

RURAL AND SEMI-URBAN ANALYSIS

# REGIONAL WORKFORCE PILOT

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An expansion of the Brampton Regional Workforce Pilot to explore the social and infrastructure barriers and opportunities for Ontario food and beverage processors in semi-urban and rural regions.

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PROCESSING

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BEVERAGE  
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# APPROACH.

Earlier this spring, Food and Beverage Ontario (FBO) published its Brampton Regional Workforce Pilot, [“Filling the Talent Gap in Ontario’s Food and Beverage Manufacturing Sector.”](#)<sup>1</sup>The study was conducted by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce in coordination with the City of Brampton and its regional food and beverage processing employers. The resulting report identified issues hindering employers’ ability to attract and retain talent in the sector and what can be done to fill the sector’s existing and projected talent gap.

To further build on this successful initiative, FBO embarked on expanding its Brampton report to explore similar challenges facing processors in semi-urban and rural regions. To achieve new insight, FBO conducted semi-formal interviews with food and beverage manufacturing

employers with facilities located in the rural and semi-rural regions of Mitchell, Cambridge, Brantford, and Windsor.

To expand on the initial Regional Workforce Pilot, interviews with employers adhered to the same format that explored 5 key themes:

1. Transportation
2. Immigration and labour skills
3. Housing, child care, and cost of living
4. Perceptions of the sector and the nature of work
5. The changing labour market

This project expanding the Regional Workforce Pilot is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs.

# SECTOR OVERVIEW.

The food and beverage processing industry plays a vital role in Canada, creating a remarkable variety of high quality, nutritious, and safe food and drink products for Canadians, and contributing significantly to our food sovereignty, food security, economic and personal well-being.

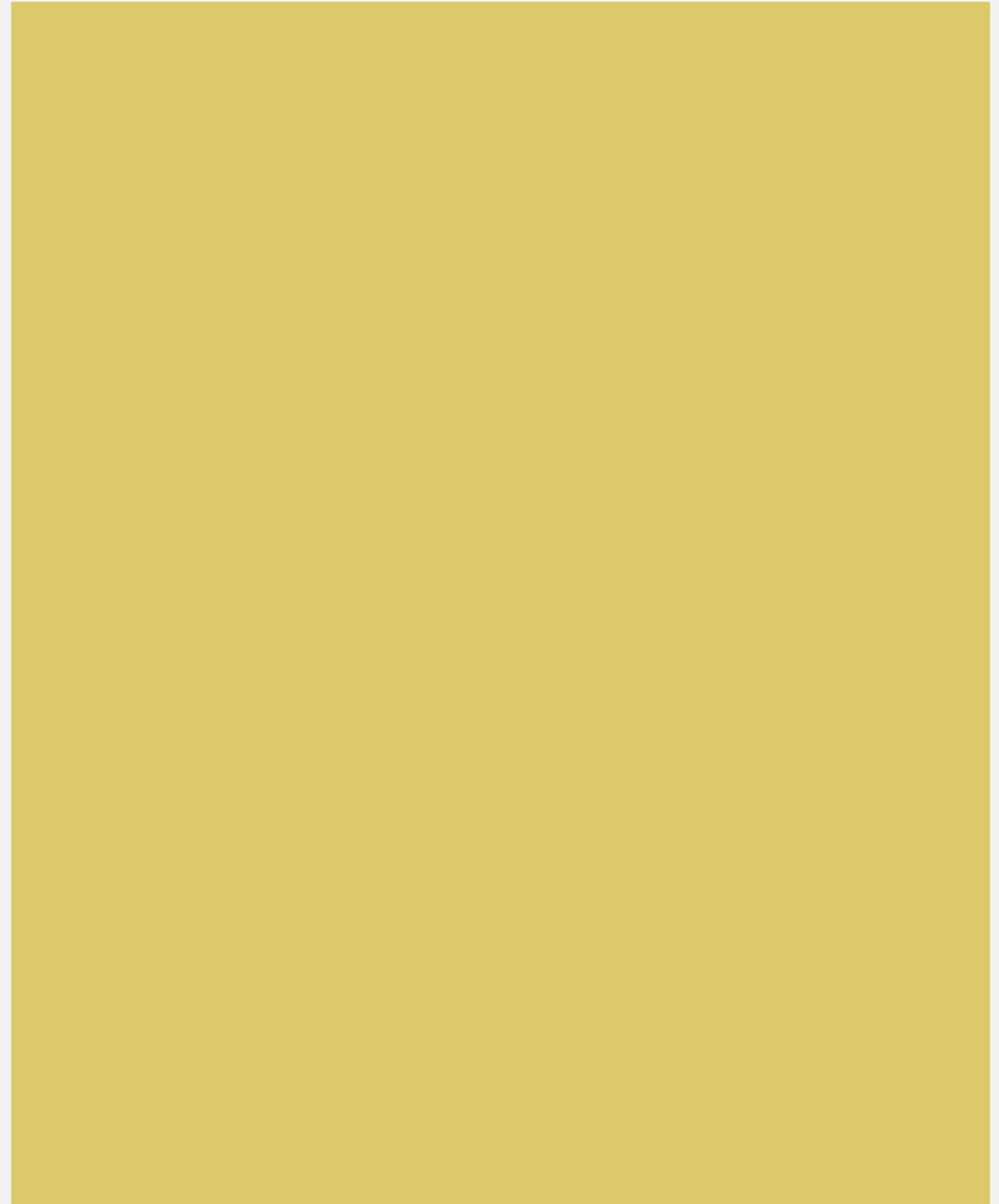
Ontario is the engine of Canada's food and beverage manufacturing sector. It represents the largest hub for food processing in Canada and one of the largest in North America.<sup>2</sup> The sector employs more than 125,000 people

at over 4,000 companies.<sup>3</sup>

Food and beverage processing is the largest manufacturing industry in Ontario in terms of employment; nearly 20% of all manufacturing jobs are in the food and beverage processing industry, more than 90% of its establishments employ fewer than 100 people, and one quarter are located in rural communities.<sup>4 5</sup> Additionally, processor businesses indirectly support hundreds of thousands of jobs in other industries such as transportation, retail, and hospitality.

Food and beverage processing is the largest manufacturing sector contributor to GDP, contributing \$13.9 billion in 2020.<sup>6</sup>

The food and beverage processing industry in Ontario is projected to experience a shortfall of 25,000 employees by 2025.<sup>7 8</sup> Despite concerted recruitment efforts by the industry, there are not sufficient people working in the sector today to maintain the status quo. The industry needs to recruit and train tens of thousands of new workers between now and 2025.



**MITCHELL  
ONTARIO** <sup>10</sup>

(Located in the Municipality of West Perth County)

**FOOD AND BEVERAGE  
PROCESSORS**

108 businesses in food and beverage processing  
(Perth County).

**POPULATION**

Population of Mitchell, Ontario is 4,570.



**AVERAGE  
COMMUTE TIMES**

The average commute time in Mitchell, Ontario, is 10 minutes.<sup>9</sup>

# CAMBRIDGE ONTARIO <sup>12</sup>

## FOOD AND BEVERAGE PROCESSORS

12 businesses in food and beverage processing.

