



EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES FOR NEWCOMERS TO SARNIA-LAMBTON AN ASSET AND GAP ANALYSIS

July 2025

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**Western
SocialScience**

Network for Economic
and Social Trends (NEST)

This brief is an excerpt from the study, 'Community Resources for Newcomers to Sarnia-Lambton: An Asset and Gap Analysis. The full report can be accessed through:



The Sarnia-Lambton Local Immigration Partnership is an initiative funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and housed within the Corporation of the County of Lambton

Funded by:



**Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada**

Financé par :

**Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada**



The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or official policies of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) or the County of Lambton.

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Special Statement About the Sarnia-Lambton economy

At the time of writing, leaders and businesses in the Sarnia-Lambton region faced rapidly changing circumstances that have affected the economic and labour sectors (as well as affecting those of Canada as a whole). These circumstances include continuing uncertainties about the future of the free trade agreement with the United States and Mexico, the United States' shifting policies toward border security, and imposing tariffs to protect U.S. industry. Currently, the United States is honouring the free trade agreement with the exception of imposing a 25% tariff on automobiles and related parts not made in the United States, steel, and aluminum. In addition, the U.S. Government has placed a 10% tariff on all items not included in the free trade agreement and on energy products and potash. Canada, in turn, has issued counter tariffs of nearly \$30 billion on U.S. steel and aluminum products and additional goods, tariffs on \$30 billion worth of U.S. goods from peanut butter to wine, beer and spirits (Department of Finance Canada 2025).

Local leaders, such as Mike Bradley, Sarnia's mayor, have predicted the impact of this economic conflict could be severe in the region because of the degree to which local business activity is integrated with Michigan and beyond. Several pipelines that supply the region's petrochemical industries and are used to deliver products to U.S. customers cross American territory. Currently, the province supplies \$3 billion in chemicals and \$9 billion in plastics to the United States, of which much is manufactured in the region, described by a Chemistry Industry Association of Canada spokesperson as the "heartbeat of Ontario's chemical manufacturing sector" (Morden 2025a).

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Locally, a \$245-million whisky distillery development set to begin operations in 2025 has been paused. Nova Chemicals, the region's largest private-sector employer, also announced in March 2025 that it had shelved plans to develop a plastics recycling plant in Sarnia. Neither company tied its plans directly to the new U.S. protectionist policies. However, Nova did announce plans to proceed with a recycling facility in Indiana, which is expected to create 125 jobs (Morden 2025b). Tariffs and increased border security could also conceivably increase the costs of certain materials and slow down shipments. Compounding the challenges to the petrochemical sector was the October 2024 decision of the Ineos Styrolution chemical plant to decommission its Sarnia plant following provincial/federal pursuit of the plant's avoidance of air pollution prevention regulations. The closure put the plant's 80 employees out of work (Morden 2025c).

Despite these setbacks, other recent developments have suggested that the region's petrochemical industry might experience protection from some impacts. In mid-April 2025, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers fast-tracked tunnel permits that will allow Enbridge to build a protective tunnel around its Line 5 pipeline where it crosses the bed of Lake Michigan. The aging pipeline supplies Sarnia-Lambton refineries and manufacturers with oil and liquid natural gas products and crosses American territory, including the bed of Lake Michigan. It has been the subject of considerable concern from environmental activists and adjacent residents who fear its potential to leak, especially in the lakebed (AP 2025).

Of uncertain impact is the recent sale of Nova Chemicals to the Borouge Group International. Nova employs nearly 1,000 people over its four plants in the region. Local reaction to the sale is mixed. Bob Bailey, the region's MPP, described the sale as promising, noting that a previous sale of the plants in 2009 drew investment to the region. Mike Bradley, however, has suggested the outcome is uncertain and Matthew Slotwinski, CEO of the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership was hopeful it was a sign that the local operations would remain sustainable (Morden 2025d).

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Canada's decision to reduce its target numbers for both permanent and temporary immigration programs has been another blow for the region, whose economic development organizations have identified as a priority attracting workers through these two streams to replace an anticipated large volume of retiring workers and to fill a wide number of positions anticipated to be created by future economic growth. These immigration caps make it more difficult for businesses to compete with other regions for workers and have reduced the volume of international students training at Lambton College for in-demand positions such as mechanic and repair technicians and health aides. Indeed, in March 2024, a spokesperson for Lambton College indicated that its international student population of 1,900 of a total of 4,100 students at its Sarnia campus could be affected (Morden 2024). As of April 2025, the college was expecting a 62% total drop in international student enrolment in the fall of 2025 compared to the same time in 2024 (Kula 2025a).

