Illuminating the Path from Probabilities to Possibilities

Light The Way Youth Homelessness Report



A COLLABORATIVE REPORT WRITTEN BY
YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERTISE


SEE THE good
BE THE light
MAKE THE difference

This report was written by youth with lived expertise of homelessness, mental health, substance use, the foster care system, many of whom identify as Indigenous or LGBTQ2S+. We wish to thank the contributions of all youth who lead the development of Light The Way: D, D, M, N, T, C, as well as all the youth currently or formerly involved with our partnering organizations whose voices shaped this project.

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Over the course of the year, this project has taken place across many lands in which most of us are visitors to, from our planning meetings, the conference, and the writing of this report.

We acknowledge the lands we gather to work on include the traditional and unceded territories of **Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc**, **T'exelc**, and **Xat'súll** within Secwépemc'ulucw, **kʷikʷəƛ̓əm** (Kwikwetlem), **səlilwətaɬ** (Tsleil-Waututh), **xʷməθkʷəy̓əm** (Musqueam), **Sḵwx̱wú7mesh** (Squamish), **q̓ić̓əy̓** (Katzie), **q’ʷa:ń ƛ̓’əń** (Kwantlen), **qiqéyt** (Qayqayt), and **Stó:lō** (Sto:lo) Nations.

We are grateful to these Nations for their stewardship and protection, past and present, of the land, water, and air that we all rely on.

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TRRUST Collective Young Leaders

The TRRUST Collective Young Leaders (CYL) is a group of young people with government care experience that guide every aspect of the TRRUST collective. Using their expertise alongside TRRUST the CYL advocate for better outcomes for youth aging out of the foster are system.

McCreary Youth Research Academy

The Youth Research Academy (YRA) is a group of diverse young people between the ages of 16 and 24 with experience of the government care system in BC. They have been hired by the McCreary Centre Society and are being trained in community-based research methods and work on projects of interest to youth in care and the agencies that serve them.

McCreary Centre Society's Youth Research Academy

Acknowledgements

VACFSS Youth Advisory Committee

The Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) comprises a cohort of 10-12 Indigenous youth who have personal experience with the child welfare system, and they are represented by the Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS). YAC's fundamental philosophy is grounded in the belief that young individuals not only have a right to express their perspectives within the context of their individual care but also within the broader framework of the care system designed to serve them. Furthermore, YAC plays a crucial role in ensuring that VACFSS incorporates the voices and insights of young people who have encountered the care system into its policies and initiatives.



The primary objective of the youth committee is to facilitate the successful transition of every young Indigenous leader from the care system into community. YAC is also deeply committed to enhancing social work practices and continuously nurturing Indigenous leadership and advocacy skills. Given the historical impact of colonial policies and practices on Indigenous communities, it is important to emphasize that the work undertaken by YAC is multifaceted, encompassing educational, cultural preservation, and acts of resistance initiatives.



VACFSS Cultural Coordinator Elder April Bennett for leading our opening prayer and a smudge circle with all conference attendees and presenters.

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Thank you to the **Light the Way Steering Committee** and the **Wellness Supports Committee** who were invaluable in providing guidance and wellness support to the youth during the conference.

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Aboriginal Housing Management Association
Celebrating 25 Years

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Last but not least, we extend our gratitude to our graphic facilitator **Kristen Elkow**, **Sam Bradd**, and **Drawing Change** for providing their support in capturing key moments during our conference through their beautiful illustrations.

And thank **YOU** for reading our report!

Authors' Message



This report is a conclusion to a four-year project started by Katherine McParland and Youth Against Youth Homelessness from A Way Home Kamloops Society. The original idea for the Light The Way project started as a grassroots local conference, eventually growing to a provincial scale resulting in the 'Light The Way Youth Homelessness Conference' hosted in 2023. This project started in 2019, where we hosted a '*Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit*' in 2021, followed by a 90-page report titled "*Honouring Katherine's Legacy to Light The Way Home*". This 2023 report is a written document of experiences from youth with lived expertise and solutions to inform government and service providers on issues surrounding youth homelessness in BC. The experiences we shared highlight the barriers youth face while navigating mental illness, disabilities, addictions, and inequalities during the housing crisis, bringing a specific focus to Indigenous youth voices. These barriers are factors that impact a youth's ability to secure and maintain employment, which is a key milestone in housing sustainability. We have worked together, rooted in action, to bring forward real stories and the similarities we share while navigating grief and trauma through the unprecedented circumstances we have faced over the last four years including a global pandemic and the loss of our beloved mentor, Katherine McParland. We continue to take steps in the right direction to carry on her legacy and honour our lived expertise in ensuring no youth experiences homelessness and can thrive and not just survive. The driving force behind all the work we do is to reduce, prevent, and end youth homelessness in BC. This report is a continuation of the many years of advocacy and hard work Katherine McParland and the youth who worked alongside her have put into ensuring youth in this province have accessibility to services, housing first, and a sense of belonging. We continue to light the way in Katherine's honour to ensure every youth in this province can and will find a way home.

- BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness Youth Advisory Committee

Dedication to Katherine



We dedicate this report to our beloved mentor and sister, the late **Katherine McParland** who brought us all together. Thank you for sending us signs along the way to let us know we are making you proud.



Executive Summary

This report, rooted in the invaluable lived expertise of youth homelessness, advocates for a comprehensive approach to tackle the multifaceted challenges that they encounter. The key recommendations outline a roadmap to foster a supportive environment that prioritizes housing stability, wellness, and equitable opportunities, with employment as a key milestone to housing sustainability. However, we know employment is not attainable or sustainable to many youth until the base issues outlined in this report are resolved. We discovered two major audiences for this report, service providers and government, thus have categorized the solutions in part two accordingly. It's important for the provincial government to read the recommendations listed in every section of this report, as many of them apply to both service providers and government, noting the non-profit sector requires government investment through sustainable, multi-year funding to actualize our solutions. Likewise, for these recommendations to be as impactful as needed, cross-ministerial collaboration and active collaboration with the non-profit sector is necessary. Outlined below are the provincial ministries whom we feel have a responsibility to the recommendations in this report.

- Ministry of Housing
- Ministry of Children and Family Development
- Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction
- Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions
- Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
- Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure
- Ministry of Labour
- Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills
- Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
- Ministry of Education and Child Care
- Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship
- Ministry of Health

As we recognized the different topics we spoke on were all interconnected, we broke down our most impactful experiences and the solutions we had throughout the report. These solutions vary with fifteen key recommendations in mind:

Listening to the Youth:
Central to our recommendations is the imperative to genuinely listen to the youth in meaningful and non-tokenizing ways. Our narratives form the cornerstone of understanding the complexities of youth homelessness. However, youth with lived expertise often experience harm from adults or authoritative figures, which negatively impacts their development and life. Thus, a youth's lived expertise must be supported and centered through a trauma-informed approach when creating policy and interventions as a youth's lived expertise is their factual reality. A major way to center youth voices is by giving them leadership jobs with a living wage for their work, wholehearted mentorship, and support in becoming active leaders in the work they do. This project, our 2021 Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit Report (YHPS), and Katherine McParland's 2020 From Marginalized to Magnified (FMTM) report, are examples of how to give youth a platform and leadership opportunities to drive necessary changes to end youth homelessness in BC.

Province Wide Recognition of 'Youth' up to the age of 30:
A critical aspect of our recommendations is the provincial acknowledgment of 'youth' up to the age of thirty.

Youth Housing First:
A fundamental pillar of our report is the Youth Housing First model. Recognizing stable housing as a catalyst for positive change, we advocate for the implementation of this approach across the board to ensure a safe and supportive foundation for youth exiting homelessness. We believe Housing First is a basic right and a key element of youth homelessness prevention.

Culturally Safe and Non-Punitive Housing:
Addressing the unique needs of youth, we emphasize the creation of culturally safe, stable, and non-punitive housing. This includes tailored solutions that acknowledge and respect diverse backgrounds, experiences, and supports youth with complex needs.

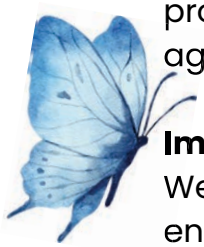


Protecting Youth Renters:
To mitigate exploitation and discrimination, we propose the addition of a youth-specific advocacy department of the Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB) to safeguard youth renters from the ages of 18 - 30. To combat current systems which provide inadequate support, are difficult to navigate, or otherwise inaccessible for youth due to lengthy processes and the use of non-youth friendly language, we recommend a youth-specific system informed by lived expertise. This should include accessible ways to increase awareness of youth's rights by adjusting existing resources to be more youth-friendly, provide support for youth in navigating all stages of housing by having hired staff who either have lived expertise themselves or whose jobs are specific to supporting youth, and enforce accountability on exploitative or discriminatory landlords. To curb unaffordable rent during the housing crisis, the RTB should also enforce strict measures to prevent disproportionately high rents for new renters in comparison to the average income of the lowest earning population in BC, which includes youth.

Pay Youth a Living Wage:
Recognizing the struggles faced by youth, we advocate for a living wage to ensure financial stability that supports them in maintaining long-term housing, covers the costs of living, and helps them escape the constant state survival. This extends to supporting access to financial aid programs and services for those aging out of care, as well as providing employment opportunities catered for youth with limited experience as it is a key component to housing sustainability. By increasing employment opportunities which build transferable skills, are career-focused, do not have extraneous requirements, and pay a livable wage, youth can be provided a sense of purpose and maintain long-term housing.

Youth-Specific Wraparound Services:
To cater to the diverse needs of youth, we highlight the importance of wraparound services ensuring that every door is the right door. This would mean a youth could walk into any applicable service organization, ask for help, and be directed to and connected with the right resources through a collaborative community approach and a continuum of services. Options with 24/7 access and life skills development would help ensure a youth's needs are met without sacrificing food, education, employment, or housing.

Financial Equity for Youth In and From Care:
Recognizing the financial barriers that often accompany "aging out" of government care, this report recommends extending access to financial aid programs to support all youth in and from care, irrespective of the duration and age.





Implement Katherine's Law:
We recommend the creation of a legal duty for the provincial government to ensure no young person "ages out" of government care without access to safe, appropriate, sustainable, and affordable housing with long-term after-care support. This includes providing financial aid, counselling, and other comprehensive supports to meet the complex needs of each individual youth and support a successful transition. Katherine's Law requires all provincial government ministries to act as parents, aunts, and uncles by providing youth in and from care coordinated, cross-ministry support that actively engages with health authorities and Delegated Aboriginal Agencies as needed.

Improved Access to ADHD and Autism Diagnosis:
A key need identified by youth is improved access to diagnostic assessments for **Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** and **Autism** for youth ages nineteen to thirty. This not only can provide prevention from falling through the cracks but also help youth receive the appropriate and adequate supports they need to thrive.

Research Focused on ADHD and Autism in Diverse Populations:
To address gaps in understanding, this report underscores the importance of increased research on ADHD and Autism within diverse populations. This emphasizes a need for more nuanced and culturally sensitive support for youth whose symptoms present differently from young white cis-gender boys, which is the main population the majority of research is based on.

Increasing PWD and Income Assistance Allowances:
To address the financial barriers faced by youth with lived experience of homelessness, mental illness, disability, or substance use, this report calls for a substantial increase in Persons with Disabilities (PWD) and Income Assistance to reflect rising costs of living. This financial bolstering is essential in providing a solid foundation for these youth to rebuild their lives.

Increase Funding for Substance Use Education and Services:
Addressing substance use, our report emphasizes the need for increased funding for adequate education and youth-specific harm reduction services, available in every community across the province. This involves greater funding for comprehensive substance use programs.

Decolonization and Reconciliation:
We call for true reconciliation and decolonization of systems impacting Indigenous youth, including the criminal justice system by reinvesting into community and restorative justice programs. We call on the provincial government to implement more meaningful reparations and provide long-term compensation for Indigenous Peoples, such as increasing Indigenous representation at decision-making tables, in policy development, and centering the voices of youth with lived expertise in these processes while also supporting youth in reconnecting with their community, culture, spirituality, heritage, language, and the land.

Defunding the Police and Community Reinvestment:
A radical shift in approach is proposed regarding law enforcement. We advocate for the defunding of the police and the dismantling of the criminal justice system as a colonial structure. Instead, funds should be reinvested in social services and community care to address the root causes of youth homelessness.

This report, crafted from the voices of those with lived experiences, presents a holistic strategy to address youth homelessness. By prioritizing housing, employment, and financial stability, alongside mental and physical wellness, and cultural safety we aspire to build a future where every youth has the opportunity to thrive.

"With great power comes great responsibility."
- Ben Parker (Spiderman)



Introduction

In this report, as informed and written by youth with lived expertise, we will explore and discuss solutions based on our experiences:

- The history of the Light The Way Project and the legacy of Katherine McParland;
- A summary of the activities at the Light the Way Conference (September 28th - 29th, 2023);
- Key solutions for government and service providers seeking to support youth facing homelessness to find sustainable employment, financial assistance, housing, mental health and substance use services, disability support, and access to diagnosis with a special focus on Indigenous youth voices; and
- Youth Voices of Resilience - calls to action from our youth leaders;

What is 'Light The Way'?

'Light The Way' (LTW) is a shared vision between youth with lived expertise who at least once have felt unable to find their way through the darkness they faced. Using our voices, we want to light the way and create a better future for youth to find a way home. Though we all come from different walks of life, we've all had similar experiences which form a mosaic. We carry pieces from those who are with us and those who have passed. As a family, we came together with a shared goal and vision to make a meaningful change.

Our goal is to bring awareness to the aspects of youth homelessness, why it is different from homelessness adults face, and how the pathways and barriers impact youth differently. We believe shining a light on youth homelessness will create a better future for youth because greater awareness will increase services and improve access to them. We want all youth to have a sense of purpose, belonging and to have their community wrapped around them.

2019: Youth Against Youth Homelessness

Our 'Light The Way' journey started in 2019, but for many of us, this path was illuminated years earlier. Some of us began walking the road of advocacy from a young age, others were introduced through a group called **Youth Against Youth**

Homelessness (YAYH) from **A Way Home Kamloops (AWHK)**; however, we all converged at a crossroads through meeting **Katherine McParland**. Katherine was a star that guided us through the darkness. When we looked up to her in the night sky and saw her shining light, we realized we were shining lights of our own or as she would say, 'rockstars.'

In 2019, YAYH wanted to create a local youth homelessness conference based in Kamloops, BC, having been inspired by a group of youth called **FLOH (Foster System, Life Promotion, Opioid Dialogue and Harm Reduction, and Homelessness)** for hosting their own youth-led conference in the Fraser Valley. YAYH collaborated with FLOH to determine how to host a local grassroots conference, which also inspired the work our late mentor Katherine McParland was doing for her Masters of Social Work Leadership practicum with the **Office of the Representative for Children and Youth (RCY)**.

2020: From Marginalized to Magnified

In 2020, Katherine completed her Masters of Social Work degree and released the resulting report from her practicum, '*From Marginalized to Magnified (FMTM): Youth Homelessness Solutions from Those with Lived Expertise*'. Our paths merged through this report, where she amplified the voices of over 231 youth from across the Province to identify key youth homelessness solutions for the provincial government. Whether we were working with Katherine as part of the leadership committee, **Youth Against Youth Homelessness BC (YAYH BC)**, or participating in a youth forum, we all were connected. This report was released through the RCY.

2020: Partnership with the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction

The experience of FMTM inspired Katherine to elevate youth voices further. In early 2020, she applied AWHK for funding through the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR) which is how our grassroots beginnings transformed and inspired the direction for this provincial project. This is how youth from YAYH BC and YAYH were brought together to bring the grassroots 'Light The Way' conference to a provincial scale.

2021: Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit

In our original contract with MSDPR we were to host an in-person conference in September 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic we had to adjust course. In lieu of an in-person event, we hosted a **Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit (YHPS)** in January 2021 and co-authored an 80-page report called '*The Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit Report: Honouring Katherine's Legacy to Light The Way Home*'. The YHPS was a solutions-focused virtual event that allowed us to share the work we had been doing since 2019/2020, to honour and remember Katherine McParland, and leave space for us to continue in a second part, which subsequently was the LTW Youth Homelessness Conference.

2023: Light The Way Conference

The **Light The Way Youth Homelessness Conference** was hosted on September 28th - 29th, 2023 with this report following its conclusion. This conference highlighted the voices and stories of diverse youth with lived expertise of homelessness, foster care, mental illness, disabilities, substance use, and how these experiences differ for Indigenous and LGBTQ2S+ youth. The voices of 25 additional youth were featured in the LTW Conference from the TRRUST Collective Young Leaders, McCreary Youth Research Academy, and VACFSS Youth Advisory Council. Together, we presented key recommendations for government and service providers related to youth homelessness, including solutions to support youth in finding and maintaining employment.

Leading up to the LTW Conference, we came together in-person for much overdue collective healing by re/connecting with the land and re-grounding our roots. Though it was different for everyone, our collective experience in having quiet space away from the noise of cities created an opportunity to reset our bodies and minds in a safe way. It was somatic healing that allowed space for our trauma to be felt in a non-harmful manner, surrounded by the love and support of one another. The experience drew us together, mending a bond loosened through the passage of time. Where the trail ended and thick forests stood in our way, we carved our own path together in this journey to light the way.

2024: Illuminating the Path from Probabilities to Possibilities

Though the curtain draws a close on our work started with Katherine, a new stage is before us. We went from working alongside Katherine in a collaborative effort to working to continue her legacy and honour the work previously done to get us here, ensuring it was seen to completion. Through this we have reminded ourselves of a steadfast strength that we can call on to overcome barriers as we remember the power of our light. We will walk in her stead, paving the way for youth to come and inspire youth to pave their own paths. We stand rooted in action, ready for this new challenge she prepared us for.



Who is Katherine McParland?

Katherine McParland is the late Executive Director and Founder of A Way Home Kamloops Society, a youth housing first organization that provides housing and wraparound services to youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness between the ages of 16-25 years old. She also co-founded the **BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness** in November of 2017, a provincial coalition of over 40 youth-serving non-profits and housing providers with the shared vision to end youth homelessness in BC. On December 5th, 2020, Katherine suddenly and tragically passed away.