## POPULATION

Population of Cambridge, Ontario  
is 138,479.

## AVERAGE COMMUTE TIMES

The average commute time  
in Cambridge, Ontario, is 22.8  
minutes.<sup>11</sup>

# BRANTFORD ONTARIO <sup>14</sup>

## FOOD AND BEVERAGE PROCESSORS

20 businesses in food and beverage processing.

## POPULATION

Population of Brantford, Ontario  
is 104,688.

## AVERAGE COMMUTE TIMES

The average commute time  
in Brantford, Ontario, is 22.7  
minutes.<sup>13</sup>



# WINDSOR ONTARIO

## FOOD AND BEVERAGE PROCESSORS

+150 businesses in food and beverage processing.

## POPULATION

Population of Windsor, Ontario is  
229,660.

## AVERAGE COMMUTE TIMES

The average commute time  
in Windsor, Ontario, is 18.9  
minutes.<sup>15</sup>

# TRANSPORTATION.

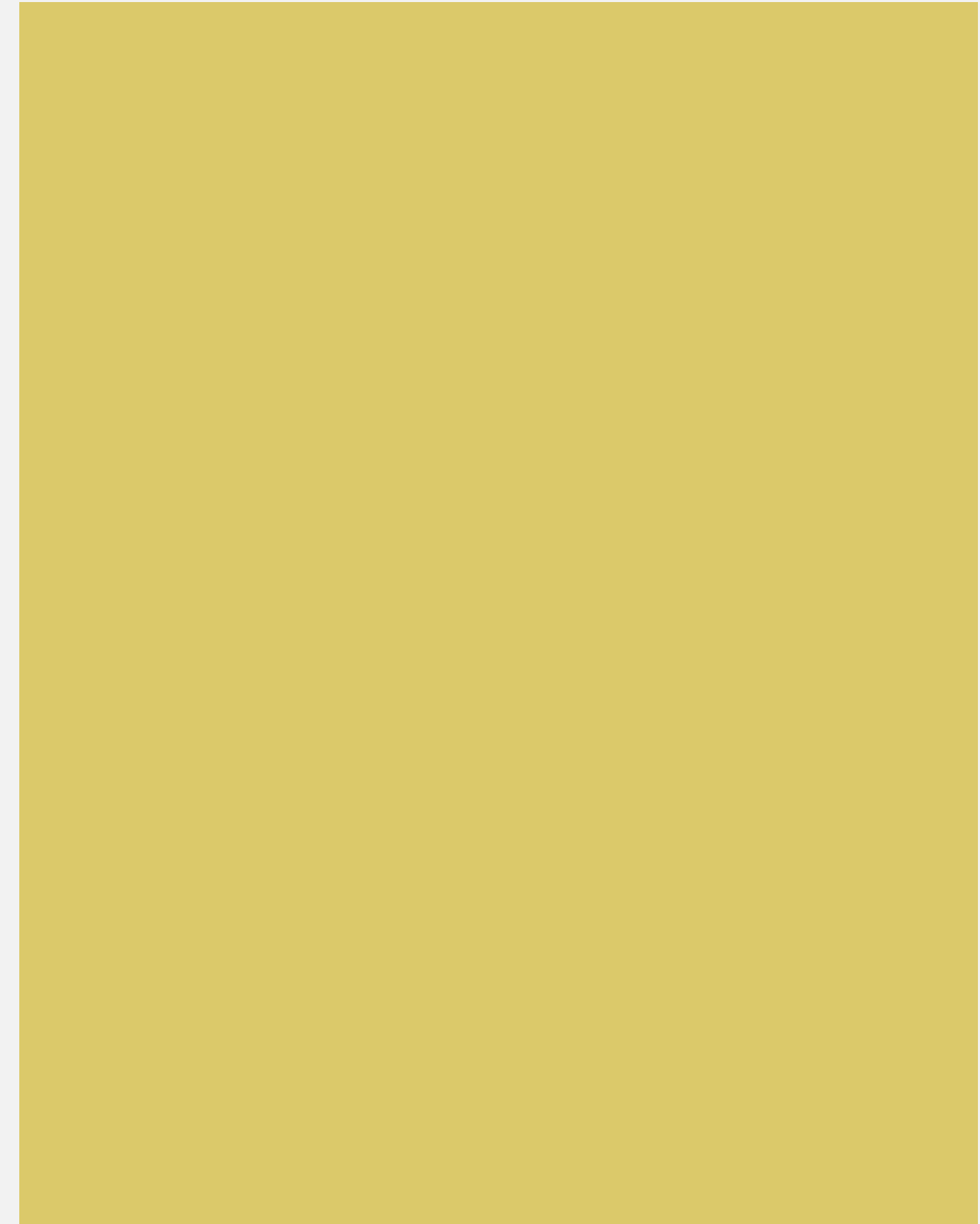
Transportation is a notable deciding factor in a food and beverage processing facility's ability to attract and retain a workforce that meets its operational needs. Due to the nature of work, access to public transportation is attractive and essential to food and beverage processors, employees, and job seekers. Employers in urban, semi-urban, and rural regions identify public transportation as an important method to commute to and from their place of work. However, the challenge of providing employees with convenient and fiscally sustainable methods of transportation are compounded for facilities located outside of major metropolitan areas.

While facilities benefit from a local workforce, they also rely on employees living in adjacent municipalities. Public transportation methods — primarily public buses — do not connect directly with food and beverage processing

facilities. Where urban areas often benefit from a wide array of public transportation methods, such as bus, light rail, and rapid transit systems, semi-rural and rural regions often offer fewer amenities. Indeed, the lack of public transit, and therefore pronounced requirement for personal vehicles, is a major barrier to employment in rural areas, specifically. As a result, the importance of aligning bus transportation with processor locations is amplified.

Commutes often require multiple bus transfers. Additionally, bus schedules and services often do not align with shift work, which can drastically extend commute times beyond 45 minutes, even for employees living relatively close to their place of work.

In effort to improve access to their facilities as well as improve employee attraction and retention, some processors have contracted third-party shuttle services to provide a direct connection to their business locations.



WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS AND EMPLOYERS DO TO MITIGATE TRANSIT AND TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS?