However, the province announced in January 2025 that the region would be included in the provincial labour ministry's Rural Economic Development through Immigration program. The pilot program allows selected communities in Ontario to reserve nominations for applicants through the province's Immigrant Nominee Program. Sarnia's allocation will be 200 nominations (Kula 2025b). Childcare, construction, healthcare, and skilled trades are the sectors in which these new workers will be distributed.

The Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership has reported that it is hearing concerns about increased costs and some customers deciding not to consider Canadian products or services and therefore reducing demand. Other customers are expecting businesses to adjust to avoid offering U.S. products. The Partnership also warns that the Canadian electric vehicle and battery supply chain, one of the sectors that the region had earmarked for economic development, is particularly affected. Additionally, the Partnership warns that although its investment attraction activities continue to identify projects, members anticipate fewer companies will be attracted and some projects already in the pipeline are being paused, cancelled or re-assessed (SLEP 2025a).

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The Partnership has responded to these challenges by promoting a business retention and expansion program that aims to develop long-term relationships with local businesses that will improve information sharing about concerns, challenges and opportunities to support the business community as a whole. It also notes that a focus on the Canadian energy security will drive new investment in products such as ethanol, biodiesel and energy production. The changed field of competition will also mean that supply chains and customers will diversify and include more domestic sources. It is also expected that satellite and distribution offices will be set up to accommodate the Canadian market (SLEP 2025a).

The Canadian commitment to clean technology along with uncertainty of U.S. support of the sector may help to better position Canada as a destination for foreign direct investment. Products and services such as renewable energy, water and wastewater management, energy storage, and other energy-related solutions can become points of collaboration with partner countries. The Partnership notes that Canada's research and development tax incentives to businesses are the most generous in the G7 (SLEP 2025a).

Overview

Despite the uncertain economic climate, several factors indicate that opportunities for migrants in both employment and entrepreneurial activities will grow in coming years. These are listed below:

Workforce Labour Trends

The Sarnia-Lambton region's manufacturing and construction workforce is vulnerable to an aging population trend affecting the western Ontario region more generally. A 2021 Western Ontario Wardens Caucus report estimated that from 2020 to 2030, more than 15,000 workers would be needed to replace retiring workers in the Sarnia-Lambton region.

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This demand is slightly larger than in other locations in Western Ontario but reflects the broader manufacturing sector trend of worker decline. Roughly three times the number of workers is needed to replace these positions compared to the number of workers needed to fill new positions created over the same 10-year period (WOWC 2022, p. 108). The Sarnia-Lambton Workplace Development Board has identified skilled trades as being one labour category particularly affected by the need to replace workers (SLWDB 2025a, p. 31).

While the manufacturing sector that extends from Sarnia south through St. Clair Township is valued as the region's largest income driver, in 2024 it ranked sixth in terms of industry employer by total employees. Educational services, health care and social assistance and retail trade were the top three industry employers, respectively (SLWDB 2025b, p. 5). The top labour occupation categories by total employees for 2024 were sales and service; trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations; and business, finance and administration (SLEP 2025b). These statistics suggest different and intersecting trends in employment needs for these other industries.

Temporary Residents Under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (Agricultural Stream) and the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program

As of 2021, the Sarnia-Lambton region had 2,140 farms, of which 14 were greenhouse, nursery and floriculture operations. A further 51 were vegetable, melon, fruit and tree nut farms, and the county also had 68 hog and pig farms. These types of farm operations are Ontario's largest agricultural employers of temporary foreign workers with greenhouses employing the largest volume of workers (Statistics Canada 2025a). For instance, in 2022, one local greenhouse operation maintained 120 temporary foreign workers (The Municipality of Lambton Shores 2022).

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Food and beverage manufacturers are another large employer of these workers. Lambton has 24 food processors, which, as a sector in 2022, employed 2,321 people (Food & Beverage Ontario 2022, pp. 14-15). Half of the more than 900 processors in the southern Ontario region employed fewer than 50 workers on their premises. The southern Ontario processors that employed the most temporary workers were bakeries, tortilla operations, and wineries. In Ontario, of the 32,585 temporary foreign workers in 2024, nearly half came from Mexico, and nearly a fifth came from Jamaica (Statistics Canada 2025b).

Aging Workforce

Like the manufacturing and construction sectors, an aging workforce is driving the need for new workers, but an aging population, in general, is driving a need in the health and social assistance sectors for workers in the form of personal support workers and others involved in home and community care.