For many youth she was like a sister - similar to those in and from government care - we carry a bond of alike circumstances. Katherine awarded us with family privilege to those of us who had little or none. She gave patience where she experienced little, unconditional love to those who lacked. When we told Katherine our stories, it might not have been the first time for some of us explaining what happened. She saw us and saw how the world had left us behind and she felt angry for us. She helped change our life trajectories, and realize our own self-worth. She made time for us when she had none. She gave us a place to speak and to advocate for others.

She showed us that we had a voice, even if we weren't ready to speak. She held space, a safe haven, where we could exist with no expectations. To define her existence, the lives she changed, and the impact she has made is a difficult feat. There are no words that we can use to fully summarize Katherine, in fact, a summarization does little justice to the full breadth of her name and story. Nevertheless, her accolades are deserving of recognition.

In recognition of her dedication to youth, Katherine received many accolades:

2018, YMCA Peace Medal
2018, Tedx Talk at Thompson Rivers University
2020, BCASW Heart of the Grasslands Award
2021, First Call Champion of Child & Youth Rights Award (posthumously)
2021, AimCanada Lifetime Mentorship Award For Youth Homelessness Advocacy (posthumously)
2021, BCNPHA Affordable Housing Champion Award (posthumously)



What is Youth Homelessness?

A portion of our knowledge on homelessness deals with our perception of it. In 2020 we spent time curating a definition for youth homelessness, as we believed the one prior to that was insufficient. In 2016, The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness defined youth homelessness as "the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence" (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). It proved necessary for us to redefine youth homelessness in March 2021 in the Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit report as we felt the language used implied youth are at fault for their circumstances and did not allow room to capture unique pathways to experiencing youth homelessness. This definition needs ongoing updates because the experiences of youth are diverse. For the 'Light The Way' project, we have redefined youth homelessness as the following:

> *"A youth between the ages thirteen to thirty experiencing inconsistent, inappropriate, unstable, unsafe, or unsuitable housing with or without parents, caregivers and/or support."*

We felt the previous definition was harmful because it excluded certain groups of youth. However, we acknowledge that everyone's experience of homelessness is unique and can never truly be put into words. We recommend the age of youth in this context to include persons up to thirty years old. The human brain has varying trajectories in development, sometimes not reaching maturity until upwards into the early 30s (van Blooijs, van den Boom, van der Aar, et al., 2023). Additionally, brain development at a young age can be affected by trauma, further delaying progress or if severe enough causing permanent damage. The precise wording is necessary to meet vastly different requirements for services. We must prove how desperate we are for help.

This definition still cannot capture the breadth of youth's experiences of homelessness and as such will need to evolve over time with society. To address the many facets of youth homelessness we must understand the pathways, barriers, and solutions to it, including employment as a milestone for housing sustainability. However, the intricacy of the issue requires prioritization of primary needs being met first to establish the foundation necessary for youth to obtain employment. With this in mind, we developed the conference to have panels exploring relevant topics on youth homelessness, including:

- An Employment Experts Q&A;
- Indigenous Voices (LTW Youth Leaders);
- Wellness and Disability (LTW Youth Leaders);
- Housing (LTW Youth Leaders);
- Substance Use and Harm Reduction (LTW Youth Leaders);
- Decolonizing Youth Homelessness (VACFSS YAC);
- Journey Maps (TRRUST CYL);
- Youth in Academic Research (McCreary Youth Research Academy)

We had a short presentation on the solutions that were highlighted in Katherine's 2020 report FMTM to emphasize little has changed. However, these solutions continue to be repeated in reports, presentations, and conferences like ours. We had thoughtful discussions during a World Café on the above topics with service providers, youth with lived experience, and government staff. In the next section, we have a summary of each panel presentation from the conference and have included the graphic recordings for the World Café and the FMTM presentation.

Photo: Youth Leaders holding Drawing Change graphic recordings





Photo: VACFSS Cultural Coordinator and Elder, April Bennett drumming for LTW Conference opening ceremony

Conference Panel Summaries

Youth Housing is a Right

In the Housing panel the youth brought forward solutions they had while sharing their lived expertise in living through the housing crisis, facing homelessness, in all forms, as well as housing insecurity.

While sharing, the youth described how a lack of awareness or education about housing rights, tenancy and life skills created a barrier for youth in and from care, as well as youth without family privilege. In relation to this youth receiving Persons with Disabilities Assistance (PWD) or Employment and Assistance (also known as Income Assistance) shared the barriers they faced while trying to obtain and keep housing due to earning exemptions. Likewise, when searching and applying for housing youth experience discrimination simply for being on financial assistance as it is often seen as an unstable form of income. Other discrimination youth faced included ableism, racism, and homophobia while trying to obtain housing.

Supporting youth in recovery from substance use is crucial to ensuring a housing first approach. It is essential to provide assistance without penalizing those already in recovery, instead meeting them at their current stage. While sharing their experiences, youth highlighted many solutions such as legislative changes provincially and organizational changes on a local scale. Some of these changes include increasing the age for youth, allowing individuals to access services as a youth up until thirty years old. This also includes helping youth who are aging out of care while working collaboratively to ensure a seamless transition. Other solutions specific to housing involve lowering the cost of rent, creating more youth-specific housing, and housing that allows pets.



Photo: Youth Keynote Panelists (left to right) Haley, Mel, Fialka, Angell, and Quintin

Youth Wellness & Disability in Homelessness

In the Wellness and Disability panel, youth spoke to their experiences of trauma from homelessness, housing insecurity, and how it has impacted their mental well-being. While sharing their diverse experiences in navigating the mental health system, youth highlighted common barriers to receiving adequate or appropriate services. They shared how having a mental illness or disability impacts their daily aspects of living, including food security, financial responsibilities, and transportation. Additionally, finding and maintaining housing is a challenge for youth with mental illness or disabilities due to the barriers associated with disproportionate rental costs and inadequate financial allowances given by programs such as Persons with Disabilities Assistance or Employment and Assistance (also known as Income Assistance). The youth provided solutions throughout their discussions to exemplify the ways youth can be better supported in the future.

Some solutions highlighted include having a trauma-informed lens in housing, providing youth a sense of permanency, and ensuring youth get early prevention/intervention support. Specifically, youth identified the importance of being able to access a psychiatrist before a mental health crisis. They also shared a need for increased funding to services, programs, and the staff who provide them, which could reduce or eliminate waitlists. Youth spoke to the necessity of seeing self-diagnosis as a valid tool for understanding diverse needs, emphasizing a self-diagnosis can be life-saving and critical for a youth's recovery. Better understanding of ADHD and Autism in the medical field for non-binary and trans individuals, and adult women over the age of nineteen could improve a youth's ability to access appropriate diagnosis, adequate support, and provide more streamlined entry to supportive housing.

Greater collaboration between organizations and provincial ministries is needed to provide wrap-around services for youth up to the age of thirty that teach life skills, assist in affording costs of living, and provide more low-barrier, youth-specific housing options. An additional solution youth highlighted is the need for systemic changes to the PWD and Income Assistance programs because their limitations on income perpetuates a cycle of poverty and denies youth the option of obtaining total financial independence. These changes would include increasing earning exemptions allowed on PWD, generating more support services for youth applying for PWD, and increasing the overall accessibility for receiving PWD. Ultimately, the needs of youth up to thirty must be taken seriously to properly address the ableism and ageism they face while navigating systems that impact youth with mental illness and disabilities most.



Photo: Substance Use & Harm Reduction Panelists (left to right) Fialka, Angell, Mel, and Haley

Substance Use & Harm Reduction

In the Substance Use and Harm Reduction panel, youth shared their experiences with recovery, sobriety, and how it correlates with youth homelessness. They provided solutions in which access to substance use and harm reduction services could be improved for youth up to the age of thirty. Their key solutions included cultural support and supporting youth in attending cultural events, specifically for Indigenous youth wanting to reconnect with their communities and land. Having an increased number of services that are culturally based, trauma-informed, and utilize values found in restorative justice would help youth.

Currently, education about addictions invalidates the experiences of youth who use normalized substances such as alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, caffeine, and other dopamine seeking methods. This resulted in shared experiences about not having an addiction taken seriously and the inability to access services due to "not being high risk". The lack of education about generational addiction and alcoholism also added an increased risk to developing a substance dependency that many youth don't understand is an addiction. By ensuring community resources provide zero-barrier support, youth can access safer options that reduce risk of overdose due to the toxic drug supply and harms associated with substance use. Some of these harms include self-medicating as a coping mechanism or improper pain treatment with prescription drugs. Having alternatives to narcotic pain relief and safer, more accessible, treatment options for youth could reduce the probability of developing an addiction in the future.

Early intervention and prevention were key themes shared by the youth, in particular, having comprehensive harm reduction education in schools. A common theme among all panels was having increased and continuous funding for services and government support to ease the burden on non-profits to provide sustainability. Youth recommended that the provincial government champion services such as youth-specific zero-barrier dry and wet housing, and youth-specific detox centres in all communities. Strengths-based approaches to substance use and harm reduction that connect youth to their communities are imperative to fostering a greater sense of belonging, purpose, and hope.

Indigenous Youth Voices

In the Indigenous panel three youth shared their experiences with colonization, growing up within the government system, as well as with homelessness and how their indigeneity has impacted their lived experiences.

The youth shared their stories to highlight how much is still needed to change, starting with proper reconciliation. They shared their solutions on what reconciliation looks like while highlighting the history and harm done through the Residential School system, criminal justice system, and in government-binded legal documents such as treaties. They recommended that the systems created to oppress them be dismantled and funding reinvested into community care, such as through social services.

They shared their thoughts on how Indigenous Peoples should be compensated for the historical and ongoing harms done, with further discussion on how decolonization should encompass all areas from government, service providers, housing, and financial reparations. Their presentation discussed solutions for culturally safe housing and the importance of keeping Indigenous children in their communities, highlighting that child welfare placements should be a collaborative effort between community, family, and a social worker with roots in their culture and/or community.

They emphasized by listening to youth and prioritizing true reconciliation would mean youth must be present in the government so they can help watch over their own people and any laws or regulations need to be put through Indigenous lenses first and foremost before it is sent to be reviewed and implemented.





Photo: Indigenous Voices Panelists Fialka, Angell, and Quintin with Carrie Louis from Indian Residential School Survivors Society

Employment Question & Answer Panel

The Employment Q&A highlighted recommendations from experts who work in the field of youth employment, such as WorkBC, local business leaders, and non-profit youth employment programs. Youth asked the panelists a series of questions, to hear in their own experiences, about how to better accommodate youth in finding and maintaining employment when exiting homelessness.

The panelists shared common areas of employment youth struggle as examples of how they've adjusted their policies or programs to accommodate the youth's needs. They emphasized that listening, learning, and committing to action leads to meaningful outcomes for youth. These changes included creating space and providing benefits to heal from trauma through increased counselling, providing more mental health days, and utilizing trauma-informed, person-centered approaches.

The panelists spoke about how providing youth with a positive environment that works for them is vital to employment sustainability. Additionally, supporting youth to build self-sufficiency requires an understanding about what that means to them followed by supporting a youth's pursuit in their long-term goals. The biggest takeaway panelists had was to not be afraid to ask, to be willing to adapt, and grow employment opportunities around youth's feedback and needs.

Thank to you the below panelists for sharing their expertise at the LTW Conference.



Angelina Oates
Aunt Leah's Place



Devin Gambler
Pamihtaw Consulting Inc.



Louise Wong
WorkBC


LIGHT THE WAY 2023
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE
MUSQUEAM
SQUAMISH
TSEIL-WAUTH
utmost respect as we walk on this TERRITORY
Let youth use the office address or phone # IF THEY DON'T HAVE ONE.
I'll take a message!
advocate FOR funding IT'S WHERE needed
ie. mental health days
SUPPORT YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES BY ADAPTING THE Program
Consider THE gig ECONOMY
FIND friendly EMPLOYERS
SUPPORTING + EMPLOYING YOUTH
YOUTH ARE LEADERS
sometimes IT'S LISTENING + empathy
Sometimes IT'S STEPPING IN
TALK TO EMPLOYERS IF YOUTH WANT YOU TO
mindset of habits leads to success
CHALLENGE THEM!
find a MENTOR
meet them WHERE THEY'RE at.
PERSON-INFORMED

Youth Voices of Resilience

In the Youth Voices of Resilience Keynote, youth shared their lived experiences of navigating adverse grief and trauma in losing their beloved mentor and sister-figure, Katherine McParland. With resiliency, the youth powered through the weight of the loss together, honouring their individual journeys of healing. Their stories highlighted how they met Katherine, how she empowered them to use their voices, and mentored them to become strong advocates using their own narratives. From their experiences, the youth explored how supports can show up for others like Katherine did for them, and shared their understanding of how service providers and government should be uplifting youth voices beyond token representation.

Governments and funders should ensure that service providers have the support and resources they need to truly make time and space for youth, like Katherine once did. However, we recognize for service providers to do what Katherine did, workloads would need to be divided equally and the responsibilities shared collaboratively amongst the organizations. To give all youth in our communities the support they deserve, the individuals providing services also need to be supported themselves. Katherine used her lived expertise as the driving force for change needed in the province, knowing many youth had words they couldn't say or yet voice. The panelists emphasized the importance of making the effort to understand the deeper meaning surrounding youth's struggles, the barriers they face, and how interconnected their experiences are within complex systems.

Katherine gave space for youth to reclaim their power and stories because she understood youth are our future. She inspired youth to lead the way, she didn't just advocate for youth leadership. Thus, an important solution is to reimagine what youth leadership looks like.

For years, youth have called for action; listening is no longer enough. It's time to recognize where power is being mishandled or inappropriately held, for current leaders to take a step back, and to instead have youth become the leaders they need. Empowering youth must go beyond listening and learning, by giving opportunities, support, and resources to be leaders of change themselves, such as mentoring youth into roles to become true decision-makers.



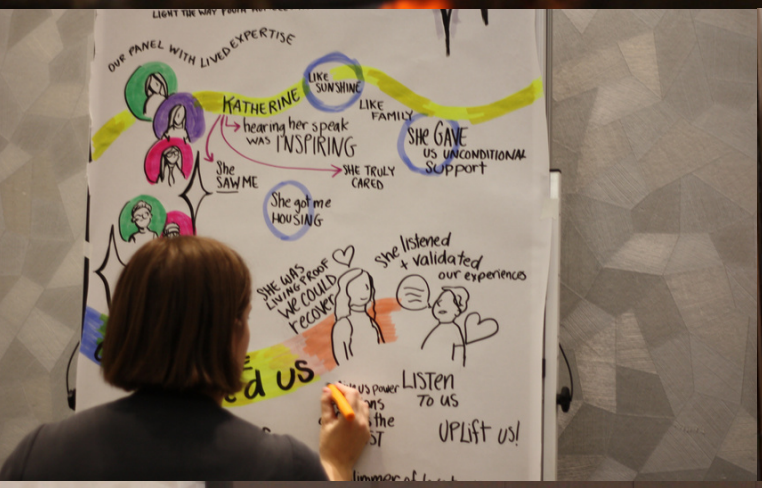
Photo: Stephen D'Souza with LTW/HSABC Youth Keynote Panelists (left to right) Kira, Haley, Mel, Fialka, and Quintin

Photos from LTW/HSABC Youth Keynote courtesy of HSABC













YOUTH

VOICES OF RESILIENCE

LIGHT THE WAY YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE 2023

OUR PANEL WITH LIVED EXPERTISE ~ IT'S REAL
give us a place at the table



KATHERINE

LIKE SUNSHINE

LIKE FAMILY

hearing her speak WAS INSPIRING

She SAW ME

SHE TRULY CARED

SHE GAVE US UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT

She got me HOUSING



LOOK AT THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF HER LEGACY

SHE WAS LIVING PROOF WE COULD RECOVER



she listened + validated our experiences



KATHERINE EMPOWERED US

Give us power
↳ Decisions affect us the MOST

LISTEN To us

UPLift us!

STAND WITH US
To end youth homelessness

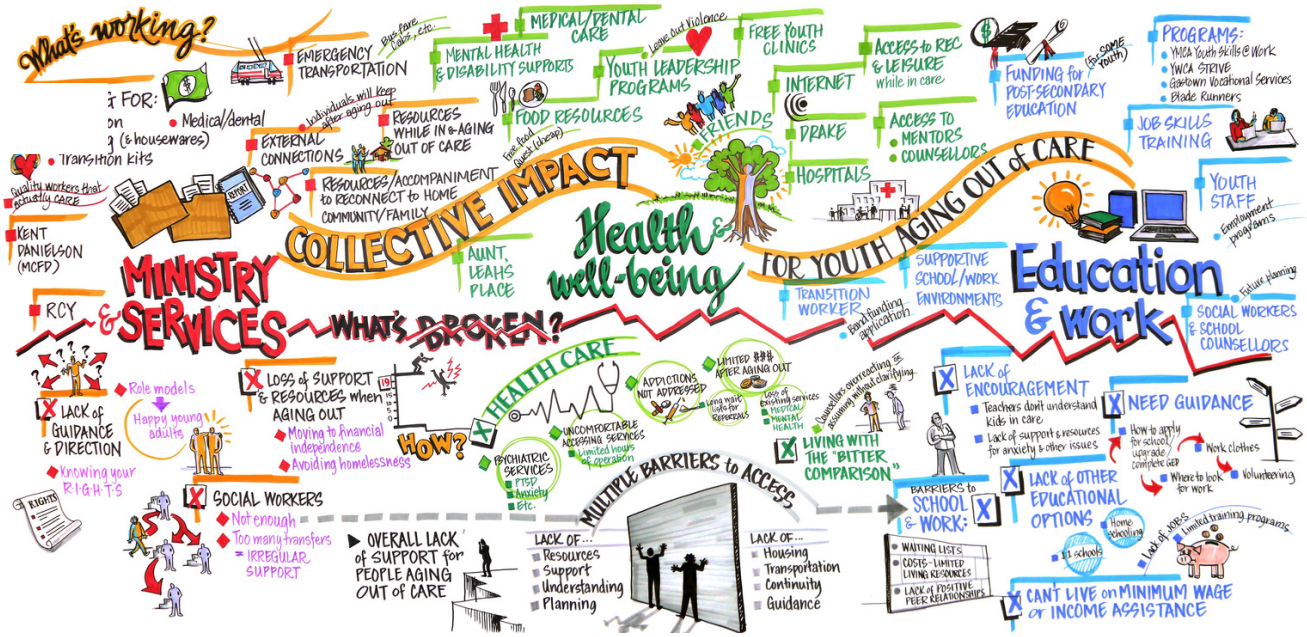
Be the glimmer of love to us as Katherine was.