TRANSPORTATION

	POLICYMAKERS	EMPLOYERS
Improve regional transit (i.e., additional buses, a greater frequency of GO and Light Rail Transit, and transit hours that better align with the needs of shift workers).	X	
Take steps to improve regional connectivity, including better roads and highways with neighbouring cities where possible.	X	
Consider innovative public-private partnerships that could be established between employers, the municipality, and on-demand transportation providers to help employees get to work.	X	X
Consider whether a shuttle bus service or a ride-sharing program could be developed to help employees get to their workplace facility.		X
Consider whether working hours can be re-arranged to accommodate shift workers who rely on public transit.		X

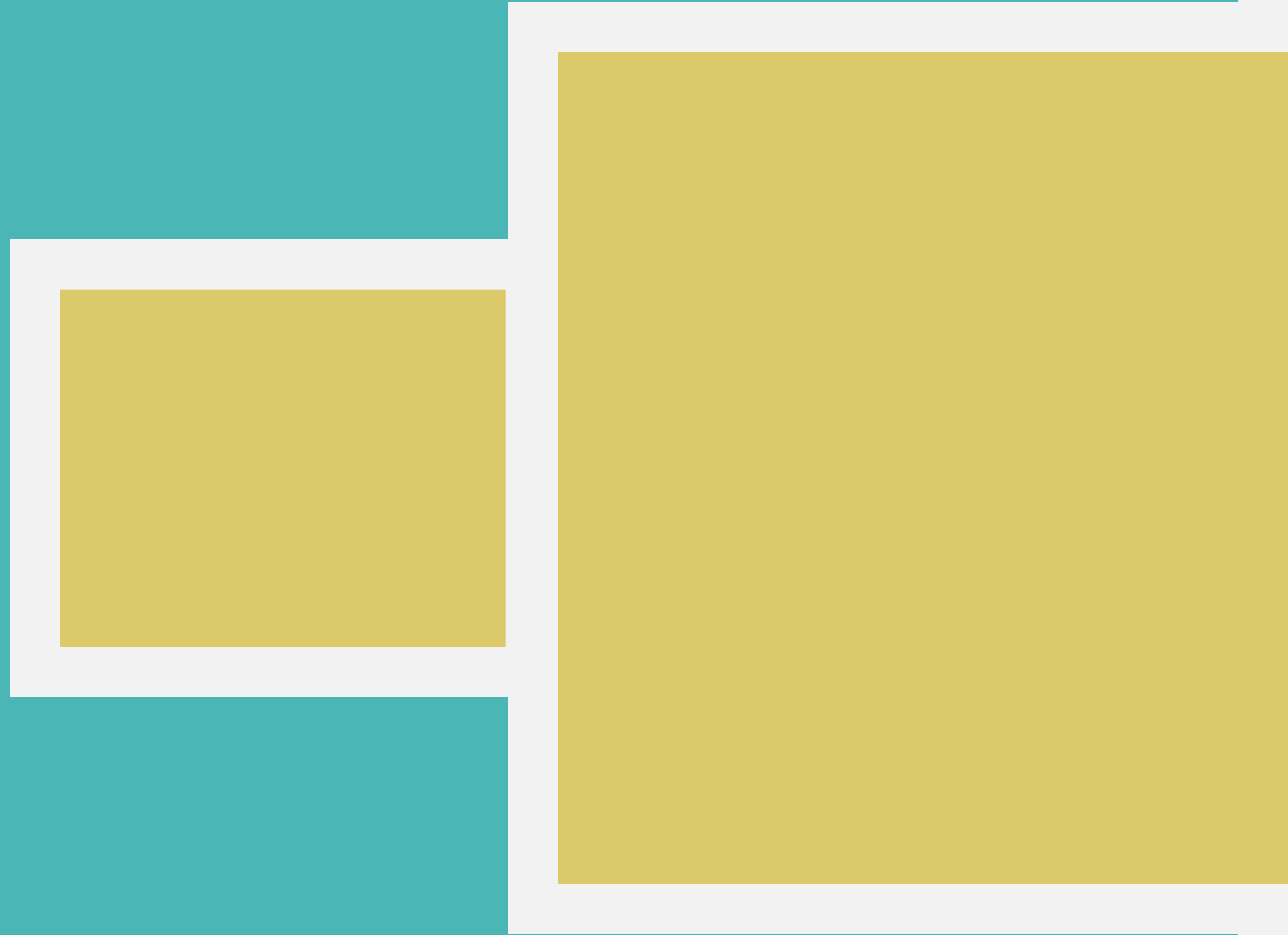
# COMPARISON

## 1. RURAL

While commute times are notably shorter on average in rural areas, the dependence on private vehicles and lack of public transit as a viable option for commuting is a notable barrier to employment.

## 2. SEMI-URBAN

Semi-urban regions experience challenges in aligning bus routes with the needs of food and beverage processing employees. Bus routes often do not service the facility location, while service schedules do not align with shift work. Additionally, the lack of express bus routes can translate to several bus transfers and extended commute times.



# IMMIGRATION & LANGUAGE SKILLS.

Immigration pathways remain a critical method of filling vacant positions that otherwise could not be sourced locally to meet the needs of food and beverage manufacturing facilities. As a result, qualified foreign workers are in high demand and organizations frequently turn to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to support their operations.

Despite the high level of interest in the program and the importance it plays in supplying processors — especially processors located in remote rural areas — with employees to reinforce their workforce, difficulty in navigating the

application process emerged as a common theme among participating processors.

Employers expressed an interest in a simplified process and concerns with an array of cumbersome deadlines involved.

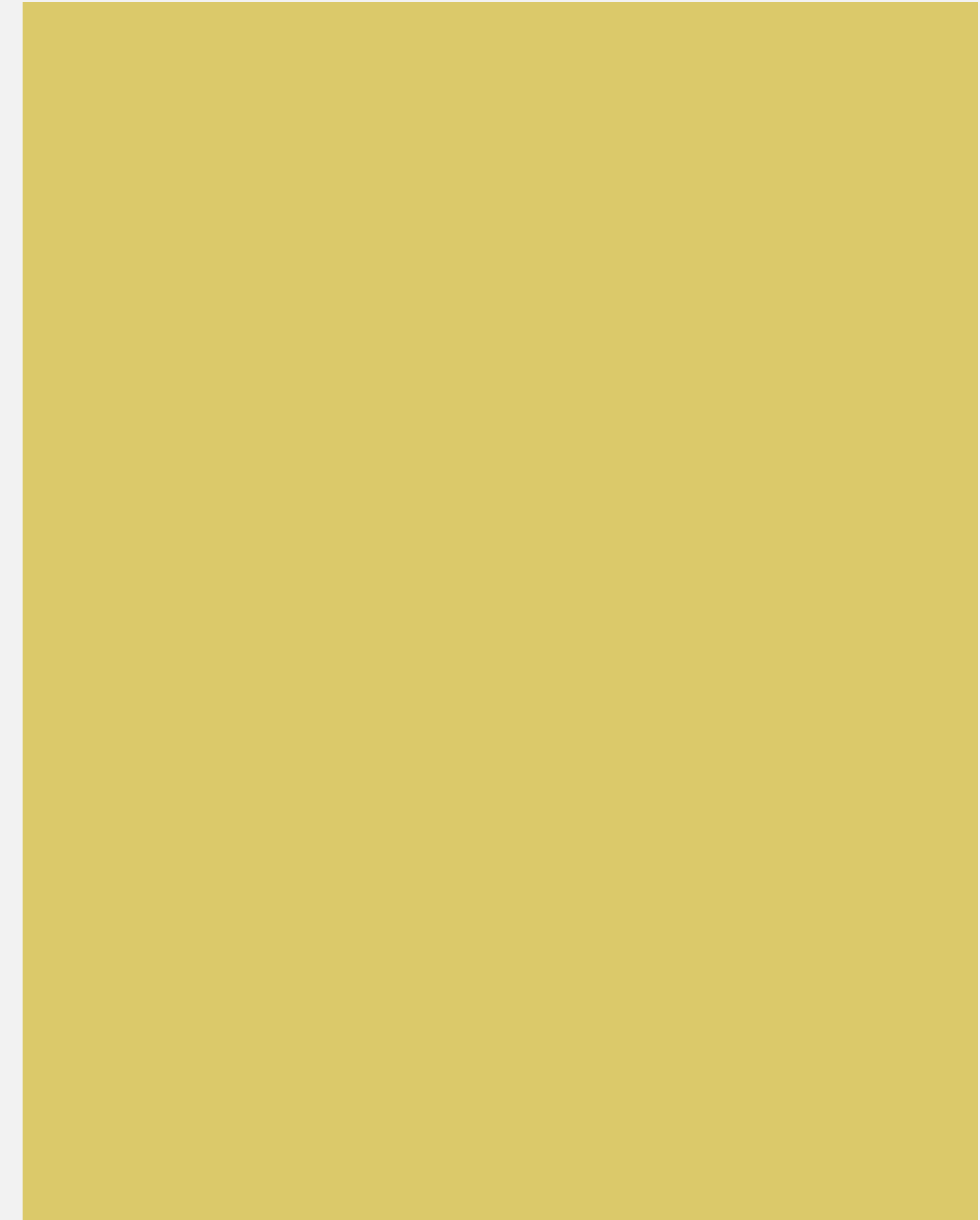
Processors shared concerns with the sector's appeal to foreign workers within the confines of the immigration framework due to what is seen as a misalignment in the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS). The permanent residency application incorporates a CRS, a points-based system to assess and score applicant profiles in the expressed entry pool. The CRS assesses skills, education, language ability, and work experience among other factors. However, the value placed on job titles has led foreign workers to pursue National Occupational Classification (NOC) codes that the government has categorized as higher skill levels to improve their score under the CRS.

