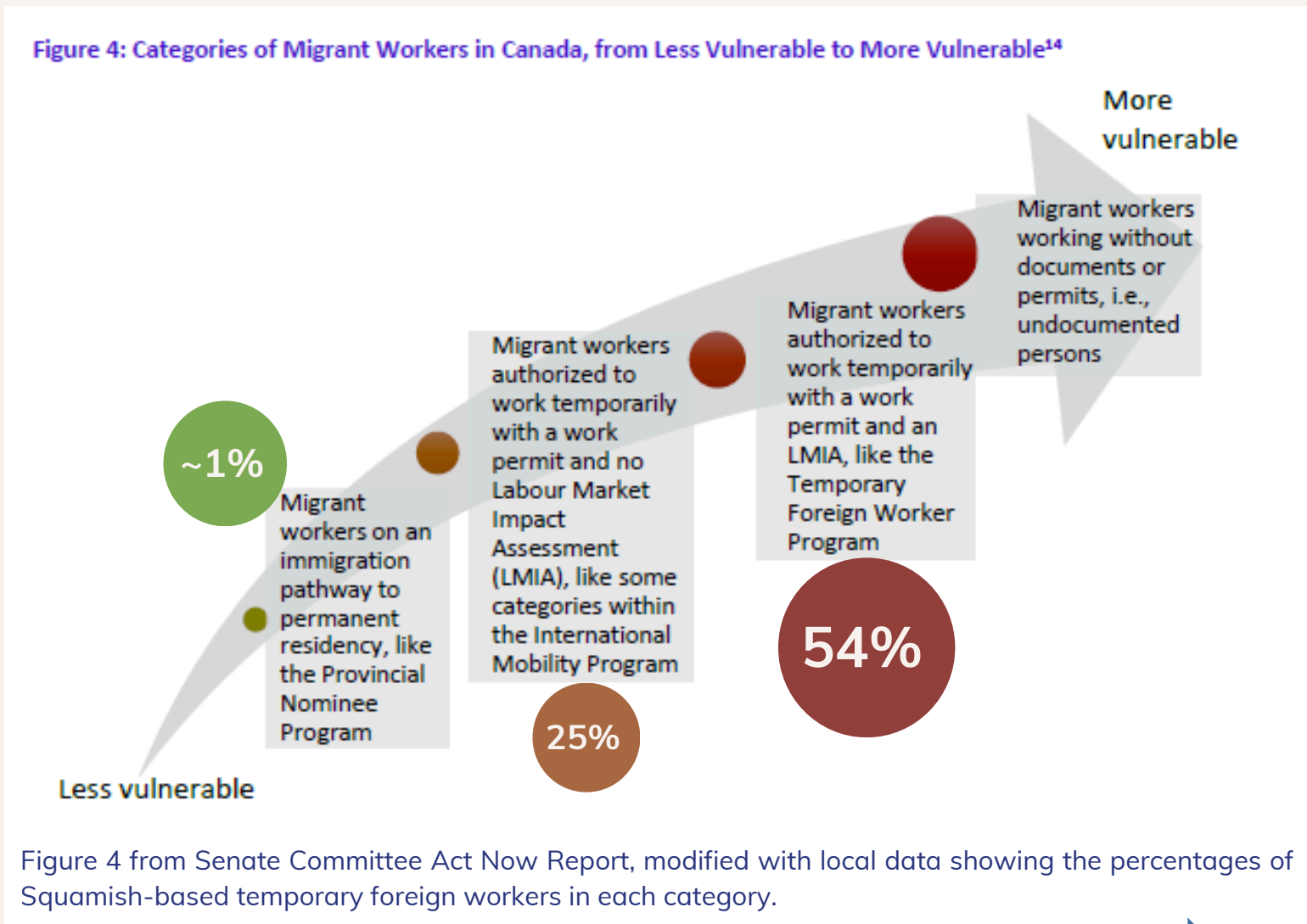
The Squamish Welcome Centre's Support Program for Migrant Workers supports people to learn about their rights and responsibilities at work in Canada. All employer-employee relationships have a power imbalance; for temporary foreign workers who are authorized only to work for a single employer in Canada, this relationship is even more lopsided.



More than one-in-three closed work permit holders in Squamish have experienced abuse at their workplace in 2023 or 2024.

Types of abuse:

- Harassment (such as threats of deportation);
- Discrimination (based on country of origin, race, or religion, for example);
- Wage theft and other Employment Standards Branch violations;
- Misrepresentation (of job duties, for example);
- Physically unsafe working conditions;
- Sexual assault and harassment;
- and more.



Another 12% don't fit neatly on this spectrum, but can be considered more vulnerable than closed work permit holders with LMIAs. This includes people with uncertain statuses, as well as those whose permits have expired and are stuck in processing limbo or without status.

Notably, very few migrant workers in Squamish have a clear pathway to permanent residency.



QUALITY OF LIFE: KEY TOPICS

Maltreatment and Exploitation

Workplace abuse has far-reaching, life-altering impacts on individuals, their family members, and the broader Squamish community. Every aspect of life can be affected, including, but not limited to, finances due to lost or stolen wages, mental and physical health, career trajectory, and interpersonal relationships.