Transition in Resources, Relationships, and Understanding Support Together (TRRUST) Collective Young Leaders (CYL): Journey Maps

Summary provided by TRRUST CYL

The TRRUST Collective Young leaders presented the 3rd rendition of the TRRUST collective Journey maps. The journey maps provide direction to TRRUST's work.

These journey maps were created by youth aged eighteen to twenty-four in July 2023 who came together to share their experiences aging out of care. In each focus area, youth identified what was working well as well as the barriers they came across. The youth were also asked what their perfect future would be for youth transitioning out of care. These stories were then turned into a stunning visual artifact by Avril Orloff.





Vancouver Aboriginal Children and Family Services Society (VACFSS) Youth Advisory Committee (YAC): Decolonizing Youth Homelessness

Summary provided by VACFSS Youth Advisory Committee

The Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) reflects on the profound significance of reconciliation as they engage with the Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS). They view today's opportunity to speak as an example of reconciliation, marking a shift from oppressive systemic interventions to empowerment and healing. YAC emphasizes the importance of acknowledging history, particularly the intergenerational trauma stemming from colonial violence, and integrating trauma-informed practices into supporting Indigenous youth. They advocate for a relationship-based framework in engagement, transparent practices, and a recognition of individuality to create effective, person-centered solutions.

YAC underscores the critical role of acknowledging and understanding their histories, especially the impact of residential schools. The committee advocates for a nuanced approach that respects the diverse voices and experiences of Indigenous youth, recognizing their entitlement to tailored support. The committee also emphasizes the need for reconciliation to include meaningful representation and the fulfillment of cultural and legislative rights for Indigenous children and youth.

The members highlight the importance of resources and tangible support, stressing that best social work practices must be complemented by youth-centered resources to prevent displacement and re-traumatization. They draw attention to the historic displacement experienced by Indigenous peoples, emphasizing the multiple moves children and youth undergo within the child welfare system.

Reconciliation, in the context of homelessness, involves recognizing historical and ongoing manifestations of chronic displacement. YAC stresses the need for secure housing, emphasizing the importance of belonging, safety, and meaningful relationships for the holistic development of Indigenous youth. They call for a decolonized perspective that views housing as a right, not a privilege, acknowledging the impact of past governmental policies and committing to ending the cycle of displacement.

The committee outlines principles for a decolonized model of youth housing, including community-driven solutions, trauma-informed support services, cultural preservation, and empowerment of Indigenous youth.

They emphasize the need for clear transition pathways, challenging the retraumatizing nature of temporary accommodations with stringent rules. YAC celebrates a partnership with Luma housing, offering a sustainable, subsidized housing pathway for Indigenous youth transitioning from care, which includes support meetings facilitated by Indigenous workers.

Finally, YAC values informal, supportive relationships and emphasizes the importance of a circle of supportive adults for urban Indigenous youth, countering social isolation and fostering sustainable support models without labels or power dynamics.

McCreary Youth Research Academy (YRA): Youth in Research

Summary provided by McCreary Youth Research Academy

McCreary Centre Society (McCreary) is a non-government not-for-profit committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation and community-based projects. McCreary's mission is to foster all aspects of youth health and positive development based on the strength of our research, evaluation, and engagement with youth and communities in the most culturally competent way possible.

The Youth Research Academy (YRA) is a group of youth from ages 16-24 who have experience with the government care system. The YRA are hired by McCreary to learn about the research process and work on projects that are of interest to youth in government care and the agencies that serve them. For the Light the Way Conference, we delivered a presentation titled '*Lighting the Way to youth-led research*'. As McCreary is a research organization, we were asked to share our perspectives on why we think youth-led research is important, and show how it can have an impact, particularly on issues such as youth homelessness.

We started our presentation by going over the goal and purpose of the YRA, which is to engage youth in all aspects of the research process. As YRA members, we initiate and direct data collection, do data analysis, and create key messages and disseminate the findings with support from adults. The presentation went on to share a few examples of how youth-led research can impact policy and practice.

The presentation then shared what we believe are some important aspects of youth-led research:

- Youth get to choose what is important to look at regarding youth, nothing about us without us.
- Youth get a say in what affects them.
- Gives youth a sense of belonging/importance.
- Helps provide skills for youth's futures, so they can get good jobs.
- Youth are the experts on what's going on for youth.

Finally, the presentation shared about two other major projects that the YRA has been involved in, the Youth Transitioning Out of Care Study and the Homeless Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey. In both of these examples, youth were involved in the whole research process, from design to dissemination. More information on these projects can be found on the McCreary website: www.mcs.bc.ca.

The presentation wrapped up with a video that included quotes from YRA alumni on what they think the importance of youth-led research is, and the hope that through these examples it is clear how youth can be successfully engaged as skilled partners in the research process and that this can lead to changes within the systems that interact with young people.

From Marginalized to Magnified: 4 Years Later

During the conference planning stages, the youth understood their work needed to build off pre-existing solutions from youth with lived expertise of homelessness. Given the relationship the youth had with Katherine McParland and the work she did for her Master of Social Work Leadership practicum, they felt it was important to continue where she started. Katherine worked with the Office of Representative for Children and Youth to bring together 231 youth with lived expertise throughout the province to create solutions that would help end youth homelessness in BC. These solutions and the stories shared by youth with lived expertise were shared in the 2020 report *'From Marginalized to Magnified (FMTM): Youth Homelessness Solutions from Those with Lived Expertise'*. This report brought forward a diverse range of solutions for government as informed by lived expertise, which the youth working on Light The Way believed to be foundational to creating meaningful change.

Through the work of the LTW Conference it was recognized that many solutions being voiced in 2023 were also voiced in 2020. The FMTM recommendations we highlighted at the LTW Conference are as follows:

"1. Listen to the youth: invest in lived expertise leadership!
"When given the opportunity to grow, homeless youth grow deep and sturdy roots. We need to engage with homeless youth to see what they as individuals need to grow those roots. And we need to be prepared to follow their lead as allies and advocates."

2. Access to a continuum of government-funded distinct youth housing options
"Housing first with harm reduction, designed to meet youth needs, not adult values."

3. Improve foster care placements to ensure they are providing appropriate supports to meet the needs of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness
"[I am tired of] paid relationships."

4. Change MCFD policies regarding Youth Agreements and aging out as a strategy to both prevent and respond to youth homelessness
"Help us find housing before we age out and have nowhere to go."

5. Increase cultural services available to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness
"Drumming, songs, dance, once a week for kids can change your life."

6.Improve emergency responses to youth homelessness
"I didn't need to freeze tonight."

7. Increase financial supports, including raising government income assistance rates and providing rental subsidies
"Poverty is a full-time job and doesn't give you time to do other things to get out of poverty."

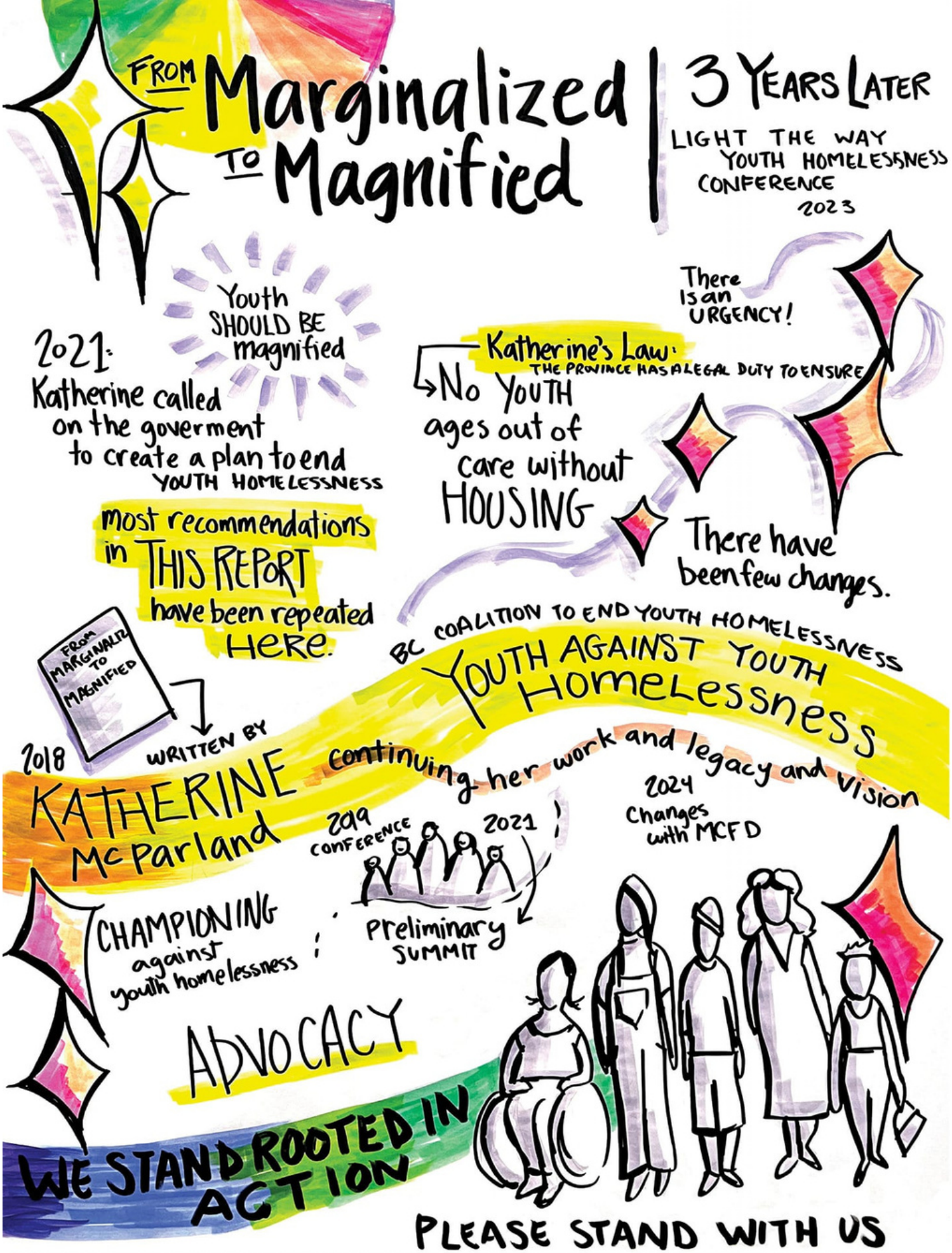
8. Increase the wraparound community support available for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness
"I wish someone was there to see bright things, [a] possibility for hope and housing. A supporting hand. Someone to reach out. This is not your life."

9. Foster young peoples' connections to natural supports and a sense of community
"Create a community for our youth aging out; ongoing support and [community] becomes your extended family. This is missing with our youth aging out of care and [is needed to] uplift them."

10. Improve education opportunities for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness
"Make [education] more accessible."

11. Increase opportunities for youth employment
"Programs that help to bridge the gap with employers."" (McParland, 2020).

In FMTM, the report "recommends that the provincial government, led by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, with assistance from other ministries and community organizations, create and implement an action plan to address youth homelessness. The plan should be informed by the solutions offered by the youth who participated in this review and government should continue to seek input from youth with lived expertise as well as the extensive network of service providers who work with them as it develops this plan" (McParland, 2020).


FROM Marginalized TO Magnified
3 YEARS LATER
LIGHT THE WAY YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE 2023
Youth SHOULD BE magnified
2021:
Katherine called on the goverment to create a plan to end YOUTH HOMELESSNESS
most recommendations in THIS REPORT have been repeated HERE.
Katherine's Law: THE PROVINCE HAS A LEGAL DUTY TO ENSURE
No YOUTH ages out of care without HOUSING
There is an URGENCY!
There have been few changes.
FROM MARGINALIZED TO MAGNIFIED
2018
WRITTEN BY
KATHERINE McParland
BC COALITION TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS
YOUTH AGAINST YOUTH Homelessness
continuing her work and legacy and vision
2019 CONFERENCE
2021
Preliminary SUMMIT
2024 Changes with MCFD
CHAMPIONING against youth homelessness
ADVOCACY
WE STAND ROOTED IN ACTION
PLEASE STAND WITH US

World Café Graphic Recording





The dream team!!
September 29th, 2023

Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit Report



Group hug!!!
September 29th, 2023

To Do:

- release report!
- see solutions implemented
- end youth homelessness
- ????

Employment Solutions

During the conference the young leaders asked a panel of employment experts specific questions related to supporting youth with employment to remove barriers to work. There were multiple recommendations voiced including:

- Listen to the youth!
- Utilize and help build on the youth's strengths
- Work from a person-centered approach
- Provide a Trauma informed environment
- Support youth to succeed, be a mentor
- Provide space to heal from trauma or crisis
- Provide mental health days as you would sick days
- Make interviews more like conversations in a relaxed environment



"Katherine empowered youth and created a safe work environment for us to be ourselves. Many of us saw Katherine as family, not just a boss or mentor. She worked tirelessly to ensure we felt like our lived experience mattered, ensuring we were at the forefront of the decisions being made about us, dedicated to making sure it wasn't done without us. She gave us the opportunity to build our careers around our lived expertise and passions. She always said, "Our most horrific experiences that cause the deepest wounds can sometimes become our life's greatest purpose." Katherine saw us as individuals and brought out the light in each one of us. She was humble, passionate, and committed to uplifting us and ensuring no youth felt left behind. Katherine listened, understood, and cared about us no matter what our experiences were. She always found a place for us to belong and truly made sure every youth could find a way home and empowered us to continue our work to light the way" (Hodgkinson, 2023).

This embodies the positive and empowering work environments youth strive in. When youth feel a sense of belonging in their workplace, they are motivated to work hard, have more confidence in their abilities and enjoy working. When youth can utilize their passions and lived expertise they are given the chance to build a career that gives them a sense of purpose and make a difference in the lives of others who have similar experiences. When employers want their employees to grow, they must create opportunities for youth to build skills, maintain their mental health and make a living wage. As employment is a key milestone to ensuring youth exiting homelessness can maintain their housing, thus it is crucial that youth don't have to work multiple jobs to survive and can prevent experiences of burnout at a young age.

Employing Youth with Lived Expertise

> *"Listen to the youth and put youth voices first. So often as adults we jump into problem solving but sometimes it's just about listening and creating space for youth." - Katherine McParland*

When working with youth with lived experience it is imperative to acknowledge their stories are their truth and are a valuable piece in advocating for change to improve systems youth navigate. It is honourable to recognize lived experience as a youth's expertise as they bring knowledge gained from firsthand experiences that others without would not have. Hence why we call it lived expertise. Creating space for youth to share their truth is a way of honouring their experiences and struggles while allowing them to feel valued, respected, and represented in the solutions brought forward. Neglecting to acknowledge this leads to censorship, tokenism, and invalidates the work and effort youth put in by sharing their stories with the hope and goal to create change.

How to Support Youth with Lived Expertise in Work

In preparation for this project, we understood employing youth with lived expertise, including complex trauma and those still processing tremendous loss, required having tailored support in place to ensure successful participation from beginning to end. Working from a trauma-informed lens is the core approach we took in this project, especially for those with trauma associated to the themes we explored in the work.

One of our biggest takeaways we learned was how having greater support on all levels for those working on the project, both as youth leaders and support staff would have been beneficial. This would have provided a necessary sense of stability and control over the work being done which in the long term would have had a positive outcome of our work. We believe this is due to the experience of losing pillars of our support network while working on both the preliminary summit and in person conference. For example, if we had consistent meetings set up with higher levels of staff or support for our conference we would have been able to prevent the feeling of isolation and fear of failing. Additionally, if we have more support staff in place to manage administrative tasks, our scheduling and time management could have been improved, had greater learning opportunities and workshops, and overall consistency in the work being done. This support would have allowed us to lean on the resources outside of the core group of youth, preventing barriers we experienced such as burnout and compassion fatigue.

This is an example of why it's important to ensure youth with lived expertise in employment are being fully supported because we can't always predict how trauma will manifest in the work itself. As such, when employing youth with lived experience, especially those voicing their lived expertise, there needs to be comprehensive assessments to understand the necessary supports for youth, those supporting the youth, what those supports look like, and how to implement them. Ensuring these supports are in place prior is a key preventative tool for youth employment. However, when unexpected needs arise having additional resources or means to provide outside support is crucial for swift crisis intervention.

Additionally, having greater opportunity for youth to meet in-person and collaborate consistently would have fostered a greater sense of cohesion and control over the quality, development, and delivery of the conference presentations. Being in-person provides a sense of belonging among peers, opening the door for improved learning, communication, and bonding. A key component to healing trauma and grief is connection, which we found our in-person healing trip to have provided such benefit. However, it would have been better to have had more than one of these, including the opportunity to bring all participating youth together in-person before the conference. Youth thrive in employment when they feel valued and have a sense of belonging with their peers, allowing their voices to be heard and create healthy, meaningful relationships that assist in employment skills development over time.



Photo: Memorial to Katherine McParland, Light The Way Youth Homelessness Conference, September 2023, Richmond, BC

Solutions for Government

Housing

Right now, British Columbians are facing a dire housing crisis. Youth experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable during this time as they are already at an increased risk of trauma, abuse, exploitation, overdose, and death (McParland, 2020). In this section, we wish to shed light on some of the key issues around housing and the solutions as informed by youth with lived expertise of homelessness. A lack of stable housing is a significant barrier to youth's success in employment: without safe, affordable, and sustainable housing, youth cannot find success in employment.