With the current CRS, positions at a fast food location, retail, or convenience



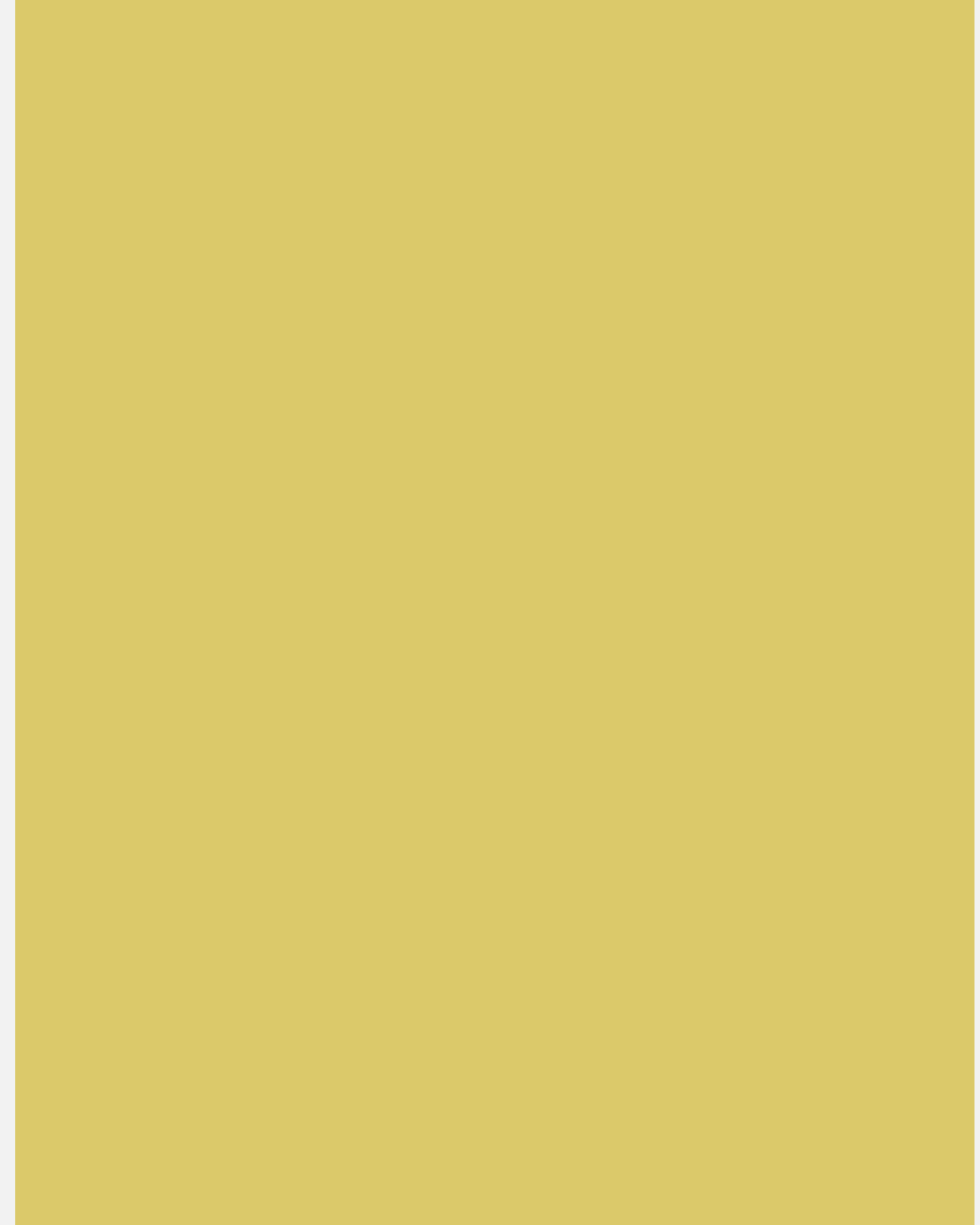
store, which may offer managerial positions, for example, can arbitrarily outweigh high-valued roles in the food and beverage processing industry. Employers reported it's not uncommon for foreign workers to request a title change to support their goal of permanent residency. However, where a title change may be easily achievable in retail, restaurants, or smaller service-based organizations, it is particularly challenging in a manufacturing environment such as food and beverage processing facilities.

In contrast to Quebec, some employers also recognize an opportunity to better support foreign workers. According to some processors with facilities in both provinces, Quebec's immigration system takes a hands-on approach to bringing in and taking care of temporary foreign workers and immigrants that is otherwise very complicated for businesses to handle. To meet the needs of temporary foreign workers looking to navigate the system, some processors have turned to third-party recruitment agencies for support. However, the complexity of the process and fiscal restraints are a barrier to many medium and small-sized organizations.





English fluency is necessary for those working in Ontario’s food and beverage processing facilities. Understandably, adequate language skills affect not only employee performance and growth but also employee retention. When candidates do not have this baseline, some employers explain that they offer English language classes to help employees succeed in their current roles and to support long-term retention and advancement.