These growing and changing needs of the local population comprise replacement and additional jobs of the same type. A 2024 Canadian Institute for Health Information study of recruitment and retention of healthcare workers in Canada suggests this local trend may reflect a broader provincial trend. The study indicates that over three years from 2019 to 2022, both entries and exits of family physicians and regulated nurses in direct care in Ontario reached high levels. (The net gain in numbers for these professions was small; the net gain of nurse practitioners, on the other hand, was much higher.) Recruiting migrants will be essential for meeting the large volume of workers to fill existing and new positions in healthcare (CIHI 2024).

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Specialized Skills

More generally, the demand for workers with specialized skills including those in the trades is high, creating opportunities for accredited migrants. For instance, of the 374 Sarnia job listings on the SLWDB job board on May 27, 2025, 43% were for workers in the fields of health care, natural and applied science and trades, transport and equipment operators (SLWDB 2025c). These sectors not only support an increasingly aging population but also play key roles in the manufacturing sector and the industries that support it.

Multilingual Skills

In May, the SLWDB job board also indicated a small but notable demand exists for workers who speak French. The Lambton Kent District School Board, for instance, was advertising for French language teachers. In April, the Ontario government's launch of French-language services to Sarnia-Lambton's Francophone population had resulted in at least two postings for French speakers (SLWDB 2025c). There are 2,415 people who speak French at home as their first language in Sarnia-Lambton (SLEP 2025c). The SLWDB's annual survey of employers also found that employers expected to hire French-speaking social workers within the next year (SLWDB 2025b, p. 7). The job board also listed one Spanish-speaking job in May.

While the demand for French-language workers is small, a 2021 report on attracting Francophone workers to the region indicated that the community could grow by 100 people per year. The strategy recommends targeting international students from Ontario and Quebec universities who want to gain Canadian work experience in their fields to fill hard-to-fill and specialized jobs. Noting the aging population, the report notes that Sarnia “must target economic immigration to maintain its labour force and to support its various industries, including the petrochemical industry and public health care institutions” (Brynaert, Brennan & Associé.e.s 2021, p. 1-3).

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Newcomer Challenges

In a 2020 Summary of Local Labour Market Plans, the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus found that newcomers to the southwestern Ontario region, of which Sarnia-Lambton is a part, are generally more disconnected from local industry and professional networks, leading to fewer opportunities for Canadian work experience. Recognition of international training and qualifications can be a significant barrier, particularly in regulated professions like health care. Limited immigration settlement supports in the region, particularly compared to larger urban centres, may compound these challenges (WOWC 2020a, p. 9).

Another key barrier in this larger region is that small businesses, which are most of the region's employers, often lack the capacity and knowledge for international recruitment processes. Smaller employers also need to develop equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategies to ensure welcoming workplaces (WOWC 2022, p. 7; WOWC 2020b, p. 3).

Employment Capacity

The Sarnia-Lambton region continues to face steep challenges in recruitment and retention of employees. Many employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses and those in healthcare, struggle to fill positions with skilled candidates. The 2025 annual survey of employers by the Sarnia-Lambton Workforce Development Board found 53% of responding businesses had hard-to-fill positions and 63% of medium businesses, defined as those with 100 to 499 employees (SLWDB 2025b, p. 6). Key issues reported include skills gaps (both technical and soft skills like dependability and communication), not enough applicants and lack of work experience. Job postings requiring French language skills take on average 29 days to fill, while postings for social and community service workers take on average, 30 days (SLWDB 2025a, p. 32). Sectors most struggling with a lack of applicants over the past year include public administration, construction, educational services and healthcare and social assistance.

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Those sectors dealing with a lack of qualifications in applicants include educational services, public administration, manufacturing and services the Workforce Development Board lists as “other services (except public administration)” which is a catchall for roles such as lawn care workers, graphic designers, job developers, business development officers, website developers, summer students and project managers (SLWDB 2025b, p. 7)

Industries anticipating the most hires in 2025 are healthcare and social assistance, public administration, other services and educational services. Industries expecting to take on new hires because of expansion include real estate and rental and leasing, manufacturing and educational services. Public administration, transportation and warehousing, and management of companies and enterprises anticipate the most retirements in 2025 (SLWDB 2025b, p. 7).

According to the survey, 63% of respondents expected to hire employees in 2025 to fill a current or expected vacancy or because of expansion. All told, the number of new hires is estimated to be 2,062 employees (SLWDB 2025b, p. 7). To encourage retention, about one fifth of the employers who responded to the survey offer regular salary increases and recognition for service and outstanding work. Other strategies include training, perks, such as discounts on merchandise, job flexibility, clear promotional opportunities and increases in benefits (SLWDB 2025b, p. 9).