Recommendations

1. Provide training to landlords on the B.C Human Rights Code to uphold statutory laws that protect young renters from discriminatory, exploitative, and predatory housing practices.
2. Create a youth-specific team within the Residential Tenancy Branch that is focused on resolving youth-related disputes with landlords, improves accessibility of resources for youth, and employs youth with lived expertise.
3. The Ministry of Housing to work with the Residential Tenancy Branch to create caps on rent prices of all private rental units across the province, regardless of location, to help curb the disproportionately high cost of rent in BC.
4. The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction to broaden eligibility to be approved for Persons with Disability Assistance (PWD) and Income Assistance programs that consider youths' unique experiences and call for support.
5. Reduce the risk of discrimination against youth by landlords by developing a screening process for tenants applying for rental market housing that protects their identity.
6. Create and manage a system for housing or rental properties that prevents landlords discriminating against any religious or spiritual practices under the guise of 'tenant rules'
7. Raise the age limit for youth to age thirty in B.C and all its systems of support.
8. The Ministry of Housing to work with B.C Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to develop a waiver system to remove or reduce pet deposits for tenancy.

9. Provide more rental subsidies with low-barrier eligibility requirements that consider youths' unique experiences and call for support.
10. The Ministry of Education to provide comprehensive education on how to obtain housing in B.C. This education must include lessons on youth's rights so youth may advocate for themselves to landlords when securing housing.
11. The Ministry of Housing to mandate Municipalities to allocate a percentage of all housing units built in the province to be made specifically for youth up to the age of 30.
12. Municipalities across B.C to consider implementing strict rent caps in market-rental housing developments that are reserved for youth tenants.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of youth facing homelessness and unstable housing which have shaped our recommendations. The following themes emerged:

- Unsafe housing and exploitation
- Education and awareness
- Renovictions
- Youth rights and advocacy
- Youth-specific housing
- Experiences of discrimination
- Age limits
- Pet-friendly housing

Unsafe Housing & Exploitation

A key issue youth experience when navigating and finding housing are the risk of encountering exploitative or unsafe landlords. It was recommended that landlords should undergo rigorous training and be upheld to mandatory federal and provincial laws to protect renters from discriminatory, exploitative, or predatory housing practices. This hub could also act as a resource site for young renters to educate and be informed of their rights in youth-friendly language. Additionally, having greater government oversight could further prevent landlords from exploiting youth in housing due to their lack of knowledge of housing rights and processes for submitting complaints.

Education & Awareness

One major solution that all youth leaders at the conference highlighted was proper education and awareness of the resources available on tenant rights and housing rights. This strongly correlated with the discrimination youth face while finding housing and the exploitation youth face from landlords who take advantage of their age, lack of life skills and vulnerability. Through discussion, the youth explained how life skills and awareness of their rights go hand in hand with feeling safe and confident in their ability to advocate for themselves when applying for and maintaining housing. The education system could play a major factor in ensuring youth of all ages have the proper education on obtaining housing without having to access services to learn these skills or navigate the housing crisis without proper awareness of what is legal and illegal when talking to landlords and inquiring about securing housing.

When Angell transitioned out of homelessness, escaping an abusive relationship, she found the housing Katherine McParland placed her in to be helpful. Eventually, she transitioned to renting on her own. With the help of safe housing, a community of like-minded people, and programs all focused towards listening to youth voices, youth are able to grow and succeed in finding purpose and meaning.

Renovictions

An example that the youth shared included '***renovictions***', which is when landlords evict their tenants under the premise of renovating the unit. This method is a common way youth have shared to have experienced homelessness, as their landlords wish to evict their tenants to increase rent without any actual plans for renovations.

Many youth are unaware of their rights when being evicted due to renovations, such as their entitlement to portions of their money back and their ability to seek compensation when being evicted this way under false pretenses (Residential Tenancy Branch, n.d.).

Many youth are vulnerable in their housing situations and do not know how or where to start in advocating for their rights. Due to their vulnerability and risk of homelessness, a youth may take the first housing option available and end up renting a unit with damages which their landlord has no intention of fixing or repairing. With lack of awareness and education on the processes available in these circumstances, youth may be left to decide between staying in the unhealthy/unsafe unit or experience homelessness. As such, we recommend improved access and awareness to these measures using youth-friendly language and lenses to help youth better navigate these challenges.

Youth Rights & Advocacy

From the perspective and experiences of youth at the conference, there are seemingly far more resources available and protections for property owners versus renters, leaving youth renters vulnerable to exploitative housing. This is because youth have reported the current system, run by the Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB), is not youth-friendly to navigate or access. As a result, landlords who rent to youth, who don't know their rights and don't know they can ask questions, may be more likely to avoid accountability. It becomes a choice between keeping a roof over their head even if there are unsafe living conditions or being exposed to the elements and risking violence on the streets.

We recommend the implementation of a youth-specific advocacy team with the RTB, providing support for youth up to the age of 30. This team could employ youth with lived expertise, ensure the resources currently available are made more accessible and utilize youth-friendly language, and create more tailored resources specifically for youth renters. This team could provide urgent support to provide youth with understanding of their rights when a youth is threatened with an unlawful next day eviction.

The current RTB process can be lengthy and sometimes results in youth ending up on the streets. This team could also provide support when youth are threatened with legal action or once they've already been evicted illegally.

Additionally, to help curb the disproportionately high cost of rent, we recommend the Ministry of Housing works with the RTB to implement and enforce strict caps on rent prices (the price listed or asked of by landlords when filling a rental unit) across all forms of rental housing in BC, regardless of location. As an example, having a maximum allowed price landlords can ask for rent from new tenants, depending on unit size only. This is separate from the annual rental increase regulations already in place. Data compiled by rentals.ca supports this need as the average "asking rent" in Vancouver is $3055 while the average in all of BC is $2529. For a one-bedroom apartment in Vancouver specifically, the average asking rate is $2686 (Urbanation, 2024). This is not accessible for people on any financial assistance programs or youth with complex needs due to disability, illness, or trauma who are unable to work a full-time job. Even for youth working 40 hours per week on minimum wage ($16.75, making a monthly average of $2680 before tax deductions), the average rent is entirely unaffordable. This means youth in search of housing, especially those on fixed incomes, are left with few viable options and are at much greater risk of homelessness.

As it is now, the current norm for 'affordable' rental housing is dire. We have seen everything from subletting 'housing' that is not intended to be living spaces such as closets, living rooms divided by a curtain, sunrooms, 'live in girlfriends', to even someone subletting half of their bedroom mattress for $600. To say that the Province is experiencing a housing crisis is a severe understatement.

Youth-Specific Housing

Additional concerns were raised by Fialka pertaining to single room occupancy (SRO) units. At the conference, she spoke to how SROs often expose youth to substance use who may be recovering or seeking treatment from it themselves.

> *"Single room occupancy suites are not a safe place for youth to end up. No youth should have to question sobriety and life choices living in these cheap and affordable places"* (Jack-Flesh, 2023).

Gentrification of SROs is also an issue, seen to be pushing out vulnerable residents as the prices skyrocket. This is a prominent issue in Downtown Vancouver, with units meant to be affordable now being listed for over $1000 per month for a room resulting in 'unaffordable affordable housing' (Ballard, 2023). Fialka suggests the provincial government make it mandatory that a percentage of all housing units built in the province be made specifically for youth, so their only option isn't unsafe SROs. Additionally, she believes youth-specific housing needs to reflect truly affordable prices as youth do not always have the money to be able to afford current market rates. She recommends making shelter allowances on Income Assistance and Persons with Disabilities Assistance higher as nobody pays $500 for rent anymore, let alone does that amount cover anywhere near the average cost of rent as outlined in the previous section. She believes making these places safe and affordable would help with the growth and stability youth need to get back on their own two feet.

Ultimately, we need the provincial government to dedicate themselves to greater oversight and understanding towards youth. Financial aid should be flexible, based on a youth's circumstances, and given without the potential of negative outcomes due to retroactive decisions on eligibility. Income support is a vital part of helping youth search for and obtain employment, as it bridges the gap between homelessness and housing stability in the interim. This is especially true for those who have unstable work, disabilities that impact their ability to work more than a set number of hours, or jobs that pay under a livable wage. Without greater youth-friendly education on renter rights and existing processes, additional government enforcement on rental caps, renter protections, or improved landlord accountability, youth in need of housing will continue to be either discriminated against in the selection process, end up in exploitative housing, or homeless.

Solutions to Experiences of Discrimination

At the conference, speakers highlighted key ways to better protect youth in their tenancy and applications for rent. One solution included screening processes made specifically for people applying to housing in the rental market to protect their identities to reduce the risk of discrimination. Similarly, another solution was for the provincial government to create and manage a system for housing or rental properties that prevents landlords discriminating against any religious or spiritual practices under the guise of '**tenant rules**'. These 'tenant rules' are often rules created by the property owner for tenants to follow, which are usually seen on rental listings and included in the lease. One of the common experiences that result in youth not receiving housing is being judged by their appearance, oftentimes primarily their race and gender. Indigenous youth are the most discriminated against in terms of finding housing, often made to feel like outsiders on traditional lands. Based on youth's experiences, implicit biases and stereotypes still permeate general perceptions on Indigenous youth, thus its often seen by youth that landlords and building managers attribute skin colour to incorrect assumptions and biases for rental suitability.

In Quintin's words, this type of system would be run similarly to how realtors sell homes, but for renters there would be a middle person/worker who took the general information needed to apply for the housing and used this to get the person appropriate housing. This would prevent landlords from being able to judge applicants based on their appearance, age, sex/gender, race, or ethnicity. In the past, Quintin has completed over a hundred applications in a year, only to receive a small handful of replies and three walkthroughs of housing. This resulted in him only finding short term rentals, sublets, and unsafe housing which was not properly screened. However, if the screening process he suggested had been in place, he would have received safe housing sooner which would have benefited him earlier in life.

Photo: LTW Conference, September 2023, Richmond, BC



Age Limits

To better encompass everyone's needs until they are ready for independent living, the age limit for youth needs to be raised and recognized across Canada and all its systems being up to the age of thirty. This includes BC Housing and MCFD programs and mandates. There is a need for greater age limit flexibility so that youth with complex needs who require extended support can continue to receive life-saving services even after the age of thirty. With services across BC having varying age limits set for accessing them, youth who need support are often left with less options thus creating unnecessary barriers. However, if youth services were recognized up to thirty (when appropriate) and more flexible, youth who didn't have the privilege to access crucial services when they were younger could do so, plus those who need more time in their healing would not be abruptly cut off. Legally, people become adults when they reach the age of 19 in BC; however, everyone's brains develop at a different trajectory from one another, with some taking up until their 30s for their brain to fully mature (BBC, 2019)(van Blooijs, van den Boom, van der Aar, et al., 2023). This should be taken into consideration with age limits; however, it still does not account for those with delayed or impacted brain development due to trauma, disabilities, or mental illness.

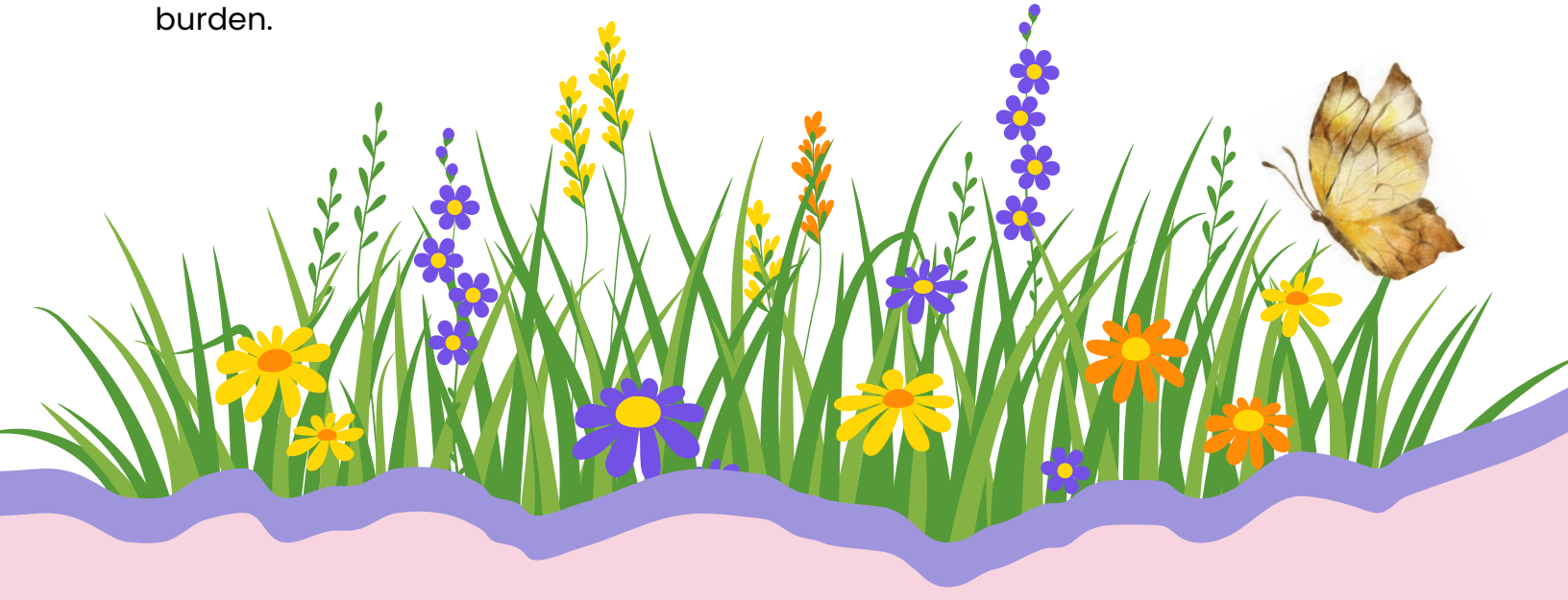
Pet-Friendly Housing

Throughout the conference youth shared that one barrier they experienced was the lack of pet-friendly housing. For many youth, having a pet can be a companion, a form of self-discipline, and accountability as well as a positive influence for their mental health. With the low rates of pet-free housing many youth have to sacrifice having their pet and experience homelessness or giving up their pet to obtain housing. Additionally, if a youth gets lucky and finds housing that allows pets, they have to pay one month's rent in deposits, for both the damage and pet deposit as most landlords ask for half a month's rent for both.

This often means youth face a financial barrier when applying and obtaining housing. One youth experienced this when she found herself homeless, but was fortunate to access the Langley Youth Hub where she was connected with a housing outreach worker and financial support to help pay both the damage and pet deposit, allowing her to be able to secure housing where she could keep her pets.

In another example, a youth encountered a landlord asking for a non-refundable $50 per month pet fee. When this youth went to issue a complaint through the RTB, though it was illegal, they were told no action could be taken as the youth wasn't already a tenant to the landlord. In the same period this youth was looking for housing, they encountered a landlord who asked for first and last month's rent in lieu of pet deposits and damage deposits which is illegal.

The three examples above provide context on how youth who are unaware of their rights or desperate for pet-friendly housing may end up exploited by landlords. Given the variety of ways uninformed youth may be taken advantage of when it comes to pet deposits, we recommend the Ministry of Housing to work with the B.C Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to either remove the requirement of pet deposits or drastically reduce the amount that can be requested to more inclusive to youth who rely on a companion animal for their wellness. Alternatively, introducing a pet deposit and damage deposit waiver program renters can apply for through BC Housing, could also help eliminate this burden.



Financial Solutions

Recommendations

1. All youth-serving Ministries to consider how to implement income support with no eligibility or reporting requirements for youth.
2. Raise the age of free transit to the age of thirty to improve access to school and employment.
3. Reduce the amount required for pet deposits to prevent youth homelessness.
4. Universal and open access to resources and supports for all youth in and from care across BC and other Provinces.
5. Increase eligibility to the Tuition Waiver Program by reducing or removing the 24-month requirement to have been in care.
6. Implement a process for youth to apply and become eligible for Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment (SAJE) that does not meet the standard eligibility requirement, which can be decided on a case-by-case basis.
7. Ministry of Children of Family Development (MCFD) to increase the quality and timeliness of SAJE Rental Supplement announcements to provide more notice for youth and their support workers to apply for subsidies.
8. MCFD to identify a calendar with key dates for future program announcements, especially rent subsidies.
9. MCFD to develop a process that enables youth to appeal decisions to reduce or eliminate the existing barriers and concerns within their youth outreach system.
10. Enable easier access to PWD support by developing resources that assist with how to fill out the application and any follow-up steps such as appeals and reporting.
11. Removing earning exemptions from all income subsidies in B.C.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of youth when navigating the financial barriers that impede access to employment and housing and discuss how they can be approved upon. In our discussion, the following themes emerged:

- Free transit
- Financial aid for youth from care
- Disability assistance

Financial solutions came up multiple times while youth were sharing their experiences. Youth in 2024 often have to work multiple jobs in order to maintain housing, pay their bills and afford necessities such as food, clothing and transportation. It was shared that subsidies and government assistance are options for youth but often have multiple barriers to accessing these solutions and many times contribute to a cycle of poverty rather than help youth make a living wage. Another topic discussed thoroughly was the idea of "affordable housing" and how the new buildings being built that are advertised as affordable aren't actually affordable for low-income individuals and those who are accessing government assistance. All youth shared how they are paying more than 30% of their income on rent, therefore having to choose between paying bills such as utilities or buying groceries for themselves. Youth at the conference supported the implementation of Universal Basic Income, which would provide much needed safety nets for those who need it most.

Free Transit

Many youth often have to access transit in order to get to work and school and by raising the age of free transit past the age of twelve, up to the age of thirty, through the "Get on Board" program could remove a financial burden many youth are facing as being able to work is imperative to reducing and preventing homelessness. In her home community while studying at the local university, Mel was afforded a semester bus pass. While in past years there was a gap between fall and winter semesters where she would have to pay out of pocket as the passes were deactivated; however, the university changed it to allow students to reactivate their passes thereby creating a bridge that has reduced financial barriers.