	POLICYMAKERS	EMPLOYERS	POST-SECONDARY
Streamline the immigration process in Ontario to encourage workers to stay in the province.	X		
Consider a pilot program that expedites PR for individuals working for a F&B manufacturing employer overseas and looking to work for the same firm in Ontario.	X		
Ensure employers are given enough spots through the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program to address regional talent shortages.	X		
Revise NOC code requirements for PR applications, so that job titles are not a barrier for workers in the F&B manufacturing sector.	X		
Support employers looking to provide English language classes by fostering partnerships with community and non-profit organizations with skilled English-language instructors.	X		
Consider English-language training to help newcomers succeed and encourage retention.		X	
Connect with local ethnocultural community organizations to locate candidates and fill vacancies.		X	
Facilitate partnerships between employers and settlement agencies or community organizations to improve awareness of the programs/initiatives that can help employers hire newcomers.	X		
Consider how technology can be used to connect with and interview candidates in Brampton and/or overseas, assess their skills and make job offers virtually.		X	
Create a pilot program that provides newcomers with intense training, including knowledge of the F&B manufacturing sector, basic technical skills, language training, a placement, and an opportunity for employers to connect directly with candidates for full-time roles.	X	X	X

# COMPARISON

## 1. RURAL

Food and beverage processors across the province experience similar challenges in relation to immigration and language skills. However, the intensity of these challenges are amplified in regions with fewer resources to support temporary foreign workers more abundantly found in metropolitan areas.

## 2. SEMI-URBAN

Metropolitan centres are an attractive hub for immigration thanks to their strength in diverse communities and adjacent resources to support foreign workers. Adjacent communities benefit from proximity to these hubs. However, processors are not able to fully benefit due to a misalignment in the NOC codes in PR applications.

# HOUSING, CHILD CARE, & AFFORDABILITY.

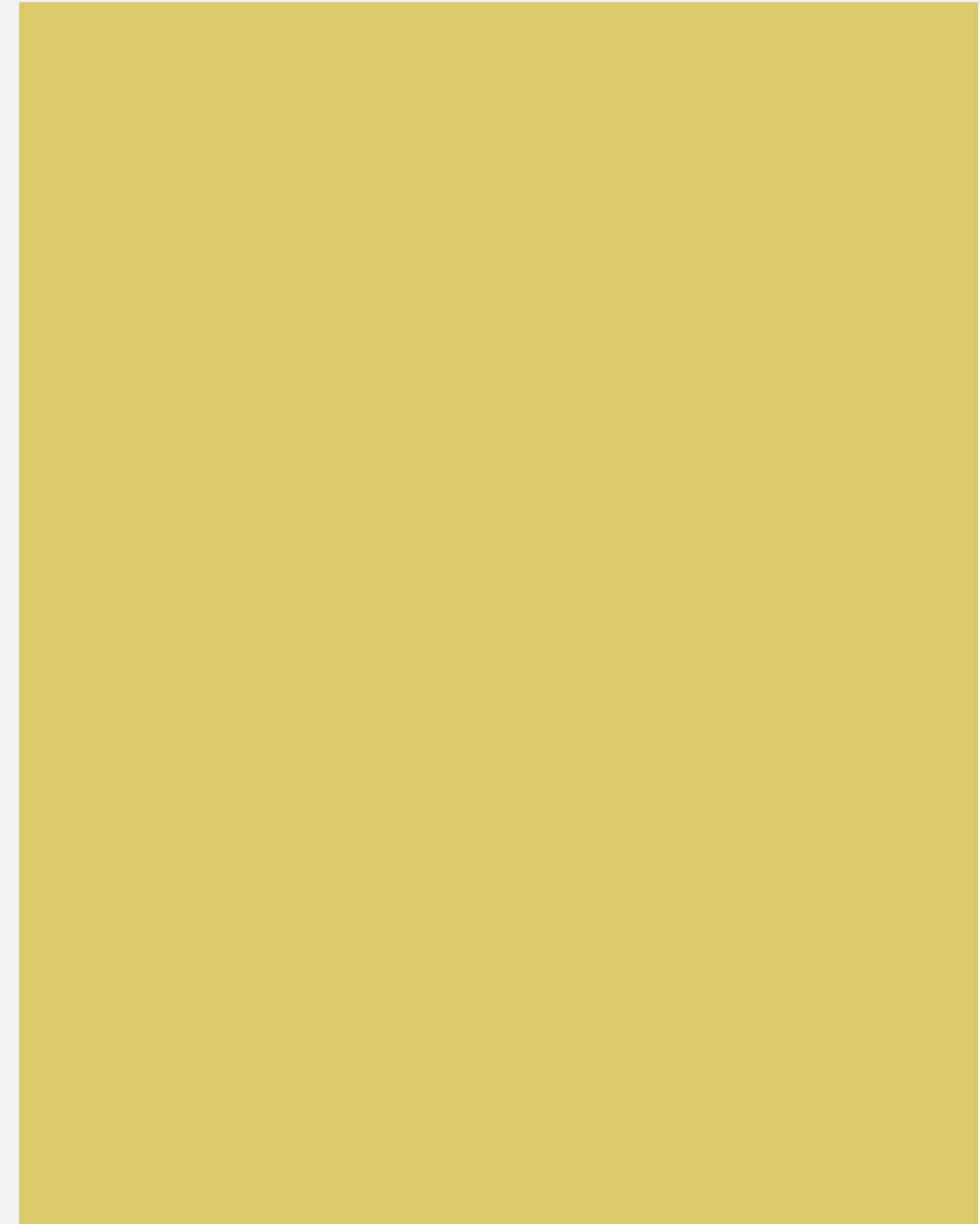
According to the [Rural Ontario Institute](#), from 2006 to 2016, the manufacturing sector demonstrated the largest decline in employment within non-metropolitan areas (a decline of 30%).<sup>16</sup> According to employers, skilled and temporary foreign workers remain in particularly short supply when compared to the more densely populated regions surrounding Greater Toronto Area.

Housing affordability is a dominating factor in an individual's choice of

employment as well as an organization’s ability to attract skilled and temporary foreign workers. While some interviewees indicated that living with extended family offered employees with affordable housing and child care solutions, housing affordability and accommodating child care solutions can make or break a job seeker’s decision to work for an organization. As a result, some employees choose to reside in co-housing situations in areas further from their place of work to make living more affordable.

Child care also presents a challenge specifically for shift workers. If an employee cannot rely on family members to meet their needs, shift work can also prevent them from accessing child care that is typically available during daytime working hours.

To address the rising cost of living and attract job seekers to their regions, some employers have begun providing employees with apartments as a transitive housing solution.



WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS AND EMPLOYERS DO TO MITIGATE HOUSING, CHILDCARE AND COST OF LIVING BARRIERS?

