

HOUSE OF COMMONS

GOVERNMENTS RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

The COVID-19 Pandemic has revealed cracks in our social safety net and the lack of a concentrated effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. An integrated response to youth homelessness is required that accelerates efforts towards ensuring communities are better equipped to respond.

A Way Home Canada's - COVID-19 Pandemic - Youth Homelessness Recommendations:

1. Identify and advance program interventions that focus specifically on intervening well before a young person experiences homelessness, and supporting youth to exit homelessness as rapidly as possible and in a sustainable way.
2. Provide multi-year program funding to service organizations to allow for sustainability of services to be prioritized at the community level.
3. Provide dedicated funding to organizations to prevent compassion fatigue, and support trauma informed care and continued learning.



INTRODUCTION

For many young people, the route into homelessness is neither linear, nor experienced as a single event. Youth homelessness is usually the result of multiple, cumulative factors. Unfortunately, the reality of COVID-19 has highlighted the cracks in our social safety net. For young people, access to stable housing and support to cope during and after the crisis are essential. Meeting basic needs, navigating the housing and income support systems, staying connected to education/training, and receiving mental health support are ongoing priorities for youth that are made all the more vital and difficult during this state of emergency in Canada.

In many ways, the COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted the need for youth homelessness prevention measures to be foundational in communities' ability to respond to youth homelessness. [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) articulates the complexities and causes of youth homelessness and we predict those realities will only become more highlighted within the recovery phase of COVID-19 and moving forward. We know that youth are likely to experience multiple family ruptures and multiple episodes of living outside the home. At a population and community level, structural factors and systems failures can put youth and their families at risk of homelessness by shaping the opportunities available to them, and the barriers they encounter. Individual and relational factors (e.g., health challenges, intimate partner violence, brain injuries) have profound effects on young people's lives, the challenges they face, their well-being, and their responses to adversity, which in some cases contribute to an increased risk of homelessness¹.

We also know that youth serving organizations are innovating and adapting to respond to the needs of young people and their families. But these innovations and adaptations are coming at a cost. Organizations have needed to increase outreach to youth in housing, adopt a new focus on social and emotional wellbeing for clients and coordinate with other community organizations to ensure there are no disruptions in services and supports for youth and their families. Provincial/territorial guidelines for social distancing or public health standards has meant they have needed to adapt or reduce their housing programs. Change in real-time has left organizations strapped for resources.

¹ Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & Dej, E. (2018). *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness*. A. Buchnea (Ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

PROGRAMS THAT FOCUS ON PREVENTION MUST BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF FUNDING DECISIONS

Within the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, we must begin to foreground the emerging needs of community partners as they recalibrate their services in response to the urgent needs of young people and their families. Program models, that align with the Reaching Home - Canada's Homelessness Strategy, should be prioritized. These models include:

Youth Reconnect

[Youth Reconnect](#) is particularly well positioned to be the missing link in communities wanting to move in a more youth homelessness prevention-focused direction. Youth Reconnect is a “place-based” intervention that is designed to enhance young peoples’ assets, self-sufficiency, and connections to meaningful adults, so that they remain attached to community and school. It is a preventive intervention that can be implemented in any community, and it is designed so that young people can access services where they are, instead of having to access supports in another community. Youth Reconnect looks to achieve the following four objectives:

- Keep young people “in place”- Youth will experience better outcomes if they are able to age in place with necessary support and don’t leave their “home” community.
- Stabilize their living situation - These efforts are intended to keep young people connected to school, friends, and meaningful adults in their lives – all of which are vital for positive youth development.
- Provide support to young people and their families - A truly effective response must consider opportunities to reconcile relationships that have become strained overtime from past or current conflict.
- Enhance school engagement - This suggests that keeping young people connected to schools can have a profound impact on a young person’s well-being, family relations, and their risk of homelessness.

Housing First for Youth

[Housing First for Youth](#) (HF4Y) can support communities to expand their youth housing continuum and relieve pressure from congregate housing options (youth shelters) for youth who cannot return home. HF4Y is an adaptation of the well-established Housing First approach to addressing homelessness. Housing First programs – including the Pathways model and the At Home/Chez Soi project – have shown great success in addressing the needs of adults who experience homelessness by specifically prioritizing chronically homeless persons with significant

mental health and addictions issues. The adaptation of HF4Y is based on the understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adults, and therefore the solutions must be youth-focused. HF4Y is grounded in the belief that all young people have a right to housing and that those who have experienced homelessness will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.²

The core principles of HF4Y include:

1. A right to housing with no preconditions - HF4Y involves providing young people with assistance in obtaining safe, secure and permanent housing that meets their needs as quickly as possible.
2. Youth choice, youth voice and self-determination - As a rights-based, client-centred approach, HF4Y emphasizes youth choice regarding housing and supports.
3. Positive youth development and wellness orientation - For youth, a recovery orientation is not only embedded in an understanding of child and youth development, but must also account for the fact that many young people who wind up homelessness have experienced trauma.
4. Individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits - A client-driven approach recognizes that as individuals, all young people are unique, and so are their needs.
5. Social inclusion and community integration - HF4Y promotes social inclusion through helping young people build strengths, skills and relationships that will enable them to fully integrate into and participate in their community, in education and employment.