Photo: Substance Use & Harm Reduction Panelists (left to right) Haley, Mel, Quintin, and Angell



Financial Aid for Youth in and From Care

Youth in care often face more barriers as they don't have the **family privilege** of asking for financial help from a family member. With new legislation from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and the introduction of SAJE (Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment) Workers, transition plans are being better put in place for youth. Part of transition planning may include supporting youth to obtain a Youth Agreement (YA) or Agreements with Young Adults (AYA). However, many youth are denied AYAs and YAs despite demonstrating complex needs or being in crisis without clear understanding as to why. When youth are denied AYAs and YAs, their MCFD assistance is discontinued at age 19. One youth leader experienced this as their workers' lack of understanding on eligibility criteria for AYA led to them being needlessly denied. Despite being denied, the youth took initiative to begin an appeal process over a year later with support from an advocate from the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth. Through this, the decision was changed, and the youth received an AYA, which has since supported them in attending post-secondary school. They are currently in their 3rd year of studies.

Additionally, if a youth is in care in another province there are more barriers to accessing funds through a youth agreement due to the lack of coordination between provinces. This happened to Quintin, who like many youth, came from another province and found no access to resources that would have gotten him the help he needed to stay off the streets. When it comes to transferring from one province to another, as a youth in care, the amount of time needed to spend in care to be eligible for support is unrealistic and does not benefit any foster kids, current or former. The current processes in place increase the risk of homelessness to youth from care.

Youth in care also have the option of accessing a Tuition Waiver through the Provincial Tuition Waiver program available for "B.C students who are current or former youth in care studying full- or part-time at the undergraduate level at a BC public post-secondary institution, the Native Education College, or one of the approved union-based trades training providers" (StudentAid BC, 2023).

Historically, this program was difficult for youth from care to access, as they also had to be under the age of twenty-seven and have been in a former youth in care for a minimum of two years; however, the Province has recently eliminated the age cap, increased the amount of months funding can be received, and introduced a $3500 Learning For Future grant for expenses not covered by the tuition waiver (StudentAid BC, 2023).

As an example, and due to the recent legislative changes, Mel was pleased to be able to continue on her Agreements with Young Adults since the total months on program was extended to eighty-four months from forty-eight months. Because of this, she continued her journey in the social work program. Additionally, the Learning For Future grant was easy to access; however, she had noted that receiving a lump sum cheque could have lead to choosing between obtaining a computer or putting the grant money towards basic needs such as rent, healthy food, and menstrual products.

While these changes have reduced barriers for former youth in care of all ages to access post-secondary or equivalent training, there remains a requirement for youth to have been in government care for a minimum of twenty-four months, either consecutively or accumulated to be eligible. This leaves youth who do not meet those criteria without access to the Tuition Waiver program, thus being left to cover financial costs on their own. Due to this barrier, youth who entered care later in adolescence will choose not to pursue higher education because they lack the resources otherwise.

When Mel aged out of care at nineteen, she found her funding for her antidepressants had changed. Without a transition worker she was advised to apply for alternative funding. Since she didn't know this would be a concern, she was lacking funds to pay for her antidepressants causing her to go into withdrawal. While MCFD has rolled out the SAJE Workers to better support transition planning and help youth receive financial support, there is lack of communication and transparency over how both the new SAJE workers' roles work and rationale for decisions made. Though Mel recognizes that SAJE workers have a high caseload, it was still left up to her to navigate what services, such as counselling, worked best for her funding.

Additionally, not every youth is eligible for SAJE support, especially youth on Voluntary Care Agreements or Special Needs Agreements. “Without adequate housing or supports, their options for housing often put them at greater risk of abuse, violence, and sometimes increased their risk of exposure to active substance use. All of these influences can compound existing trauma, creating even greater difficulty in breaking cycles of abuse and poverty they may have been subjected to in their short lives“ (BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, 2024). We recommend that for youth who were initially denied SAJE, that would now be considered eligible, have a retroactive review for eligibility completed, especially when complex supports are needed.

Concerns also arise from the lack of adequate notice for when MCFD rental supplements are made available, leaving service providers scrambling to get all the necessary paperwork in order to support youth in their caseloads who require subsidies to maintain their housing (BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, 2024). Two weeks is an inadequate time frame for service providers to create and compile all the necessary documentation for youth, thus resulting in many youth who need or are eligible to receive the subsidy unable to submit an application in time. Improved communication, a regular calendar with dates for when subsidies will be released, and support for youth to appeal decisions is required to reduce or eliminate the existing barriers and concerns within the youth outreach system run by MCFD (BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, 2024).

Disability Assistance

Every financial support provided by the government, whether as a youth in care, a youth with employment barriers, or a youth with disabilities, has rigorous eligibility criteria creating multiple barriers in accessing financial support or leaving youth without any support at all. Youth at the conference shared their experience of applying for or receiving Persons with Disabilities status and benefits, highlighting the barriers associated with the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) and Income Assistance program.

> *"Getting PWD requires you to be able to access enough services to fill out all three sections of the application form which many youth don't have"* (Hodgkinson, 2023).

Creating easier access to PWD includes solutions like having resources readily available to fill out the application and support with any steps that follow submission such as the appeal process or completing monthly reports. A common experience for youth with mental illness and disabilities is working while at a higher risk of burnout; therefore, they benefit from PWD when they need prolonged time off of work. Disorders such as Bipolar Disorder, Anxiety, and disabilities such as ADHD and Autism can be unpredictable and harder to manage if a youth is facing crisis, burnout, or trauma, making it difficult and in some cases not possible to work, hence the importance of obtaining PWD.

However, a key issue shared was how being on government assistance programs, such as PWD, contributed to the cycle of poverty. One solution echoed by youth was increasing the amount of government assistance to a living wage by removing the earning exemptions (known by youth as the income cap) that essentially penalizes people for working beyond a certain wage. For single person households, this amount is equivalent to $16,200 annually or $1350 per month (Province of British Columbia, 2024).

Angell would describe herself as one of hundreds of domestic violence victims negatively impacted by the PWD earning exemptions when she was in a relationship with someone who made substantially more money than her. Their income was not equally shared, thus she still needed her PWD to survive; however, her funds were almost cut off all together because the total household income exceeded the exemption allowance. This forced her to depend on her partner financially and to become trapped in a codependent relationship. She has had a similar experience in a common law partnership that was abusive and controlling, which made it difficult for her to escape. From her experiences, she believes the PWD system in place does not support youth in a healthy way. She said, "It's like youth are too 'poor' but too 'rich' when barely scraping by with their current supports" (Olsen, 2023). Angell advocates the limit needs to be raised and the limitations adjusted.

With rental increases everywhere due to the housing crisis, it is impossible to survive off of only PWD, especially if you're in a single income household. For most youth who live alone, they can only get up to a maximum of $1,483.50 per month on PWD (Province of British Columbia, 2023), which as Angell highlighted, is still not enough to cover rent, utilities, and any other bills.

In Canada, the poverty line is measured by three scales, the Market Basket Measure (MBM), low-income cut-offs (LICO), and the low-income measure (LIM). Canada's Official Poverty Line, the MBM, measures poverty thresholds based on the cost of food, items, shelter, and transportation to reflect a basic standard of living for a family of four (Gustajtis and Heisz, 2023). The current thresholds reflect poverty trends from 2020 and 2021, where the 2022 provisional poverty thresholds in British Columbia range from $46,950 - $55,062 (Gustajtis and Heisz, 2023). However, this is reflective of a four-person household and not a single person household thus we also looked at the LICO measurements as they provide thresholds for 7 variant household sizes. The difference to LICO is that it is the approach to "estimate an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter and clothing" (Statistics Canada, n.d.), based on the 1992 Family Expenditures Survey. The 2021 LICO for single person households after tax in BC ranges from $14,915 to $22,801 (Statistic Canada, 2023). A youth receiving the maximum monthly PWD allowance ($1483.50) to an annual total of $17,802, would be considered living in poverty in any community larger than 30,000 people by the LICO measure as the poverty threshold for a single person household in communities of less than 30,000 is $17,070 annually (Statistic Canada, 2023). We know from lived experience that since 2021, the cost of living has only gotten higher, which begs the question if youth even in small or rural communities are also considered to be under the poverty line.



Photo: Mental Wellness and Disability Panel,
Light The Way Youth Homelessness Conference, September 2023, Richmond, BC



Katherine's Law

The BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness is currently working to bring forward legislation to ensure no youth in care ages out without safe, adequate, affordable and stable housing called Katherine's Law. This would mean the government would be accountable in requiring youth who age out of care don't fall through the cracks and experience the superhighway to homelessness. As Katherine said, "They taught me how to couch surf and sleep in strange places. I learned how to tote all my belongings in garbage bags. I learned how to be homeless at a quite young age through foster care" (McParland, 2018 cited Metcalfe, 2018).

"In implementing Katherine's Law, we urge the government to:

- Centre the voices and perspectives of youth with lived experience of aging out of government care. They are the experts on their own needs.
- Consult with youth with lived experience to define what "safe, appropriate, and sustainable" housing means, recognizing this may look different for each youth.
- Provide flexibility and choice for youth transitioning from care. No youth should be forced to accept housing or care provision they do not feel is appropriate for them.
- Commit to providing housing that meets the unique developmental needs of youth transitioning from care, adhering to the widely accepted best practice of Housing First for Youth.
- Make youth housing projects a priority under the Building BC programs and ensure youth leaving care receive priority for housing and rent supplements through BC Housing.
- Meet the unique transition needs of Indigenous youth in care, who are dramatically over-represented in the foster system and disproportionately at risk of homelessness in communities across BC.
- Partner with communities and youth-serving organizations to find appropriate solutions for the unique challenges facing communities across BC – including rural and remote communities" (BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, 2021).

Katherine's Law would change the trajectory for youth aging out of care, creating a province where youth aging out of care have the chance to thrive, not just survive.

Solutions for Service Sector

Despite a large portion of recommendations featured throughout this section being made with the youth-serving sector in mind, we recognize the importance of the provincial government's role in actualizing them. As funding is highly competitive, the Province should support the delivery of these recommendations through sustainable investment for organizations already doing similar work in their communities or for new multi-year projects. Government has a key role in supporting the recommendations outlined through this report through active cross-collaboration with the youth serving service sector and youth with lived expertise, being flexible to adapt and change alongside the needs of communities as they evolve.

Housing

Every youth who spoke at the conference has navigated accessing services throughout their journey, all shared the role service providers have played into their stories. The young leaders shared both positive and negative experiences from receiving professional support when trying to obtain housing.

Recommendations

1. Service providers to consider hiring staff with lived expertise and knowledge of community resources and provincial systems navigation.
2. Implement low-barrier eligibility housing models that focus on empowering youth challenged by their mental illness and substance use that meets youth where they're at.
3. Develop transition plans in collaboration with youth that focuses on developing circles of care to support their housing, mental health, and substance use support needs.
4. Service providers to consider housing as a right for all youth regardless of personal circumstances.
5. Implement the Housing First model when working with and supporting youth.
6. Develop housing programs that enable safe substance use in addition to developing housing options that do not enable any substance use.

7. Service providers being trained in Non-Violent Crisis Intervention and de-escalation practices.
8. Implement housing and support programs that ensure youth on waitlists for housing and graduates of said housing can still receive support from program caseworkers.
9. Service providers to support youth to advocate for their rights and responsibilities to landlords.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of youth in housing related to mental health, substance use, addiction, and trauma. The following themes emerged:

- Youth mental health and addiction housing
- Understanding trauma in housing youth

One major solution youth shared is having service providers that are knowledgeable and have lived expertise when providing housing. They shared this was especially helpful when service providers provided specific support for people who have **Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**, **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**, **gender dysphoria**, and **People of Color (POC)** whilst ensuring trauma-informed practices.

Youth Mental Health & Addictions Housing

Youth who experienced barriers such as mental illness and addiction shared the importance of being able to access housing that empowered and supported them through their journey. These youth highlighted how imperative it was that housing services didn't penalize those who continue to use and struggle to manage the symptoms of their mental illness. A solution to this includes allowing youth to remain in housing programs longer if they are not yet ready to transition into independent living. An important factor to this is helping youth to look for long-term or permanent housing after leaving the program while they are still accessing the services, creating a transition plan for youth that provides both mental health and substance use support in conjunction with housing support.

When communities provide wraparound support, they are removing barriers for youth by supporting and empowering them to manage their symptoms, learn life skills, and access harm reduction if they choose to. By meeting them where they are at, service providers can help youth build trust within themselves and confidence in their ability to maintain healthy skills to navigate further barriers.

In Fialka's experience, she had been going to the BGC (formerly known as the Boys and Girls Club) for mental health and addictions support for years between two counselors, one of whom helped her off the streets into housing. They provided support and extended care to Fialka beyond their age mandate which was essential for Fialka in her recovery and prevented her from re-experiencing homelessness. One of the BGC counsellors brought Fialka a job opportunity to gain research skills and subsequently employment at McCreary Research Centre Society which helped her attain other job opportunities over the years. This experience is a key example of how providing care beyond the confines of age mandates can create beautiful opportunities and life-long friendships that substantially change a youth's trajectory. It provides hope to youth that their supports truly care and helps them find and pursue their own purpose.

It was echoed by many youth that youth housing is a right, meaning youth deserve to be housed even if they are using substances, experiencing a mental health crisis, or chronic mental illness. Working from a Housing First Model is important to ensuring youth have a safe and stable place to work on their mental health, recovery, or use safely if abstinence isn't their chosen form of recovery. This includes ensuring youth transition to safe supportive housing if they relapse while in dry housing, rather than just discharging youth with no support or new housing obtained. Some solutions youth shared were providing wet and dry housing so youth had a choice in a housing option that felt safe to them. Choice is invaluable to youth in recovery, so by requiring that there are enough options for different types of housing in each community ensures youth have autonomy in their mental health or substance use journey. Housing youth in recovery who are trying to stay sober with other youth who continue to use can create an unsafe and triggering environment during their recovery.

> *"Experiencing housing insecurity frequently trained my brain into having behaviours or instincts more ingrained. It caused symptoms of complex trauma and impacted my attachment style"* (Hedch, 2023).

> *"Youth may struggle financially because of their addiction, making it difficult to pay rent and other finances such as bills and groceries. It is also difficult for youth to find affordable housing that provides onsite substance use support and safe consumption sites, creating barriers for youth to access the supports they need while still experiencing substance use and not in a place to start their recovery journey. There is also a correlation between relapse and accessing youth housing that doesn't provide a supportive space for youth in recovery to be away from their relationship with the street and peers who are still using substances"* (Hodgkinson, 2023).

Understanding Trauma in Youth Housing

Youth who are living in a trauma response experience high levels of cortisol due to the chronic toxic stress of constant fight or flight. This affects the way the brain functions and our ability to respond appropriately and manage emotions. Youth who are homeless or living in unsafe housing situations experience this daily, suffering from the effects both physically and emotionally. Our brains are not built to sustain high levels of cortisol for an extended period of time, resulting in lasting changes to the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and the amygdala. These are the parts of the brain that control our memory and learning as well as how emotions are processed and regulated. These changes can lead to a smaller window of tolerance, especially for youth with under-developed brains, which is used to describe the optimal zone of "arousal" for a person to function in everyday life (Siegel, 2019).

If service providers in housing programs worked from a trauma-informed lens they would better understand that sometimes youth who are advocating for themselves will show heavy emotions such as anger, frustration, and annoyance due to the experience of being misunderstood, judged or unheard. Often in this case a youth is not being aggressive, but rather doing their best to be assertive and advocate for their needs, despite being ignored time and time again. Requiring service providers and ministry staff to be fully trained in de-escalation and Non-Violent Crisis Intervention Training would promote a safer environment for all included, especially in housing programs.

Rather than denying services or discharging a youth due to an incident, service providers would be better equipped on how to handle behaviour that from their perspective, may present as inappropriate. However, from a youth's perspective, this behaviour is a rational response through a lens of trauma and a maladaptive coping mechanism to keep themselves safe.

Additionally, youth recommended implementing continuous and coordinated support by ensuring organizations and ministries practice regular check-ins with youth that are on waitlists, in programming, and youth that are recent program graduates or discharged. This could prevent youth from falling through the cracks. Support from service providers should extend to helping youth learn how to self-advocate for their rights with landlords, acting as a bridge to improved tenant-landlord relations resulting in greater housing sustainability. Within government-funded housing, this would mean opening collaboration between the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, and the non-profit sector to support vulnerable and at-risk youth while ensuring they are receiving safe, adequate, and affordable housing alongside the services they need without fear of homelessness.



Haley shared the impact of homelessness has been presented in many forms, such as paranoia and nightmares about losing housing and the lack of security she feels in keeping her housing. It also creates anxiety around leaving her housing, triggering fear that something tragic will happen to her housing that will cause her to lose it while they are not home.

"There are many skills we have. Some are born of passion, others we learned in dark places, a knowledge that can't be removed no matter how we wish it so" (Hedch, 2023).





PROMISING PRACTICES:

Aunt Leah's Place
Covenant House
Langley Hub
Foundry

Mental Wellness & Disability Services

Recommendations

1. Access to community-wide coordinated wraparound supports, sharing resources to support and reduce barriers for youth.
2. Service providers to consider how they may enroll youth into life skills programs after settling into their housing arrangement.
3. The Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction to consider developing more free treatment options for youth aged 19 - 30 in communities across BC.
4. The Ministry of Education and Child Care to offer training on early symptoms of ADHD and Autism to better identify and support youth who may need a diagnosis.
5. The Ministry of Education and Child Care to develop a system for collaboration with parents for education plans.
6. The Ministry of Health to develop education opportunities and resources for parents to better understand and support their children utilizing the medical system.
7. The Ministry of Health to conduct more research into ADHD and Autism with the goal of developing new diagnostic criteria that considers differences in age, sex, gender, and race.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of youth related to accessing services for mental health and disabilities, including barriers to diagnosis and medical discrimination. From this discussion, the following themes emerged:

- Wraparound mental illness and disabilities services
- Diagnosis and access to services
- Self-diagnosis with ADHD and Autism
- Ageism, sexism, and ableism in mental health

> *"Throughout the province, youth felt a lack of wraparound support services was a significant barrier impacting their ability to leave homelessness. Youth talked about their need to have comprehensive supports that create a sense of belonging for those coming out of homelessness and their need for a wraparound support network that mirrors positive family support"* (McParland, 2020).