The survey also looked at sector attitudes towards hiring international talent and found accommodation and food services, educational services and healthcare and social assistance, and "other services (excluding public administration)" most open to hiring candidates with international backgrounds. Least likely to consider this group are those in manufacturing, construction, and agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting sectors. Close to half of survey respondents indicated that they had hired individuals with international talent previously (47% reporting yes and 53% reporting no) (SLWDB 2025b, p. 11).

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Entrepreneurship

Several studies over the past seven years concerning economic development in the region have recognized the importance of attracting newcomers to the Sarnia Lambton region not only to meet labour demands but also as entrepreneurs to foster economic growth, and to offer a clear path to advancement for entry-level workers (Mellor Murray Consulting 2018, p. 8; WOWC 2022, pp. 33, 36; County of Lambton 2022, p. 7; and SLWDB 2025a, p. 20).

Another factor generating interest in fostering more entrepreneurial activity is that the region's business landscape is dominated by businesses that employ no workers (70%) (SLWDB 2025a, p. 13). Among those with employees, micro (1-4 employees) and small (5-99 employees) businesses are most common, particularly in construction and retail. Medium-sized businesses are mainly in manufacturing and healthcare/social assistance, while large businesses are concentrated in manufacturing, educational services, and public administration. Many of these businesses, however, are affected by the region's aging population trend and lack a succession plan (Western Ontario Wardens Caucus 2022b).

Migrants searching for resources to aid employment or entrepreneurial efforts will find a robust selection of general local and online resources, and a number of these are listed in the Resources section below. Some resources specific to newcomers are also available and are included. These entries are intended to be as comprehensive as possible at the local level, but many more exist online than can be listed here. Many of these resources are sector specific, and to exemplify their range, we show what some of these look like in the agricultural sector.

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Identified Needs and Recommendations

The following nine employment sector organizations were surveyed as part of the community asset and gap analysis : the Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board, Express Employment Professionals, Community Futures Lambton, the Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce, the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership (SLEP), Ontario Works, The WorkPlace Group, Service Canada, and Lambton College Community Employment Services. These organizations offer a wide array of services, including employment assistance, career development, community connections, civic engagement opportunities, and social networking.

Six of the respondents identified specific activities that could be done to better support migrants in Sarnia-Lambton. In particular, the following needs and recommendations were shared by employment sector respondents:

- **Expand Funding:** Increased funding is necessary to support the development and delivery of essential services and programming for migrants, including employment services; services for temporary migrants; community navigation services; and recreational, social, and cultural events.
- **Expand the Focus of Support:** Service eligibility should be expanded to include international students and other temporary migrants who are not currently eligible for the same level of support as Permanent Residents. This would require additional funding and coordination from multiple levels of government.
- **Provide Targeted Services:** Service availability, in general, needs to be expanded to match the growth of the population in Sarnia-Lambton. Wherever possible, these services should be targeted to the specific needs of the community, with dedicated providers being funded to provide these targeted services. Immigration-focused legal services, for example, should be made available to both immigrants and temporary migrants, and in the employment sector, an employment service provider should be designated to provide support to temporary migrants.

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- **Help Migrants Develop In-Demand Skills:** Supports should be provided to help migrants develop important skills, such as language skills, interpersonal skills, and other soft skills. These skills will be beneficial in both employment settings and community integration.
- **Reduce Barriers to Service Access for Those Outside of Sarnia:** Migrants who reside in the region of Lambton outside of Sarnia face barriers to accessing services, such as limited transportation and service availability. Service availability should be expanded outside of the city and transportation services should be enhanced/provided so that in person programming is accessible to all migrants.
- **Increase Data Collection and Dissemination Efforts:** Collection and dissemination of data and research pertaining to employment trends—including through in-person sessions—would facilitate a better understanding of the economic landscape in Sarnia-Lambton and would allow service providers to offer more targeted and relevant guidance to their clients.
- **Improve Community Navigation:** Sarnia-Lambton should designate a Navigator to support and connect migrants with services and members of the community in both Sarnia and the broader region of Lambton outside of Sarnia. A “Welcome Hub” should also be developed to welcome migrants to the area and act as a primary point of contact to their community.
- **Support Community-Wide Education:** Public education campaigns incorporating positive stories about immigrants and temporary migrants will help to foster inclusion and support for these individuals.
- **Promote Community Building:** Places should be designated for community gatherings where immigrants and temporary migrants can connect with one another for social, recreational, networking, and cultural events. These events should include non-migrant members of the community as well to aid in community integration.

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