Spouses of closed work permit holders with open work permits also experience abuse. Our program found that 30% of the migrant worker community overall (closed and spousal open work permit holders) has experienced some form of abuse in their workplace.

A common misconception is that migrant workers must leave Canada if they are not working for the employer listed on their work permit. However, migrant workers are permitted to stay in Canada until the expiration date on their work permit regardless of if they are working. However, unless they are granted a new work permit, they cannot work for another employer. This, combined with language barriers, ineligibility for some social services, barriers to access other social services, lack of information about rights at work, a lack of a social network, and other vulnerabilities, makes it extremely difficult for migrant workers to identify, respond to, and recover from abuse.

The toll of abuse is uncountable. For more on this topic, see Amnesty International's report on Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program.⁹

Healthcare Access

After a 90 day waiting period, Migrant workers are eligible for BC's Medical Services Plan (MSP). Employers are required to provide emergency insurance for the first three months, and for any time when the worker is not covered by MSP. Nevertheless, many migrant workers in Squamish struggle to access healthcare, in line with trends nationwide¹⁰ some barriers include:

- Difficulties understanding medical recommendations from health practitioners¹⁰
- Gaps in MSP Eligibility, i.e., when getting a new work permit or on maintained status;
- No coverage for non-emergency health care during the waiting period; and
- Difficulties navigating a new healthcare system.

(In)Eligibility for Services

The TFW Program is designed to bring workers from outside Canada to fill temporarily fill labour market gaps. These workers thus do not have a clear pathway to permanent residence and are supposed to return to their countries of origin after the work contract is completed. The program is designed with the needs of employers in mind, not the needs of the workers.

Migrant workers are thus not eligible for most federally funded settlement or newcomer services¹⁰, such as IRCC-funded language instruction for newcomers to Canada (LINC), WorkBC, and more.

Without Permanent Resident Status, migrant workers are also ineligible for many components of the federal and provincial social service safety net, such as the Affordable Childcare Benefit and subsidized housing through the BC Housing Registry, to name just a few examples.

English Language Learning

The hiring process for TFWs confirms that new employees have appropriate language skills for the job. Not all jobs require English language skills – some jobs actively discourage speaking at all. Nevertheless, English language knowledge can be important in other avenues of life, such as at the doctor's office.

Migrant workers in Squamish report facing serious challenges learning English. While provincial funding to settlement agencies mean there are some English learning programs available, options are limited. The most commonly reported challenge is a lack of time. Workers with irregular shift work in the hospitality industry, for example, also face difficulties attending scheduled classes.

Language is also critical for understanding one's rights in Canada, accessing services and resources in the community, and building social connections – all of which reduce vulnerability; "In addition to acting as barriers to obtaining permanent residence, lack of English or French language skills also poses a real risk to safety and increased vulnerability."¹⁰

In Squamish, the need for language learning opportunities is also high among Francophone migrant workers.

References

1. Omidvar, R. and Cordy, J. (Co-Chairs). 2024. *Act Now: Solutions for Temporary and Migrant Labour in Canada*. Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: 117-118.
2. In 2021, 45 LMIA positions were approved to businesses with addresses listed in the District of Squamish. In 2022, this number rose to 146. In 2023 and 2024, 140 and 193 LMIA positions were approved, respectively. ESDC. 2025. Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): Positive Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) Employers List. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90fed587-1364-4f33-a9ee-208181dc0b97>
3. Statistics Canada. 2022. Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population. Squamish, Census agglomeration. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?lang=e&topic=9&dguid=2021S0504934>
4. Calculated based on available information from IRCC, ESDC, and anonymized program data from the Squamish Welcome Centre's Support Program for Migrant Workers. For more information on how this estimate was calculated, please contact the Program Staff.
5. Omidvar, R. and Cordy, J. (Co-Chairs). 2024. *Act Now: Solutions for Temporary and Migrant Labour in Canada*. Figure 3: Top 10 Source Countries for Temporary Foreign Workers in 2023. Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: 23.
6. Anonymous surveys of Temporary Foreign Workers in Squamish conducted as part of the multi-year project Direct Outreach and Support – Migrant Workers in Squamish, funded by ESDC through MOSAIC as part of the BC-CCBP.
7. Squamish Community Foundation. 2024. *Living Wage for Squamish*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives & Living Wage BC.
8. Squamish Community Foundation. 2023. *Squamish's Vital Signs: 2023 Report*. Vital Signs ® & Community Foundations of Canada.
9. Amnesty International. 2025. *"Canada Has Destroyed Me": Labour Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Canada*. January 2025. AMR 20/8807/2025.
10. Omidvar, R. and Cordy, J. (Co-Chairs). 2024. *Act Now: Solutions for Temporary and Migrant Labour in Canada*. Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: 55-61.

Want to Learn More?

We strongly recommend Amnesty International's **"Canada Has Destroyed Me": Labour Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Canada**, published in January 2025. More can be learned from the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology's 2024 report **Act Now: Solutions for Temporary and Migrant Labour in Canada** and from the BC Employment Standards Coalition's February 2022 report **Justice Denied: The Systemic Failure to Enforce BC Employment Standards**. All three reports are available for free online.

You are also welcome to come to the **Squamish Welcome Centre** if you want to learn more, get support, or get involved! You can get in touch with us at miwow@welcomesquamish.ca



Every migrant worker is unique.