Wraparound Services for Mental Illness & Disabilities

The way the systems across BC are run is not done with 'everyone' in mind, often excluding considerations for youth with disabilities, whether developmental, mental, or physical. Within the social services field, organizations have been slowly growing to encompass wraparound services for youth because of the existing gaps and barriers youth encounter when navigating or advocating for adequate services. However, we recognize organizations often operate with limited capacity and resources, in which we recommend that youth voices be at the center of decision-making to identify the most crucial services for providers to prioritize.

When youth working on LTW were asked what does wraparound support look like to them, these are the common types of supports or services they considered should be part of wraparound care:

- *mental health services;*
  - *ex. counselors onsite of youth service organizations;*
- *substance use support and harm reduction supplies;*
- *employment supports;*
- *staff support in navigating and accessing dental care and healthcare providers;*
- *full medication coverage;*
- *financial supports;*
  - *ex. workers from Income Assistance available;*
- *support in getting set up for all benefits a youth are eligible for;*
- *cultural supports;*
- *community meals and kitchens;*
- *accessible showers;*
- *community closets (clothes);*

Given the lack of resources in the social services sector, the youth recommend organizations to develop wraparound supports through community-wide coordinated access, sharing limited resources and supports to help reduce barriers for youth. Oftentimes, youth have to go door to door, retelling their stories just to find the right service; however, coordinated access ensures every door is the right door. An example of this is the WRAPFORCE coordinated access table started by A Way Home Kamloops Society. Youth-serving organizations in Kamloops, BC, meet twice a month to share referrals and determine how to best prioritize and support youth needing housing and other wraparound support, discussing which organizations have available units or relevant services.

This helps to stop youth from falling through the cracks and going unnoticed in the community. A way to help youth after helping them to acquire help and housing is to offer life skills programs to youth who struggle with mental health and disability so they can learn how to live better independently.

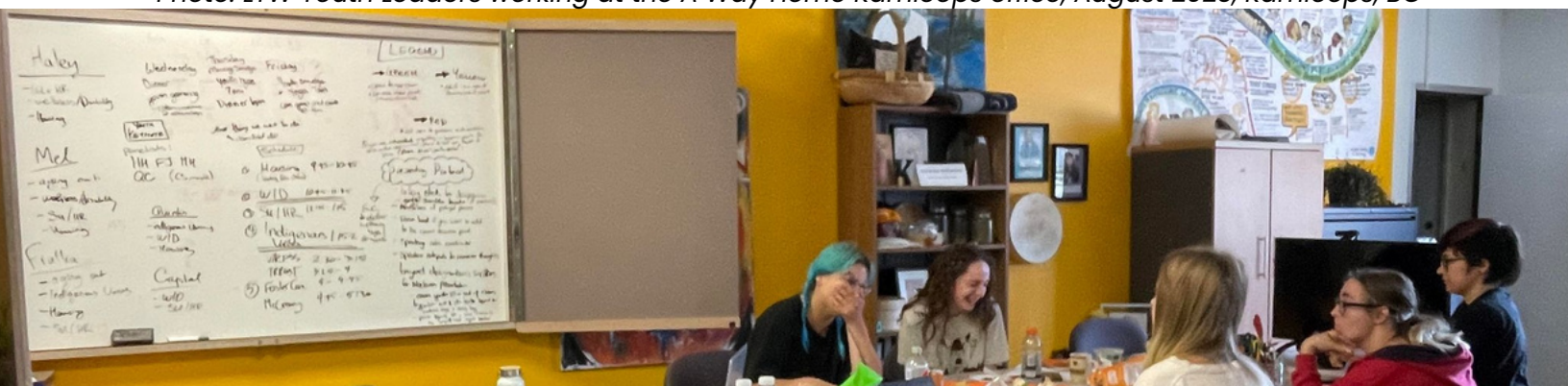
PROMISING PRACTICE:

"Every Door is the Right Door is an initiative of the Chilliwack Child and Youth Committee to ensure that children, youth and their families are receiving the support they require in a timely manner. No matter which agency door a client may knock on, they will be directed to the services that best meet their needs" (Chilliwack Child and Youth Committee, n.d.).

Diagnosis and Access to Services

Mental health, like many things, exists on a continuum. Historically, British Columbia has not implemented a preventative approach to healthcare but has a 'band-aid' approach that makes access to services competitive, rife with lengthy waits for free services, or expensive costs for services through private practice. Offering support to people before they are in crisis, such as when the first signs appear, is an upstream and preventative approach to wellness. Early screening can help to accommodate young kids and youth throughout their life and even prevent harmful coping mechanisms from developing simply because there was no other way to help themselves. However, for systems to become more accessible and eliminate barriers, the provincial government needs to commit to massive overhaul of how access is handled through public health authorities, private sector, and invest greater amounts to reduce waitlist times.

Photo: LTW Youth Leaders working at the A Way Home Kamloops office, August 2023, Kamloops, BC



One youth experienced tremendous barriers in navigating and accessing a much-needed resource for their healing, **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)**. They spent 8 years searching for a free DBT group offered through Interior Health to only be able to find a subsidized group after they moved cities into a new health authority's jurisdiction. In the time this youth was searching, they had been cycled through multiple psychiatrists, many of whom were unhelpful, and were forced to attend public health group therapy while on a waitlist for a service that never was made available. This group was based in **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** but had new participants every week as it was open to the public. Interior Health required group participants to attend twelve weeks of open group, before being able to move into a closed group, then completion of the closed group before they could be eligible for the treatment they required from a counsellor. The youth found it difficult to attend the open group because it was for all ages but they were often the youngest one present. They were unable to feel safe or comfortable sharing about themselves or participating in activities due to the inconsistency and lack of ability to predict what kind of people would be present each week, who might know their family or parents and break confidentiality, and the general anxiety of a being in an unknown clinical space with strangers under the expectation to focus on healing.

Additionally, they found a majority of the material being discussed or shared about CBT to be invalidating to their emotions and experiences as a youth with **Borderline Personality Disorder**. This youth was unable to complete even half of the minimum number of weeks required to move into a closed group, thus they were never able to receive the crucial service they needed for their mental illness. Though it took just under a decade, they recognized it was still a privilege to be able to eventually leave and access new services which many youth living in the Interior are not ever able to do, thus being left without adequate services. They further reflected and realized that if they had been able to find appropriate therapy sooner, they also would have had two less attempts on their own life. This youth said what would have helped them most, was greater options for free treatment within their community specific for youth between the ages of 19 - 30. Having a 'one-size fits all' approach to mental health services is widely inadequate and will often isolate or leave those beyond typical diagnosis of anxiety or depression without appropriate or relevant treatment options.

Around the age of five to nearly seventeen Quintin dealt with anxiety that was so severe it would lead to frequent panic and anxiety attacks. He has been dealing with depression since he was six years old and has struggled to find a way to deal with it due to not receiving proper assessments and support. What would have helped him early on in school as well as out of school was proper assessments early and regular therapy for C-PTSD/PTSD, both of which would have reduced the long-term effects of dealing with the trauma in his life.

Ensuring young children are screened at an early age for any developmental disabilities can work as a preventive approach to misdiagnosed mental illness. This involves ensuring educators in the school systems are fully trained and educated on the early warning signs and symptoms of disabilities such as **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** and **Autism**. Additionally, developing a community approach between doctors, practitioners or psychologists, and the teachers to put in place a system for collaboration to work with parents would create opportunities for individual education plans. This puts the responsibility on the parents to get their children screened for any developmental disabilities that affect their ability to do well in school before they have the chance to fall through the cracks and go unnoticed due to lack of education and awareness for parents. One youth, based on their own experiences, believes that parents not getting their children screened early is a form of child neglect. Alternatively, a way to prevent this from happening, to the best of people's abilities, is to have free resources for parents so they can get help for their kids earlier on in life. Once parents have the education and awareness from the free resources, the parents of kids with suspected developmental disabilities would be able access diagnosis and resources available due to the community approach put in place.



Self-Diagnosis with ADHD and Autism

Self-diagnosis is widely accepted among the ADHD and Autism community. It is recognized that the lack of accessibility to diagnostic services is a barrier many people face. In BC specifically, you can only access free diagnostic assessments through the British Columbia Autism Assessment Network until the age of nineteen. After the age of nineteen accessing an Autism Diagnosis can cost an estimated $2000 - $3500 through a private practice, there are no government funded resources. Additionally, receiving an ADHD diagnostic assessment requires access to a general practitioner that is informed and educated about ADHD, specifically ADHD in adults. Often youth that are nineteen and older who are seeking an ADHD or Autism diagnosis have to repeatedly advocate for themselves and request an assessment multiple times before actually receiving one. Furthermore, due to the lack of education and research on ADHD and Autism in young adult women, non-binary and trans folks, many youth experience years of misdiagnosis with mental illness' such as depression, **Bipolar Disorder Type 1** and **Type 2**, and Borderline Personality Disorder.

"If there was more education around ADHD/Autism, especially in young women and more accessibility in getting a diagnosis as an adult female there would be less misdiagnosis and more accurate support for individuals that got to the root of the cause. Having a doctor that listens during the adolescent years would mean young adults wouldn't have to live with a self-diagnosis and could access better support" (Hodgkinson, 2023).

Haley shared that it took her ten years to receive a proper diagnosis for ADHD after seeing four different psychiatrists, two psychological evaluations and five years of counseling. She was misdiagnosed multiple times, first with depression, then Bipolar Disorder Type II, and most recently Borderline Personality Disorder before finally receiving a diagnosis for Combined ADHD at the age of twenty-three. Haley shared that she had to advocate for herself over and over again while trying individual counselling, group therapy such as CBT and DBT, and taking multiple different types of medication throughout the years, many of which did not work.

Her experience was not unlike many youth who also utilize self-diagnosis as a tool. This experience is a perfect example as to why it is important to listen to the youth when they are advocating for themselves. We call it lived expertise because the youth are the experts in their own experience and know themselves better than anyone else. The young leaders believe and advocate for self-diagnosis because it has proven to be lifesaving in many cases, in their and others lives, while they try to navigate a system with so many barriers to proper assessments. Having an adequate diagnosis by a professional is necessary to open more doors for accommodations and financial supports. If a youth is considering they might be Autistic or have ADHD, it is imperative to provide them with the correct diagnostic assessments and resources. Youth who are **neurotypical** do not experience the struggles **neurodivergent** youth face and it is often said by therapists and doctors alike 'if a person is asking themselves if they have ADHD or Autism, chances are they do, neurotypical people don't ask themselves those questions'.

A youth has recognized a pattern of not realizing they needed help until they stepped outside of their insular support system. They had little to compare their own life experiences to, so assumed everyone had similar challenges - with time management for example. In their early twenties they understood these differences were expressions of ADHD. Upon joining groups, they found that they often understood the world differently. Knowing that there was a reason helped give insight into their strengths and how they could mitigate their weaknesses.

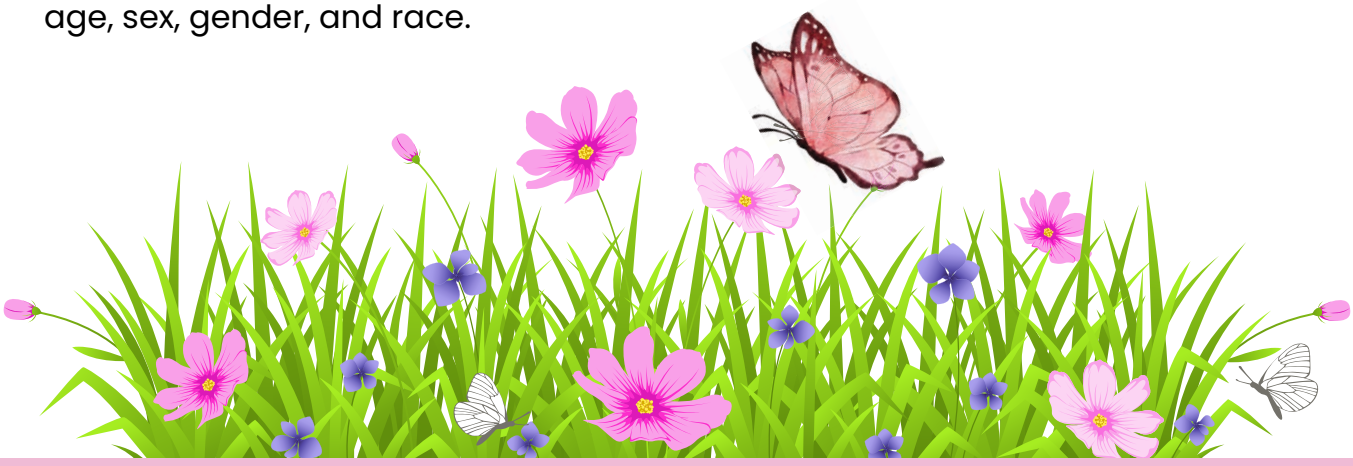


Haley shared that if she had an ADHD or Autism diagnosis as a child and skills to manage the symptoms of her disability, she wouldn't have needed to go through the years of misdiagnosis and unnecessary medication to cope with the symptoms that were exacerbated because of the lack of support for an ADHD and/or Autism Diagnosis.

Ageism, Sexism, & Ableism in the Mental Health Field

The medical and mental health system needs to get a fresh set of eyes on how to better accommodate and meet the needs of everyone, not just able-bodied or mentally well individuals. Alongside ageism, youth with developmental disabilities have to cope with people's reaction to their divergences. These can range from disbelief to contempt or infantilization. Unfortunately, young females, non-binary and trans folks are often subjected to sexism when reaching out for support, often disregarded, and labeled as mentally ill or “hormonal” rather than listened to and properly diagnosed. This applies especially to teenagers who are seeking resources after experiencing symptoms that affect their daily living, leaving many youth without the proper treatment that is imperative to healthy brain development. This results in masking symptoms related to their disabilities to “fit” into a neurotypical world rather than skills to manage and cope with the symptoms rooted in their disabilities.

There’s a prevalent issue in medical research surrounding knowledge of symptoms of ADHD and Autism, having been mostly studied only within young cis-gender boys. This often results in youth not part of that sub-population being denied help simply because their symptoms present differently. If we wish to give every person equal opportunity, we need to stop assuming every person shows symptoms the same way and improve the diagnostic criteria for diagnosing ADHD and Autism. More studies are needed on how symptoms present in diverse populations such those who are diverse in age, sex, gender, and race. Thus, to start a path towards bettering the diagnostic criteria for diagnosing ADHD and Autism, it needs to be expanded to be more diverse and inclusive of variances in age, sex, gender, and race.





Substance Use & Harm Reduction

Recommendations

1. Service providers to improve youth outreach services to reduce overdose fatalities and moments of crisis by increasing hours of service availability and using inclusive youth-specific approaches to support programs.
2. The Provincial Government to fund initiatives that take a preventative approach to serving youth's needs across all sectors in BC.
3. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Housing to develop youth substance use centers made available in all communities that actively collaborates and joins forces with all organizations in each community doing similar work.
4. Establish and adequately fund recovery programs focused on building connections, in particular ones using cultural practice and healing.
5. Models of medical care must take a trauma-informed and harm reduction lens instead of focusing on abstinence-based approaches.
6. The Ministry of Education and Child Care to provide lectures in schools about addiction, harm reduction, and intergenerational trauma.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of youth related to substance use and harm reduction, which informs our above recommendations. In the discussion, the following themes emerged:

- Crisis support
- Cultural support in healing
- Increased access to services
- Education and awareness

Crisis Support

Crises don't happen nine to five. Increasing outreach services is vital to reducing overdose fatalities and moments of crisis youth face while using substances, especially for youth living on the streets. Most youth specific services are only open for a limited amount of time, restricting youth from accessing services if they need it outside the typical work hours.

Although crisis lines exist, youth who are struggling to stay sober experience different struggles than youth who are facing a mental health crisis or suicidal ideation, meaning most crisis line services aren't helpful. Programs like Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous are often geared towards adults and are rooted in religious practices and beliefs, making it an unsafe and unwelcoming place for most youth, especially those who identify as Indigenous or LGBTQ2SIA+.

One youth shared that they felt they stood out in Alcoholics Anonymous since a large portion of the members tended to be men with a twenty-year age difference that had years' worth of sobriety. The difference in age made it challenging to relate as what worked for the older participants was drastically different for the youth. Additionally, the model where relapse is seen as a failure seemed to be more shameful than empowering for their recovery.

Cultural Support in Healing & Recovery

Connection is what is cherished most with Indigenous Peoples, and it reflects in the way they share everything. For someone to get lost off the path or never having been on it, finding a way to connect is important. Healing from what doesn't bring us peace is arduous and many people never find their way home again, this is why having cultural support is very important. This would benefit Indigenous people who want to reconnect and help them with attending cultural events which would help them to build connections in the world with their people. A youth attended a recovery program under Axis Family Services in Kamloops, BC, before 2018, and this helped them to better understand the internal struggles when it comes to addiction and recovery. Despite this program no longer existing, it left a good impression on the youth that attended and still inspires them to push for connection as a means to recovery.

Angell found decolonizing herself and delving into her culture greatly helped improve her journey towards sobriety. As someone she describes having grown up white-washed, adopted into her white family out of care, she had to seek out her own education on Indigenous cultural practices.

When transitioning out of homelessness and leaving an unstable relationship, Angell found the advice of Elders extremely helpful. These relationships and reconnection to culture allowed her to attend sweat lodges and learn how to make Indigenous crafts such as beading or cooking traditional foods. We recommend the Provincial government to support current and new recovery programs focused on building connections, through a cultural healing lens, ensuring these services are available in every community across BC.