Together, these program models are backed by robust program model guides which support implementation, data collection, service delivery, training and technical assistance and evaluation. As key components of [The Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Demonstration Lab](#), they have proven how they can quickly adapt to the realities COVID-19 has presented and their flexibility within the context of communities' existing response to homelessness writ large.

SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMS WILL BE THE FOUNDATION OF COMMUNITY RECOVERY EFFORTS

In Canada, the response to youth homelessness is typically provided by a range of organizations (often not-for-profit) at the local level, with municipalities and other orders of government providing funding to organizations. Government funding for the most part is not integrated or coordinated from department to department which means organizations at the local level are

² Gaetz, Stephen. (2017). THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

forced to cobble together funding in hopes that it is sustainable. Organizations have begun to think about their future service delivery needs and the impact COVID-19 has had on their fundraising and philanthropic efforts. This means that organizations not only have immediate funding concerns but will likely experience longer term funding constraints.

A multi-year funding commitment would allow organizations to meaningfully plan and respond to this continued COVID-19 crises and recalibrate/seize opportunities to build internal and external capacity. This sustainability would allow for greater staff retention which means they can more seamlessly respond to new community problems, improve planning and allow for leadership development. It will take dedicated resources (people, time, space, funding) to move forward with youth homelessness prevention and starting with Youth Reconnect and Housing First for Youth offers important building blocks for each community in Canada. Communities want and will need to adapt their approach, but without adequate funding to do so, they run the risk of this not being prioritized. As time wears on and more young people are not able to connect with the timely and appropriate services they need, the likelihood that these youth will go on to become entrenched in homelessness and housing precarity increases. It is important to invest in supporting communities to make calculated changes and implement new approaches that will reduce both the number of youth that end up in emergency situations and the social and financial toll of homelessness and housing precarity.

[The Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Demonstration Lab](#) (MtS DEMS) has shown the importance of supporting multi-year, collaborative projects that work to prototype and test approaches to support the prevention of and facilitate sustainable exits from homelessness. The delivery of services as well as the research and evaluation of these demonstration projects, which is funded by the Employment and Social Development Canada as part of the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS), has yielded important resources which can and will accelerate on-the-ground application of Youth Reconnect and Housing First for Youth in communities. Led by A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and powered by countless individuals working in policy, planning, research, and practice who have committed their careers to improving the wellbeing of youth, the infrastructure is there to support real change on the ground. As we make progress towards understanding what kinds of programs and practices lead to better outcomes for young people, we can factor in how those outcomes translate into public policy and how they can inform a range of department mandates.

THE STRENGTH OF THE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SECTOR RELIES ON ITS PEOPLE

The view, through the eyes of practitioners, youth workers, case-managers and organizational leaders, of the front-line in response to COVID-19 is nothing short of terrifying. Organizations

gripped with ensuring youth don't lose hope, lose connection and spiral backwards into risky lifestyles has meant they work longer days or short-staffed because of turnover or family requirements. Amidst all of this, innovation and collaboration have been thrust to the centre of their work and in many ways has meant new service models have emerged which demonstrates youth serving organizations readiness for change and preparedness for managing crises.

Burnout, vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue and PTSD among workers in the homeless-serving sector has been well documented. The challenges of working with homeless individuals, including the psychological stressors of working with clients who have/are experiencing trauma, addictions and mental illness, as well as the physical/environmental challenges staff tackled during the pandemic placed them at further risk. But the work isn't done. Within recovery, a looming second wave and then the rebuild phase, we must place a lens on staff wellness, opportunities for learning and organizations' ability to ensure their staff are supported.

We can safely predict that the needs of young people entering the homelessness system will become more complex following the pandemic. High rates of traumatic exposure among young people experiencing homelessness is the norm in the sector. Service providers often feel ill-equipped to understand and respond to the trauma-related needs of the young people they serve at the best of times. As with the organizations serving them, young people have needed to adapt during the pandemic, which can lead to further traumatization. Equipping organizations and their staff with the tools, training and support they need to respond to the new and emerging needs of the young people they serve will not only strengthen our response to youth homelessness but galvanize organizational capacity to respond to change.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring housing stability, re-attachment to school, increased awareness of mental health issues, family breakdown and navigation of social supports will need closer attention and dedicated resources during and after the pandemic. Our recommendations are interrelated and offer a path towards recovery and rebuilding communities with an eye towards sustainable and equitable service delivery.

Recommendations

1. Identify and advance program interventions that focus specifically on intervening well before a young person experiences homelessness, and supporting youth to exit homelessness as rapidly as possible and in a sustainable way.

2. Provide multi-year program funding to service organizations to allow for sustainability of services to be prioritized at the community level.
3. Provide dedicated funding to organizations to support compassion fatigue, trauma informed care and continued learning.

Canada has the opportunity to respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic with a concentrated and integrated effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. With it, we can accelerate a shift to the prevention of youth homelessness away from the current response which does not meet the needs of young people. If this crisis has taught us anything it is that supporting our most vulnerable has to be our primary focus.

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