	POLICYMAKERS	EMPLOYERS
Continue to work towards housing and child care affordability and accessibility.	X	
Ensure child care options align with the needs of shift workers.	X	
Enhance flexibility for employees juggling family responsibilities.		X
Increase wages where possible.		X

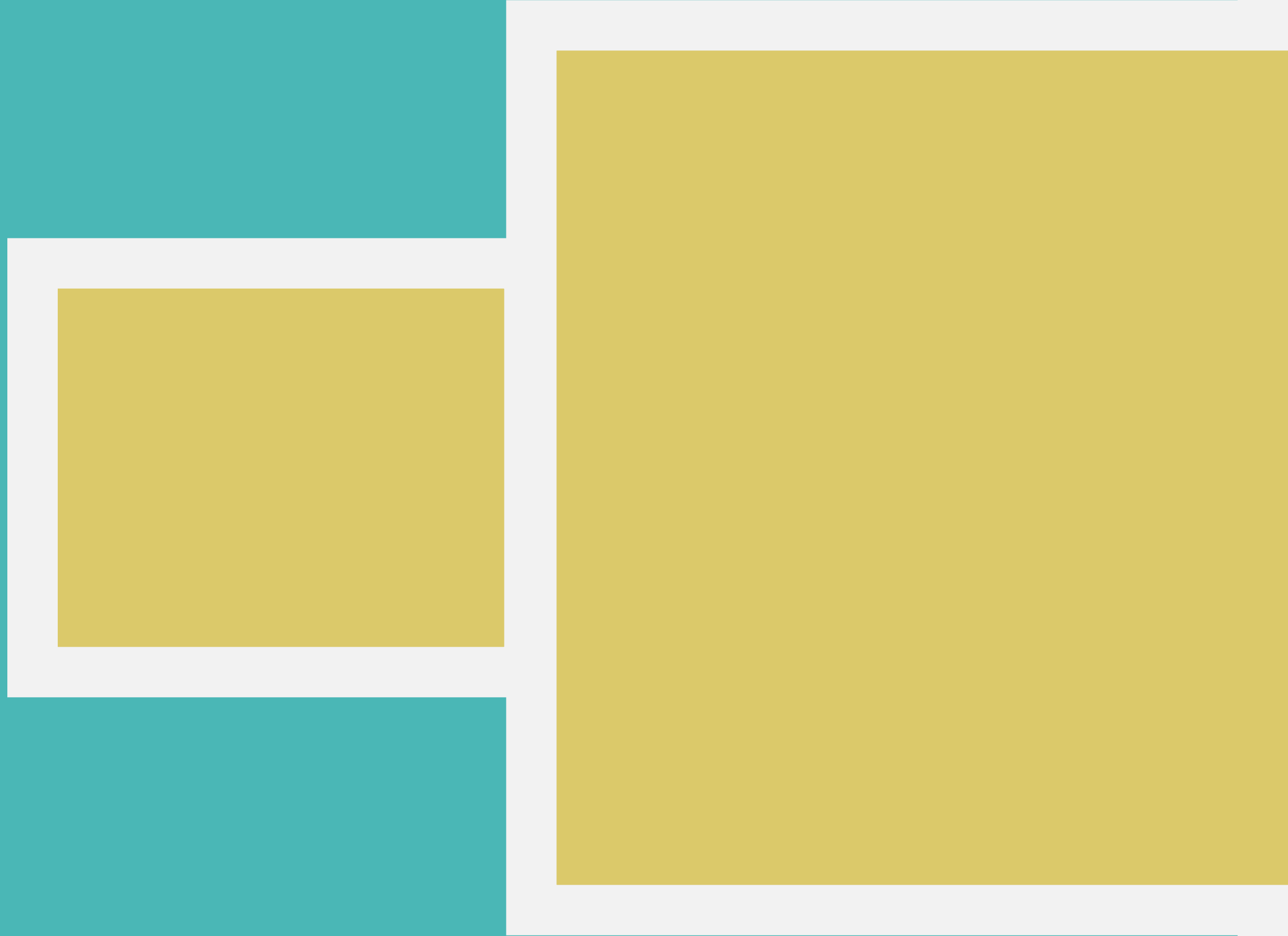
# COMPARISON.

## 1. RURAL

While still affected by Ontario's soaring housing market, rural regions benefit from historically more affordable housing options available to employees. Meanwhile, it is notably challenging for employees performing shift work to find accommodating child care options regardless of the region.

## 2. SEMI-URBAN

Employers indicated the cost of housing and rising cost of living to be a significant barrier to employment, motivating some businesses to seek housing solutions such as purchasing units for employees to rent at affordable rates.



# PERCEPTIONS OF THE SECTOR & NATURE OF WORK.

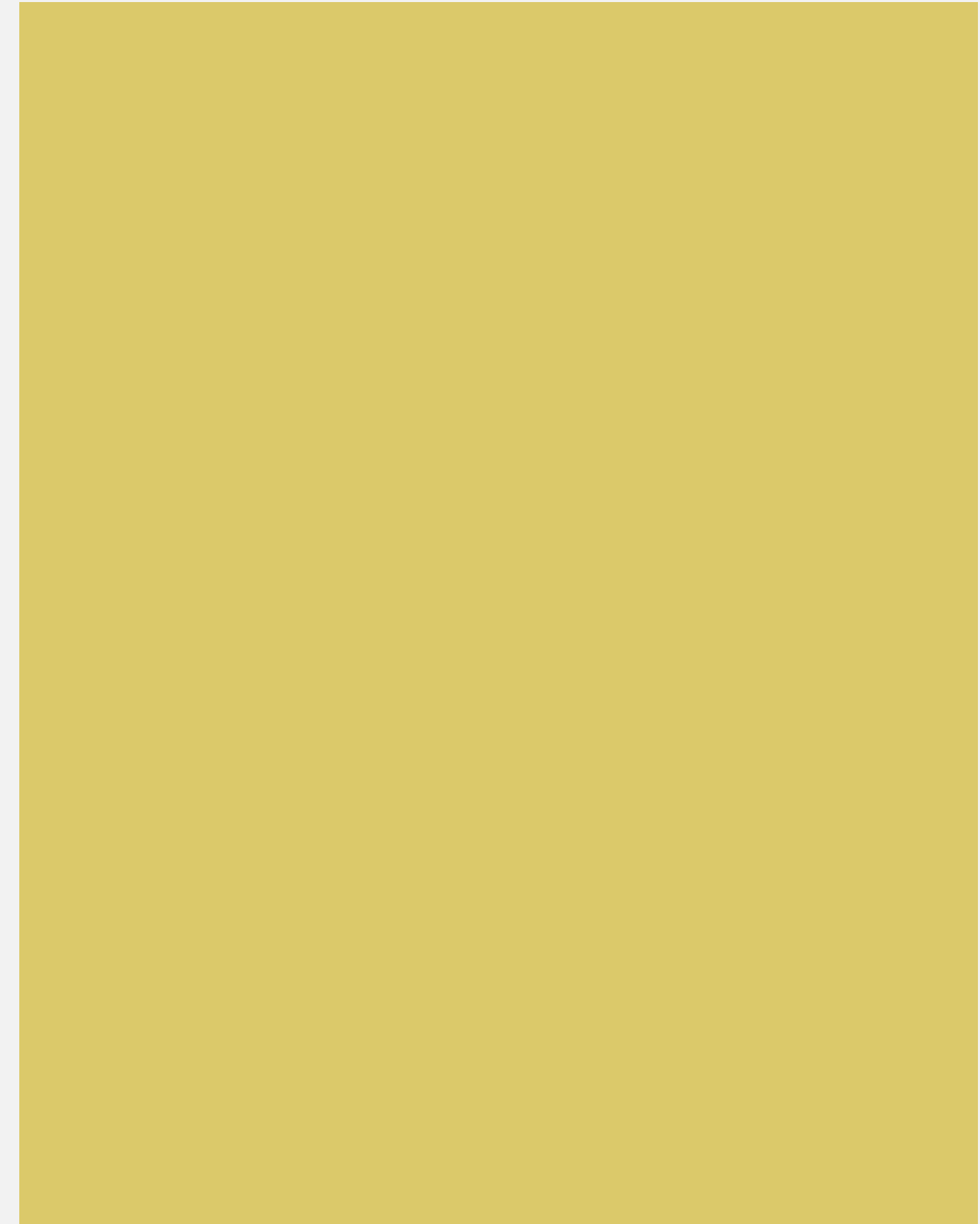
While an essential and valued role in every facility, the food and beverage processing industry offers far more opportunities than conventional production line jobs. Rather, few industries feature such a diverse array of exciting fields such as skilled trades, quality assurance, food safety, food science, research and development, engineering, sales and marketing, finance, human resources, and more. The sector is a cross-pollination of skillsets that makes it an ideal environment for advancement and innovation. However,