Increased Access to Services

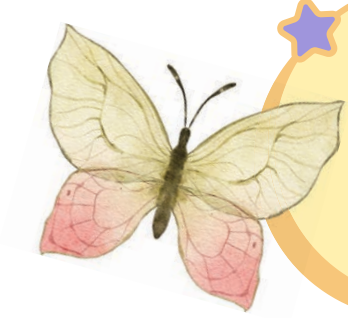
Increasing immediate access to supports such as counselling, detox, and treatment reduces the risk of overdose, relapse, and removes the barriers for youth who are often unable to access services due to waitlists. An important solution to increasing immediate access is increasing government funding, prioritizing a preventative approach for youth specifically. This includes increasing the options of treatment youth can access by providing organizations with the tools and resources they need to adequately support youth experiencing substance use.

In Fialka's experience, she found doctors did not take her pain seriously. When she was recovering from surgeries, she struggled to find affordable alternatives to the narcotic pain relief she was prescribed as lengthy use led to unintentional addiction.

> *"Struggling to find alternatives that don't cost $200 per visit is hard in the Lower Mainland. It just breeds for addiction to happen" (Jack-Flesh, 2023).*

Fialka recommends that alternatives to narcotic pain relief, such as physiotherapy, acupuncture, chiropractic care, and doctors who practice medicine based on cultural knowledge like traditional Indigenous teachings or traditional Chinese medicine, be more affordable and accessible for youth who have a history of struggling with addiction. This could be done through government investment in subsidies or grants for youth to apply for.

Additionally, if the provincial government provided greater investment into youth substance use services, resources such as youth-specific detox centres could be made available in every community. Currently, youth residing in small communities in BC must travel out of town to participate in detox programs, creating barriers for those who may not have the resources or support to physically get there. Having alternatives to detox, such as services focused on reducing use through trauma-informed harm reduction lenses would also be beneficial to meet youth where they are, as not everyone is willing or able to undergo detox followed by maintaining abstinence. Youth require a spectrum range of support as healing and recovery looks different for everyone; no two people's stories are the same nor are their reasons for having used substances in the first place.



PROMISING PRACTICE:

Traverse in Chilliwack is a live-in program in the Fraser Region for youth ages thirteen to eighteen who identify struggling with substance use. Traverse is a free, and voluntary program that allows youth to access the program for up to 6 months (Pacific Community Resources Society, n.d.).

While in hospital receiving treatment for **Cannabinoid Hyperemesis Syndrome**, one youth advocated that she needed help with her addiction to cannabis and requested to be referred to mental health and substance use services in the Fraser Valley. Through the Chilliwack Substance Use and Prevention Services (CAPS) at Pacific Community Resource Society, the youth was able to learn about resources available, with the option of attending an in-person treatment centre or one on one counselling with a substance use counselor. They were able to access free counseling within two weeks of getting sober from cannabis.



Photo: Tranquille, Kamloops, BC

Education & Awareness

One of the best ways to support youth who are experiencing or are at risk of addiction is by providing proper and transparent education in schools about addiction, harm reduction, and intergenerational trauma. This includes increasing awareness about the effects of growing up with a family member who is currently or has previously experienced addiction and the exposure of substance use from a young age. Furthermore, teaching from a harm reduction approach acknowledges that there is a high possibility that within their lifetime a youth may experiment with drugs. Rather than the one size fits all approach of "just say no", youth would be taught about ways to reduce the harms associated with use and provided resources on how to prevent overdose. This also includes teaching youth about the different types of substances, the way they can be used, and the effects each one has. This provides youth with knowledge and awareness of what they are putting in their bodies and the effects it has on their brains. Harm reduction also includes teaching youth about the side effects of using substances while experiencing mental health issues, one example is providing youth with the knowledge of how alcohol is a depressant and can worsen symptoms of depression or anxiety. Another example is how cannabis has a negative effect on the still developing brain and can exacerbate latent mental health concerns like schizoaffective disorders and drug induced psychosis which can have lifelong impacts. One youth mentioned that they struggled with cannabis as their drug of choice and was told that it was virtually impossible to be addicted to it. Claiming cannabis is not addictive negates the reality of those who struggle with their use. It denies users from accessing support services and induces shame. Substance use exists on a spectrum.

Another youth shared that her experience with addiction was rooted in her childhood. Growing up in a family of alcoholics impacted her mental health and the attachment styles she learned. She explained her experience in an unhealthy relationship mimicked a lot of the struggles she faced while dealing with substance use. She shared that her experience with addiction didn't just happen with drugs and alcohol but happened with a toxic relationship, screen time, food, nicotine, and other sources of dopamine seeking that were harmful to her mental health.



Photo: Cooney Bay, Kamloops Lake, BC

Indigenous Voices

Reconciliation

Recommendations

1. The Provincial Government to mandate continuous financial reparations from churches which contributed to the colonization of Indigenous Peoples in BC, redirecting funds into healing, and breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma.
2. Wide coverage of Residential Schools, Starlight Tours, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.
3. Service providers to consider what actions can be taken to acknowledge Indigenous languages and traditions that go beyond Land Acknowledgments.
4. All levels of Provincial Government to support Indigenous sovereignty by working with Indigenous communities to use Municipal and Crown lands to be returned to Indigenous Peoples for them to steward.
5. Provincial Government to become inclusive of Indigenous Peoples by incorporating each Nation's government and ensuring laws or policies uphold Indigenous sovereignty, right to self-governance, and are controlled by Indigenous representatives.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of Indigenous youth with a focus on their solutions for reconciliation.

Impact of Religion & Residential Schools

In the presentation, the impact religion has had on Indigenous People was described, highlighting it needs to not be ignored especially as it resulted in the genocide of Indigenous Peoples since the first colonizers walked onto the Americas soil. The youth spoke on how the impact of residential schools left Indigenous People with intergenerational trauma, stereotypes persisting which harm Indigenous youth, and continuing to be treated like second class citizens.

Residential schools were the final nail in the coffin to how the Indigenous Peoples' way of life was erased by colonizers, from their languages, cultures, lands, rights, children, and belonging to our communities. It is not enough for religious figures to apologize but they must compensate all their victims and their families as well as not be allowed so much power under the government. The youth state religion should not hold any power over Indigenous people or any human rights.

> *"When I was five years old I asked my grandmother what residential schools were and she called it "A hateful place". I saw the tears on my grandmother's face when I asked her more about them and she couldn't explain further" (Courtoreille, 2023).*

The most recent residential school closed in 1997, in Nunavut, and yet the traumas and past are still being denied. Despite how recent residential schools shut down there are still many people who refuse to accept that such a grim thing was caused by racism. This in turn causes a greater divide between Indigenous people and the ancestors of their colonizers.

Residential schools have created long lasting and sometimes permanent effects on Indigenous Peoples. Intergenerational trauma is not exclusive to Indigenous Peoples of Canada, but it is something they have been dealing with since Christopher Columbus crossed over the sea. Residential schools were the final step the colonizers had in mind to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into a more Eurocentric mindset so they would be acceptable to society. Intergenerational trauma is the result of Indigenous Peoples going through waves of genocide.

> *"I don't know my own language and I barely understand my own cultural practices and I can say with confidence now that religion has destroyed everything that I could have known about my people and our ways of life" (Courtoreille, 2023).*

Necessary Steps to Reconciliation

As many steps are needed to mend the ways Indigenous Peoples have been treated, one of the first recommendations from the youth would be intentional land acknowledgments. This would be best done through action in the form of acknowledging the diverse Indigenous languages across Canada and speaking in those languages when acknowledging the lands the Peoples are part of as well as the wrongs done to those people. Because the Doctrine of Discovery was proven to be falsified by the Vatican to acquire lands, we recommend Indigenous Peoples to be given their lands back to steward and ensure full self-governance over again. Furthermore, we recommend recognizing all Indigenous languages in BC as official languages.

Quintin continues to live with the weight of the recent past on his shoulders like many other Indigenous people as they continue to fight against a system that seems to ignore their part in actively causing a genocide of Indigenous Peoples across Canada. We would benefit from a wider coverage of issues pertaining to Indigenous Peoples such as Residential Schools, Starlight Tours, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Lastly, we recommend the Provincial government to dismantle and restructure to be inclusive of Indigenous Peoples, each Nation's government, and ensure laws or policies pertaining to Indigenous Peoples are not voted for without Indigenous governance. As a bare minimum, we believe reconciliation should never be performative and the government should uphold decolonization by taking proactive steps to collaborate, respect, and honour the desires of Indigenous Peoples.

Photo: LTW Youth Leaders on a land-based healing trip, August 2023, Kamloops, BC



Decolonization

Recommendations

1. Provincial Government to bring full education of colonization and the knowledge of history that led to Indigenous people being over-represented in almost all forms of need across all government systems and public education.
2. Include Indigenous governments, groups, organizations, and individuals in the decision-making process in systems of care that will support Indigenous people.
3. The Provincial Government to consider funding all forms of therapy to Indigenous people in BC to compensate for the abuse and neglect experienced from colonization.
4. The Provincial Government to develop greater subsidy support for Indigenous youth in BC to go towards rent, food, other necessities, and cultural needs.
5. The Provincial Government to develop programs that support Indigenous youth's recreation and travel to their home communities to maintain community connections.
6. BC Corrections to identify how they may better support Indigenous youth in the justice system.
7. BC Corrections to implement more restorative justice programs that support Indigenous youth.
8. Provincial government to create a trauma-informed and relationship-based framework in engaging with Indigenous youth. This approach involves transparent practices, clear explanations, and a commitment to acknowledging historical trauma.
9. Implement tailored support services that go beyond generic approaches, including acknowledging individual needs, preferences, and circumstances.
10. The Provincial Government to disrupt the cycle of intergenerational trauma to Indigenous youth by looking to rebuild systems of care with an Indigenous lens.
11. The Provincial Government to develop mechanisms that ensure Indigenous youth leave care with wraparound supports.
12. The Ministry of Child and Family Development to release a copy of all case notes from when the youth was in care to said youth upon aging out.
13. The Ministry of Child and Family Development to enhance their psychiatric screening process for foster parents to reduce the risk of abuse to youth.
14. The Ministry of Child and Family Development ensuring that eligible Indigenous youth are being connected to their local Delegated Aboriginal Agency to utilize safe housing environments that support Indigenous youth's foster care arrangement.

15. All Government systems of support should include maintaining a youth's connection to Indigenous community as a positive health factor and embed funding to support this need.
16. The Ministry of Housing to work with Indigenous housing providers to develop more Indigenous youth housing options, especially for Two-Spirit and/or traumatized youth.
17. The Provincial Government to develop more connections for Indigenous youth to cultural opportunities, especially for Two-Spirit youth who may not have information on their culture and how they fit into it.
18. Housing for Indigenous youth should be required to use a decolonized model of youth housing that promotes community-driven solutions, optional trauma-informed services, cultural preservation, and empowerment that respect cultural heritage, foster inclusivity, and empower Indigenous youth.
19. Implement more sustainable, subsidized housing where youth assume responsibility for rent and independence upon aging out, provides a clear transition pathway, minimizing relocation and ensuring ongoing support.
20. Youth in care should have clear ways to hold the Ministry of Child and Family Development accountable through publicly sharing their experiences and stories while being in care.
21. Create a diverse Indigenous Youth Advisory Council within the provincial government and in partnership with local First Nations governments that assists in all governmental development, policies, or other processes which impact Indigenous people the most.
22. Support community engagement and mentorship initiatives using informal, supportive relationships and a circle of supportive adults to mitigate social isolation while fostering sustainable models without oppressive dynamics for youth.

Discussion

In this section, we will share the lived experiences of Indigenous youth, highlighting the barriers associated with colonial systems and how to decolonize them. The following themes are highlighted throughout this discussion:

- Decolonization of language, land, and providing financial reparations
- Decolonizing the justice system
- Keeping Indigenous youth in their communities, with a focus on culturally safe housing
- Representation in policy, decision-making, and news

The act of decolonizing will not be easy but it's necessary if there's any hope of moving forward, especially with the knowledge of how power in the wrong hands can prove detrimental to so many people. The starting point is with acknowledgment of the wrongdoings which led to the first treaties that took advantage of the naivety and language barriers of the First Peoples. In the times when the first treaties were made across Canada, the language barrier between Indigenous people and their colonizers made it very easy for colonizers to take advantage and deceive them, promising something very different from what happened. From that point on Indigenous people have lost the lands they stewarded and cared for, some still up to the present day. Returning the land to the hands of those who were here first requires the provincial government to return leadership to Indigenous Peoples who can show how to govern the land and the people so that everyone can live in equality. This means having Indigenous Peoples lead and show how current systems in place are not designed with them in mind but are often historically designed to further discriminate.

To Quintin, colonization is still alive and thriving. He feels that there is very little to nothing being done to change this and shared at the conference that he and his people's colonizers stole everything from them. The youth shared that compensation for those abused and neglected as a result of colonization is required to move towards true reconciliation. There is a need for greater support for Indigenous youth across all areas of their lives and finances for their ensured survival. Support for recreation and travel as well would benefit youth and help them to forge further connections within Canada and other countries. Ultimately, the only way to properly change how much colonization has integrated itself into our society and systems would be to completely dismantle how we govern and recreate the systems with everyone in mind.

One youth shared that there's a need for anti-discriminatory systems to filter people's race, names, and gender/sex (except for medical reasons) to greatly reduce the gentrification, discrimination, and alienation from society that Indigenous Peoples experience. They believe by reducing this it would help with getting the help and support Indigenous Peoples deserve.

Within the Justice System

Within the Justice system, reconciliation is needed for Indigenous youth as Indigenous Peoples are over-represented in prisons, though make up only a fraction of the overall population. Youth at the conference shared how the justice system has treated and continues to treat Indigenous Peoples, which is very showing of how the justice system and many who operate under it views Indigenous Peoples as a whole.

Angell has had more bad experiences with the police than good experiences. Some of them involved racism, ageism, or assumptions from the police officers. She shared her experience of the night when she was thrown into the 'drunk tank' and experienced verbal abuse and physical assault that resulted in her shirt being ripped. She was not given anything to cover herself until she was processed and put into the cell. Luckily, the court system saw Angell had no previous criminal record, and instead of giving jail time, she completed courses on respectful relationships and restorative justice facilitation. In doing so, Angell managed to get away from her abuser and hasn't had any legal problems since. Despite these traumatizing incidents with the police, Angell used her experiences to become an advocate to raise awareness in her work later. From 2020 - 2021, she worked with BC Corrections to share her expertise with an educational webinar on how to better support youth that was used in provincial-wide training.

Restorative justice is a key idea for supporting Indigenous youth within the criminal justice system. When Angell was transitioning out of homelessness and recovering from her previous experience with police, the course on restorative justice facilitation was immensely beneficial as it was based on healing circles that honour and give space for multiple points of view. Angell believes this is imperative as Indigenous people are over-represented within the criminal justice system and are incarcerated at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous people (Robinson, Small, Chen, & Irving, 2023). She believes restorative justice could be a good solution to drastically lowering the criminal rate of Indigenous people. She shared at the conference how it should be a mandatory step before Indigenous youth are convicted with jail time. As Angell said, "It's a chance to reconnect and make amends with one's community as well as help mend intergenerational trauma between Indigenous communities and the court systems."

Even though restorative justice is a promising way to evolve how the criminal justice system works with Indigenous Peoples, the fear and paranoia may always remain with those affected by what has happened with police. The youth advocate that the best way forward to stop this cycle of harm from perpetuating is to dismantle and rebuild the system so that future generations will have the chance to experience peace as everyone should. The only way forward is to treat all Indigenous Peoples with fairness by not constraining them to stereotypes or assuming they all turn out the same.

Photo: LTW Youth Leaders on a land-based healing trip, August 2023, Kamloops, BC



Keeping Youth in Community

One solution that could benefit Indigenous youth in care is by ensuring all records of care for current and former fostered Indigenous youth are released to them. We recommend these documents are ready to be provided to youth after aging out, and to create a streamlined process for former Indigenous youth in care to request their records. These records of care tend to hold all information regarding the youth throughout their time in care. Youth deserve the choice to see what their workers and foster parents had noted on them during their time in care. One youth states that, "It is eye opening to see your past from an outsider's perspective even if it is not always a positive one". The records of care can also help outsiders who have never spent time in care to understand and better emphasize the poor living conditions some of these youth had to live through if they choose to share their stories. Providing youth a record of their care also gleans insight on any diagnosis they received but were never informed of.

Additionally, the youth recommended having comprehensive psychological screenings for foster parents to prevent Indigenous children and youth from experiencing neglect, thus improving child safety as a priority in the system. When placing youth in the care of foster parents, their safety must always come first and to ensure this every foster parent needs to go through periodic but unpredictable psychological evaluations to confirm they are stable enough to care for kids. Providing a one-time assessment is inadequate because people's mental stability can unpredictably change or evolve over time. This is just one way that child care services can support the safety of Indigenous youth in care. Because they are a vulnerable population who are often exploited, their words aren't often believed.

The youth emphasize another way to protect Indigenous youth in care is by ensuring Indigenous communities are the ones to identify the safest housing and be the decision-makers on foster placements. Bill C-92, '*An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*', is the law that protects Indigenous Peoples rights to make decisions regarding childcare for their children.

"Through the Act, national principles such as the best interests of the child, cultural continuity, and substantive equality have been established to help guide the provision of Indigenous child and family services. The Act also enables Indigenous groups and communities to transition toward exercising partial or full jurisdiction over child and family services at a pace that they choose" (Indigenous Services Canada, 2019).

While the point of making sure the child or youth returns to their community is valiant and righteous, sometimes it isn't a possibility which leads to helping maintain a kinship and connection to the community which is the next best thing. To make the best of removing a youth from their community MCFD should be maintaining contact with the youth's community. With this established contact in place, Indigenous youth will still have the chance to learn about their culture and maintain a connection to the people and land they came from which is something very uncommon in the child services field. In making sure MCFD puts all their effort into maintaining this connection for the youth it prevents them from losing their identity and culture.

Youth should not be aging out on their birthday but when they are ready; being flexible to the needs of Indigenous youth and providing support before, during, and after the transition. Indigenous youth who have different needs and struggles that should be fully recognized and supported. Everything in the world is going to be harder for Indigenous youth from housing, employment, education, and accessing services in their communities. This is why aging out when a youth is ready and has support in place for a smooth transition is important to ensure no youth ages out into homelessness.



