

**Connecting newcomers to jobs in the trades**

**A United Way initiative helped Syed find a new career in the construction industry**

When Syed first arrived in the GTA in December 2021, he struggled to find a full-time job. He had a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering and a master’s in project management, but his credentials weren’t recognized in his new home.

“When I came to Canada, there was nothing for me to do because my education was from another country,” he says. “I started delivering food on my bike. It was -28°C outside, and my beard was all white, my eyelashes were all white. It was hard.”

Despite the freezing temperatures, Syed was determined. He wanted to help provide for his family, and at that moment, this was the only way. But he continued to seek more secure work. He started seeing a career counsellor at a United Way-funded organization who introduced him to Aecon-Golden Mile, one of five projects to come out of the Inclusive Local Economic Opportunity Initiative (ILEO) convened by United Way Greater Toronto and BMO.

Aecon-Golden Mile, or A-GM, is a construction joint venture between Aecon Group Inc. and the Centre for Inclusive Economic Opportunity (CIEO). As part of the venture, CIEO, a non-profit organization comprised of 10 community agencies, provides training and job pathways in the construction industry for local residents. Like all of ILEO’s initiatives, the goal is to help residents take advantage of opportunities created by development and infrastructure projects coming to the area.

“I came to know that Aecon and A-GM are providing people here in the Golden Mile more opportunities to secure professional and labour jobs,” Syed says. “I knew that these were big companies, and I would eventually find an opportunity to grow in my career.”

Syed applied to the program and quickly got a call back. He was excited that he was finally on the path to the career he had envisioned for himself.

He did six weeks of training, where he got experience with everything from hydrovac trucks to installing fibre optic cable into homes. He thrived in the program and was appointed foreman during a placement where he worked for a telecom wire crew.

At the end of the program, he got a full-time job with A-GM. And when his education equivalency came through, he was able to move up within the organization. Today, he’s a project coordinator.

“That's a huge jump for me,” he says. “The position I am in right now is the start of my professional career. It’s what I was aiming for.”

Not only is Syed succeeding at work, but he’s now mentoring other newcomers who are going through the program—and encouraging more of his neighbours to sign up.

“There are a lot of talented people in the community who are looking to secure a professional job,” he says. “I would tell anyone who is interested to look into Aecon-Golden Mile seriously. There will be plenty more opportunities.”

Across the region, United Way funds almost 70 employment programs and is creating career pathways that respond to employer demands and ensure residents gain the skills they need to succeed in today’s labour market. That includes everything from a Mortgage Underwriter Program for Black youth facing barriers to employment to an employment social enterprise that provides training in technology refurbishments, sales and customer service to people living with mental illness.

These programs, paired with innovative initiatives like ILEO and United Way’s collaborative work with local government, labour partners and corporate partners, is helping more than 10,000 people improve their employment opportunities and financial security each year.

Like Syed, many have gained a sense of security and optimism and are building brighter futures for themselves.