Ontarians tend to have little or no knowledge of the industry. Perceptions of the sector and nature of work are challenges that are experienced across the province.

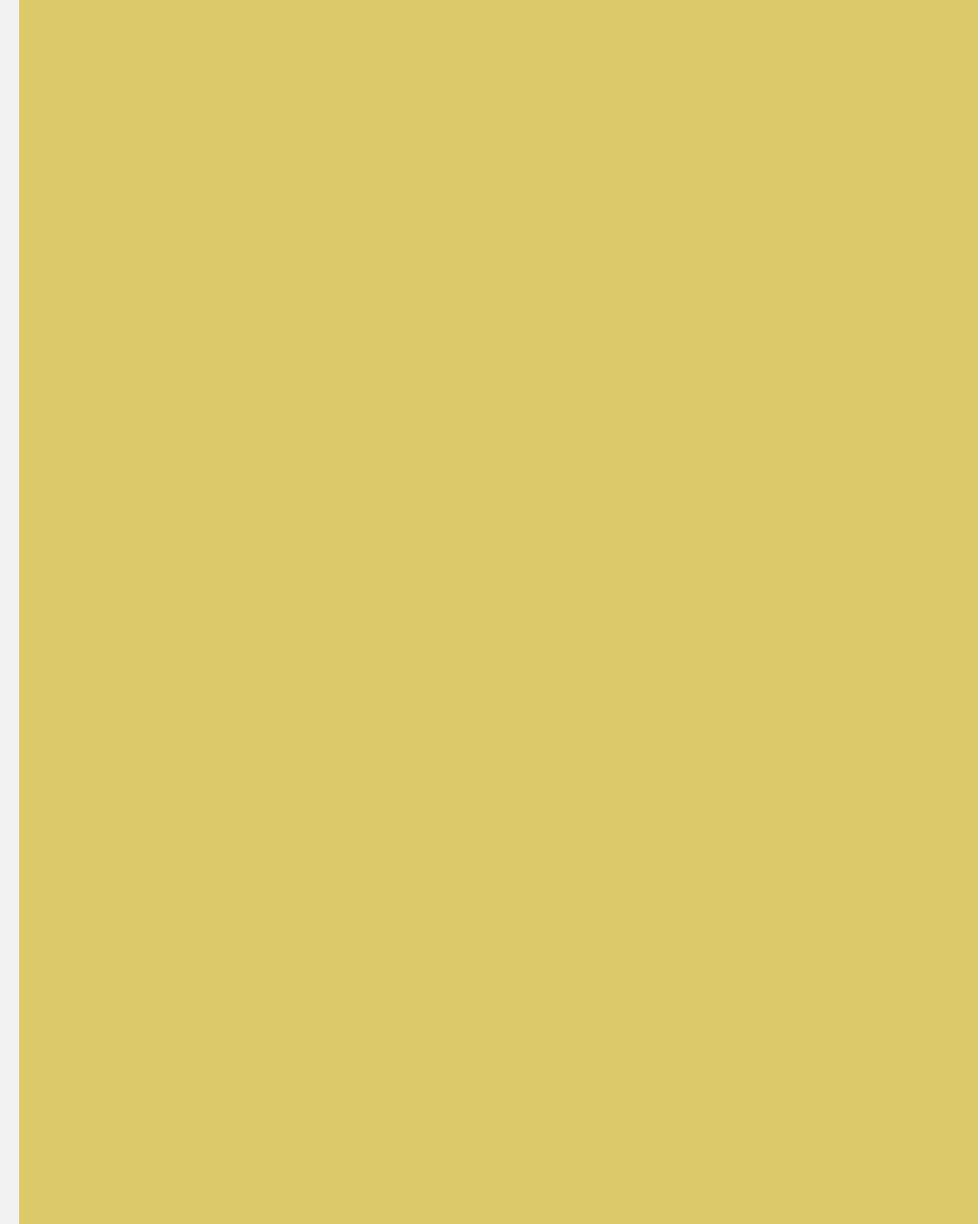
Despite the sector being a large employer, participants noted the sector does not have the same profile or recognition as other essential sectors. They indicated much more attention had been paid to other parts of the food supply chain, such as farming, food retail, and food service, which tend to be more top-of-mind for consumers. Participants suggested that accurate representation and promotion of Food and Beverage manufacturing as a critical sector by government would reinforce a sense of value and societal purpose.

Further, participants highlighted the critical role improvements in workplace and careers development play in attracting and retaining an essential workforce. Employers noted the importance of ensuring advertising and job



postings accurately reflect the nature of work, while onboarding processes properly support new hires to ensure employee success.

Upskilling and promoting internally are also highly appealing for employers as well as job seekers. It allows processors to locally source skilled workers for in demand jobs across their organizations. As a result, employers also noted they are working to highlight the growth opportunities at their facilities, which is often overlooked by employment agencies and those unfamiliar with the sector.



PERCEPTIONS OF THE SECTOR,  
& THE NATURE OF WORK

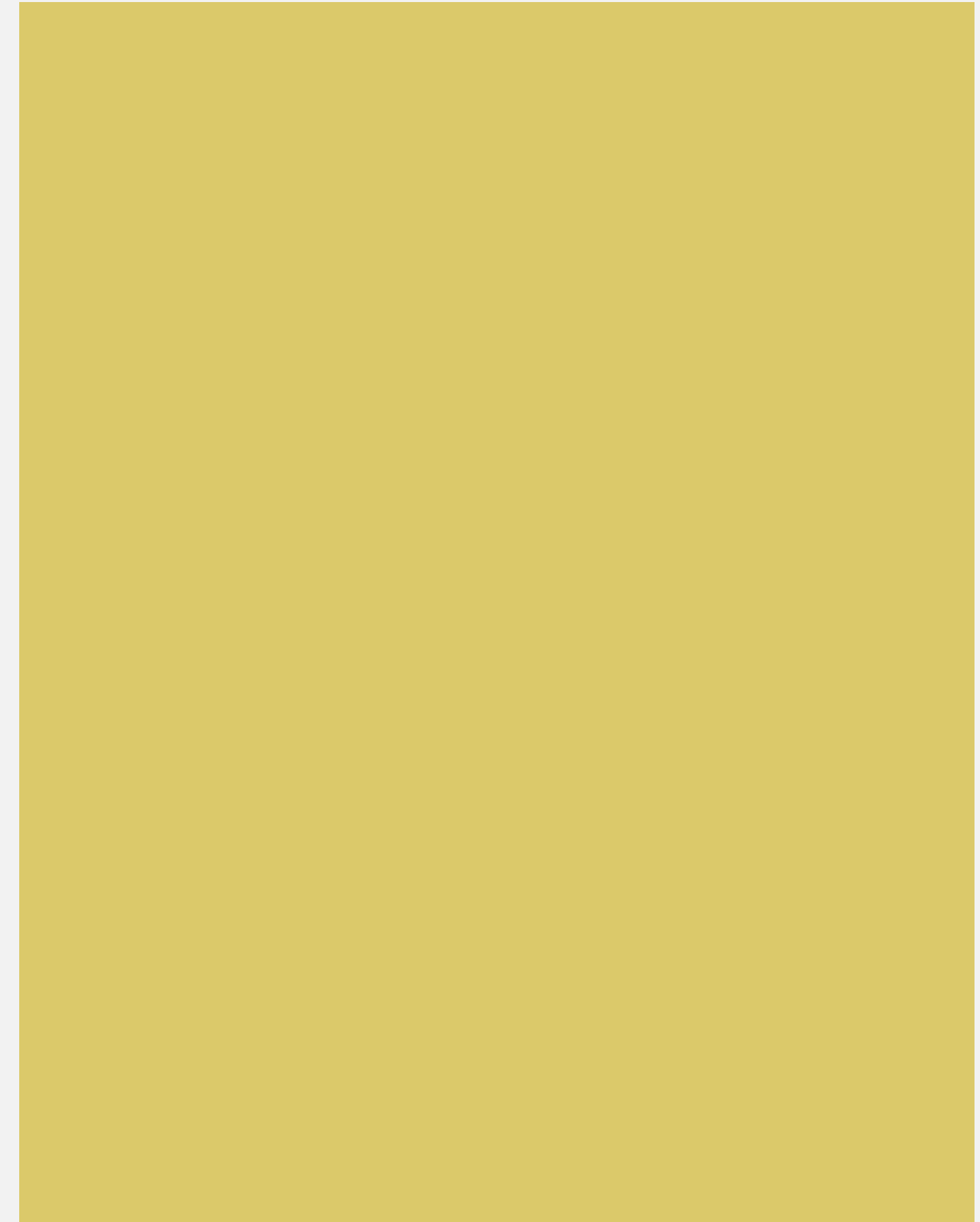
	POLICYMAKERS	EMPLOYERS	POST-SECONDARY	ORGANIZATIONS HELPING JOB SEEKERS AND NEWCOMERS
Educate job seekers and employment consultants about the F&B manufacturing sector, the various positions within the sector, the nature of the work, and advancement opportunities.	X	X	X	X
Share virtual tours of facilities, promote job vacancies on company websites, and/or share videos of current employees discussing their success stories and career trajectories to address negative perceptions.		X		
Offer job shadowing for employees looking to advance within the sector and multi-generational cross-training for young apprentices to learn from experienced journeypersons.		X		X
Encourage managers/supervisors to discuss career goals with employees to support retention and advancement.		X		
Elevate the profile of the F&B manufacturing sector when discussing issues facing Ontario's agri-food sector.	X			
Improve awareness of the F&B manufacturing sector among high school students through outreach and job fairs to highlight the sector's importance and showcase innovation and career opportunities within the sector.	X	X		
Continue to invest in training and upskilling programs to keep pace with the automation, digitization, and other innovations in the F&B manufacturing sector.	X	X	X	
Improve awareness among employers of relevant post-secondary programs and community and non-profit organizations that support job seekers and newcomers.	X	X	X	
Facilitate/develop partnerships between employers and post-secondary institutions offering programs and courses relevant to the F&B manufacturing sector to build the talent pipeline.	X	X	X	
Integrate F&B post-secondary programs into other in-demand programs (e.g., engineering) to attract a wider talent pool to the sector.	X		X	

# THE CHANGING LABOUR MARKET.

As employers across sectors compete in a limited labour pool, all participants expressed concerns about attracting talent to the industry in today's labour market. Shortages are particularly acute in frontline production and apprenticeship roles such as quality control technicians, millwrights, electricians, and other skilled trades. While the industry has been battling the challenges of labour shortages for several years, these issues were intensified with the onset of COVID-19. Employers expressed concerns about pandemic-related absences and labour shortages, putting additional pressure on existing employees to fulfill production targets. Recent analysis from FBO also

revealed long wait times to fill skilled labour positions, with an average of 7 months, and more than one quarter of employers experiencing wait times of 12 months or more.<sup>17</sup> These shortages have a compounding effect on employers and their staff. The more skilled trade jobs an organization needs to fill, and the longer it takes to fill them, the more pressure is placed on current employees to keep operations running. As a result, employees are experiencing an elevated risk of burnout while producers are experiencing reduction in capacity and a loss in revenue.

The values and expectations of Ontario's workforce has also shifted in recent years. Employers noted there is undoubtedly a higher value on work-from-home positions and accommodations that offer greater work-life balance. They note wages are not always the deciding factor in employment decisions, citing examples of employees taking lower-paying jobs in favour



of more accommodating shift times, proximity to work, or flexible hours. While employers seek to adjust roles to support employer satisfaction and new expectations, they also recognize the gig economy and at-home work, which can be done in the comfort of home, poses a new and elevated risk to the sector's ability to attract new talent. To address this, processors are hopeful to see an industry led advertising initiative with refreshed messaging and an effort to promote the nature of work and the industry to younger demographics who don't fully understand the sector and opportunities of working at food and beverage manufacturing.



HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS, EMPLOYERS, AND POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS RESPOND TO LABOUR MARKET CHANGES?

	POLICYMAKERS	EMPLOYERS	POST-SECONDARY
Better communicate “why” a candidate should apply and “what’s in it for them” in job postings, provide candidates with flexibility regarding interview times to accommodate their schedules, and ensure the interview process is swift.		X	
Provide flexibility regarding vacation periods; consider different staffing models to attract newcomers looking for greater flexibility, and consider part-time roles to attract employees, post-secondary students, and international students with varying preferences of employment arrangements looking to work for the same firm in Ontario.		X	
Provide new hires with a smooth transition, review performance, promptly address issues, showcase career progression options, and consider cross-training opportunities to encourage retention.		X	
Develop positive workplace cultures to foster loyalty and consider perks (i.e., team building, wellness initiatives, lunches, gift cards, etc.) to attract and retain talent.		X	
Consider whether micro-credentials can be developed to equip job seekers with in-demand skills for careers in the F&B manufacturing sector.	X	X	X
Generate more awareness of F&B post-secondary programs among employers to fill job vacancies and apprenticeships roles.	X		X

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# ENDNOTES



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