Photo: Cooney Bay, Kamloops Lake, BC

Culturally-Safe Housing

For youth-specific housing, there needs to be steps taken to ensure it is culturally safe and stable for youth to live comfortably. Safe housing must include having culturally and trauma informed supports and housing options to meet the needs of youth, especially Indigenous, Two-Spirit, and/or traumatized youth. In many youths' experiences there has been a gap in housing and services for youth who need better accommodations to their trauma, culture, and identities tied to their cultures. These services are being cut off too soon for youth who may need further support. Youth working towards recovering from trauma that need housing specific to them should be taken into consideration when creating supportive housing. As well, the differences in POC youth and non-POC youth should be acknowledged, such as supporting POC youth in having housing that reconnects them to their culture without any discrimination, ensuring the staff utilize proper culturally informed practices. Having housing staff and wraparound supports who identify as or are an active part of the youth's culture or community are best to create genuine culturally based relationships. This can help guide youth in their journey towards reconnection to their community's cultural and traditional practices.

More opportunities to connect Indigenous youth to cultural opportunities and receive help to meet their needs is a crucial element to their wellness, especially for Two-Spirit youth who may not have information on their culture and how they fit into it. When it comes to building housing specific to Indigenous Peoples, consideration to the land and the people who live there is needed to understand how different colours and materials are significant to them. The placement of housing on land is also of importance, knowing the history is necessary to properly pay respect to the land before breaking ground.



Photo: Cooney Bay, Kamloops Lake, BC

Representation

As an active step towards reconciliation, listening to the youth and prioritizing them is crucial. We recommend ongoing check ins with current youth in care to be more meaningful as it would close the gaps between workers and youth. Having meaningful connection means everything to Indigenous youth, especially when they grew up in a community and moved into a more individualistic society. Seeing a society that doesn't care for one another like Indigenous people do can cause the youth to become more alienated. Listening to youth should include publishing and releasing the stories of any youth that wants their story out there.

The youth shared that the best way to give youth back their voices is that youth must be present in the government so they can help watch over their own people and needs. A good way to do this would be to have a government equivalent of a student council. It would be diverse youth across the Province so that their voices would be put first. Any laws or regulations should first be put through Indigenous lenses before it is sent to be reviewed and implemented.

Photo: LTW Youth Leaders and AWHK Staff on a land-based healing trip, August 2023, Kamloops, BC



Solutions from VACFSS YAC

Written by VACFSS Youth Advisory Committee

Key Issues:

Historical Trauma and Displacement: Indigenous youth face the enduring impacts of historical trauma and displacement, leading to challenges in holistic well-being, housing instability, and a lack of support systems.

Limited Support Post-Care: There is a significant gap in support for Indigenous youth once they leave the care system, resulting in increased vulnerability, social isolation, and the perpetuation of systemic issues.

Need for Culturally Relevant Practices: Generic, non-culturally sensitive approaches fail to address the unique needs and diverse experiences of Indigenous youth, hindering effective solutions.

Lack of Sustainable Housing Pathways: The absence of clear, sustainable housing pathways contributes to ongoing displacement, hindering the ability of Indigenous youth to establish stable foundations for their futures.

YAC Solutions:

Trauma-Informed and Relationship-Based Frameworks: YAC advocates for a trauma-informed and relationship-based framework in engaging with Indigenous youth. This approach involves transparent practices, clear explanations, and a commitment to acknowledging historical trauma.

Tailored Support Services: Recognizing the diverse experiences of Indigenous youth, YAC calls for tailored support services that go beyond generic approaches. This includes acknowledging individual needs, preferences, and circumstances.

Decolonized Model of Youth Housing: YAC proposes a decolonized model of youth housing that promotes community-driven solutions, optional trauma-informed services, cultural preservation, and empowerment. This model aims to create housing solutions that respect cultural heritage, foster inclusivity, and empower Indigenous youth.

Sustainable Housing Pathways: YAC highlights the success of the Luma housing partnership, offering a sustainable, subsidized housing pathway. This model, where youth assume responsibility for rent and independence at nineteen, provides a clear transition pathway, minimizing relocations and ensuring ongoing support.

Community Engagement and Mentorship: YAC emphasizes the value of informal, supportive relationships and the importance of a circle of supportive adults. Strengthening support networks through community engagement and mentorship mitigates social isolation, fostering sustainable models without oppressive dynamics.

Implementation Steps:

Policy Development: Develop policies that integrate trauma-informed and relationship-based frameworks into social work practices, ensuring that Indigenous youth receive transparent and culturally sensitive support.

Resource Allocation: Allocate resources for tailored support services, acknowledging the diverse needs of Indigenous youth and ensuring that resources are available to address individual circumstances.

Collaborative Housing Initiatives: Collaborate with organizations like Luma housing to establish more sustainable housing pathways. This involves supporting initiatives that provide clear transition plans, cultural enrichment, and ongoing community support.

Community-Based Programs: Invest in community-based programs that promote mentorship and informal support networks for Indigenous youth. These programs should focus on fostering a sense of belonging and providing culturally relevant guidance.

Cultural Competency Training: Implement cultural competency training for professionals working with Indigenous youth. This ensures that service providers have a deep understanding of the historical context, cultural sensitivity, and the unique needs of Indigenous communities.

By addressing these key issues and implementing the proposed solutions, the provincial government can contribute to a more comprehensive and effective approach to supporting Indigenous youth in their transition from the care system, fostering reconciliation, and creating tangible pathways to holistic well-being and sustainable futures.

Photo: VACFSS YAC, Elder April Bennett, & Staff on YAC Retreat, September 2023





Photo: LTW Youth Leaders on a land-based healing trip, August 2023, Kamloops, BC



Youth Voices of Resilience Quotes

In the Youth Keynote at the Conference, the youth leaders shared *how service providers and government can support, empower, and uplift youth to channel their passion and expertise for change?* This is what they had to say:

Haley said:

"Service providers and government officials can support us by LISTENING to us and involving us in the process of the decisions being made ABOUT us and our care, access to services and needs to live a healthy life. They can empower us by ensuring that our stories are validated, and work is done to change what needs to be changed so we no longer navigate a broken system. They can uplift us by being mindful of the fact that we are the future generation and decisions that are made about the present and future AFFECT us the most. We are the ones affected by the decisions made that have caused us to live during a housing crisis, affordability crisis, mental health crisis and an opioid epidemic. Government can step up and create a better province for us to live in that ensures NO YOUTH EXPERIENCES HOMELESSNESS and a provincial plan is put in place to change our trajectory. Service providers can help us by holding each other and the government accountable in creating better access to resources, less barriers to support services and a more inclusive environment for us to live in. We didn't have a voice in how we live in the present, at least give us a voice in how we live in our futures. We want to THRIVE, not just survive."

Quintin said:

"The government must put youth on the same level as themselves; after all, they are going to be the ones paving the future and living in it. The government needs to show the statistics on how many youth they have failed to help and take action to fix the hole in the net. They need to stop ignoring the homeless because homeless youth turn into adults. Find the core reason(s) they end up on the street and fix it. Homeless people are an effect of capitalism and human greed. It's time to fix it and work on viewing people with empathy again."

"The last year of aging out is the critical spot. There can be no time wasted and this is when the government needs to make sure the youth are thoroughly prepared. If a worker is on vacation time, give that youth someone else to continue working with them. There cannot be slacking on this because it is a matter of life and death."

Mel said:

"Imagine going to a social worker - someone who's been trained to work with youth, yet someone who is overworked and underpaid. If you're not someone that presents as capable, knowledgeable, independent, you're just another case number. A sad story: the cycle continues again AND NOTHING CHANGES. You, the social worker, just works within the system. And that youth who is holding onto their sense of independence and dignity comes up to you and asks why their income, their living allowance, has been deducted for an unknown reason. Maybe it was a mistake. All the while they have a nagging voice in their head: 'don't I deserve better?'; 'what if my social worker doesn't like me talking back to them?'. It becomes part of their identity; an identity that mistrusts the system. Mistrusts stability, safety. If they are resilient and are lucky enough to not experience more trauma that part of them shrinks as they have better experiences - some call them moments of wonder."

"I ask all of the professionals here today to understand, to empathize. To allow for wonder and ask curious questions. Cycles repeat. The more aware we become of these actions or inactions and their impact, the more likely we are to grow from it. We need youth, people with lived experience who've been through the system - who know its flaws and advantages to help fix it. Lived expertise is real so give us a place at the table, listen to our voices."

Angell said:

"You can help by listening to us, and our experiences. Truly try and see what we went through. We are all up here bravely sharing our traumas in hopes for a better future. Take what we say here today and at the conference and implement those changes. I'd love to see more youth advisory boards taken seriously, and more made throughout the government. Make sure you ensure the youth don't feel tokenized when advocating for changes in the systemic barriers we face every day. Please don't wait years to take the reports we write to make a change. Ensure that all the workers are trauma informed when working with youth so we aren't further re-traumatized from our experiences. Don't put unsafe people in a power of position where youth feel like they can't advocate for safety and changes. These spaces are supposed to be safe. AND, last but not least, reconciliation for Indigenous youth. as well as some serious changes for us so we can heal from the intergenerational trauma due to the colonization of the government. Even though the conference is coming to an end this is just the beginning of, hopefully, a tidal wave of change. I hope we all leave here today and really be the rock stars Katherine always called us. Katherine had a vision to end it pre-pandemic and we need to get back on that track. While we get to leave this conference homelessness will still be imminent. The suffering doesn't stop just because we leave here today. Katherine always said the government is supposed to be like our aunties and uncles. I hope you take that quote and advice seriously today, and I pray that you stand with us. And you stay rooted in action with us the BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness. As well as standing with us to make Katherine's law a reality, in which I'm incredibly passionate about. Kukstemc, all my relations."

Fialka said:

"Government officials can support youth to channel their passion and expertise for change by allowing us a voice at decision making tables and meetings about youth. Nothing about us without us!!! Allowing us to speak our minds and not be discriminated against for having these opinions. I'd love to see the day that you are a part of all (underline all) decision making tables."

Kira said:

"For years we have been saying LISTEN TO YOUTH. We're here together, listening, but now it's time for action. It was time for action in 2021 when we wanted a Provincial Plan to End Youth Homelessness. It was time for action in 2020 when we stood alongside Katherine, Jennifer Charlesworth, and the RCY for the release of "From Marginalized to Magnified". It was time for action in 2018 when Katherine did her Tedx Talk. It was for time action when we experienced loss, grief, and heartache."

"Put youth into leadership and positions of decision-making power. Not token representation or even as consultants. Mentor youth wholeheartedly, to become the leaders we need in the coming years, because our leaders have time and time again failed through inaction or lengthy-bureaucratic processes. Let us be the leaders we KNOW we can be, recognize where you no longer can be, and give us that opportunity to do it ourselves. Katherine took her opportunity and look at the immense ripple effect that it had for us. Let's continue this legacy together and give youth the platform to make a meaningful change."

To echo Katherine McParland, ministries should act as aunts and uncles who give the benefit of the doubt, a warm hug, and an open ear, like the quirky aunt that always has your back because she's been there. She may have come from a different generation but still remembers what it's like to be alone.



Photo: LTW/HSABC Youth Keynote courtesy of HSABC

As Katherine McParland (2020) stated, "Lived experience must be recognized as lived expertise. This is the silver lining of youth homelessness and why lived expertise must be at the centre of all policy and program development. This provides opportunities for youth to find purpose in their most difficult experiences by creating systemic change and better opportunities for other youth by helping the system learn and change."

As we stated in 2021, we believe the voices and solutions from youth with lived expertise should be informing and leading the changes needed to address, prevent, and end youth homelessness in BC. In our previous report, we had a call to action which we have not yet seen progress on. As such, we have included it in this report.

CALL TO ACTION

We call to action the government of British Columbia and all youth-serving government ministries to support and collaboratively participate in the development of a **provincial plan to end youth homelessness.**

A plan that is informed and led by youth with lived expertise, works with BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness as the driving force behind the plan, and implements this reports recommendations as well as the solutions presented in Katherine McParland's 2020 report, *'From Marginalized To Magnified: Youth Homelessness Solutions From Those With Lived Expertise'* and our 2021 Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit Report, *'Honouring Katherine's Legacy to Light The Way Home'*.

LIGHT THE WAY 2023
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by executive dysfunction occasioning symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity and emotional dysregulation.

Autism - A neurodevelopmental disorder that exists on a spectrum and causes significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. Also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness - Founded in 2017 by Katherine McParland and Fred Ford, the BCCEYH sought to bring together service providers, youth with lived expertise, and government to create collaborative solutions to address, ending, and preventing youth homelessness in BC. Today, the BCCEYH has membership of over 40 youth-serving organizations, Indigenous leadership, and youth with lived expertise.

Bipolar Disorder Type 1 - A Mental Health Disorder that is characterized by extreme mood swings, specifically long periods of highs (known as Manic Episodes) and lows (known as Depressive Episodes).

Bipolar Disorder Type 2 - A Mental Health Disorder that is characterized by extreme mood swings, with less severe and shorter periods of highs (known as Hypomanic Episodes) and lows (known as Depressive Episodes).

Borderline Personality Disorder - A Mental Health Disorder with symptoms that severely impact a person's ability to manage their emotions often attributed to the experience of extreme mood fluctuations, interpersonal instability, chronic emptiness, and impulse control.

Cannabinoid Hyperemesis Syndrome - A condition that chronic, long-term users of cannabis experience with cyclical nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy - A problem-focus and action-oriented form of talk-therapy.

C-PTSD - Complex post-traumatic stress disorder can result from experiencing or witnessing chronic traumatizing events over a period of time than PTSD.

Developmental Disabilities - Neurologically based conditions that are impacted by behavioural, social, learning and language impairments that arise before adulthood.

Dialectical Behavioural Therapy - An evidence-based form of therapy that focuses on four main skills, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, mindfulness and interpersonal effectiveness.

Family Privilege - The benefits, mostly invisible, that come from membership in a stable family (Seita, 2001). Affords a privilege to be able to easily access housing for longer periods of time by living at home, financial support (education, rent, etc.), connections to employment, life skills development, etc.

Gender Dysphoria - The internalized conflict and distress experienced by an individual whose gender assigned at birth does not align with their affirmed gender.

Lived Expertise - Those with lived experience are the experts of their stories and experiences, thus having the expertise to know how best to respond to these experiences. Those who have not lived these experiences have not had to learn to survive, thus do not have the knowledge to know how to navigate or overcome resulting barriers or impacts.

Neurotypical - A term used to describe those with typical neurological functions or development.

Neurodivergent - An umbrella term used to describe those who live with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Inclusive of autism (autism spectrum disorder) ADHD, auditory processing disorder, BPD, Bipolar disorder to name a few.

POC - People Of Colour: Individuals who are not white.

PTSD - Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: developed upon experiencing or witnessing an event that surpasses the mind and bodys' natural coping mechanisms.

Reconciliation - The cleansing of the wrongs done in the past and forgiving for the sake of moving forward together.

Renovictions - When landlords evict their tenants under the premise of renovating the unit.

Tenant Rules - Guidelines enforced by the landlord that tenants must follow.

Tokenism - Involves performative inclusion of members often to placate them.

Wraparound Services - A collaborative effort amongst community organizations that ensures service providers are aware of the resources available in their community in order to connect clients with resources or information without barriers.

Youth Against Youth Homelessness - Originally started as a group of twelve youth leaders with lived expertise that helped shape and drive the development of A Way Home Kamloops. YAYH evolved from volunteer-based support to paid employment opportunities through the Peer Navigation program and the Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit. Youth with lived expertise have been driving the local organization and provincial advocacy since the grassroots beginnings to 2021.

Youth Against Youth Homelessness BC - The fifteen youth leaders who helped Katherine McParland in the development of her February 2020 report, "From Marginalized To Magnified: Youth Homelessness Solutions From Those With Lived Expertise". Supported by Katherine, each youth leader went back to their communities to host youth forums to have youth from their communities voices heard. These youth leaders decided to take on the name YAYH BC in recognition of work done by the local YAYH group in Kamloops.

Youth Homelessness - A youth between the ages thirteen to thirty experiencing unstable, unsafe, inappropriate, unsuitable, or inconsistent housing with or without parents, caregivers and/or support. This definition was created through our work in developing the Youth Homelessness Preliminary Summit.

Youth Housing First - A youth-centered Housing First model to practice, which values providing housing to youth first and then all other supports will follow. Many Youth Housing First programs in BC empower and engage youth with lived expertise to help shape the programs to best fit youth's needs.

Light The Way Employment Support

Below, we will outline the measures we took to uplift, empower, and support the Youth Leaders during their employment on this project. We also share our learning outcomes in areas where additional support would have benefited everyone and what it would have looked like for the youth.

What We Did:

- Created detailed documents for youth and supports to help contextualize the parameters of the project;
- Provided documentation with time to clarify and provide questions and feedback
- Convened a Steering Committee from the BCCEYH to help support the youth and guide the development of the project;
- Convened a Wellness Supports Committee to create wellness plans and safety guidelines for youth at the conference;
  - ex. supporting youth in crisis, recovery, and in safety planning;
- Grief Circles hosted through MRT for youth in processing grief and changes to project;
- Therapy dog and MRT present at the conference with additional counsellors/wellness supports available;
- Colour ribbons system for youth to subtly disclose their comfort level of being approached or talked to during the conference;
- Cultural supports at the conference from the Residential School Survivors Society (through HSABC);
- Flexible work hours for Youth Leaders;
- meeting youth where they're at, allowing youth to step away when needed and to return later back into the work when ready;
- Weekly check-ins leading up to conference with the Project Coordinator;
- Land-based healing trip to Cooney Bay in Kamloops, BC;
- bringing together the Youth Leaders to bond and heal from the land**;**

Learning Outcomes:

- Gap in employment between YHPS and LTW projects;
- A year and a half between work left the youth to have to find other sources of income with little support in between;
- More opportunity for cross-collaboration in conference lead-up;
- Challenges collaborating with partner organization YACs regularly due to busy or conflicting priorities in schedules, miscommunication, and staffing changes;
- Opportunities to check-in with the project manager directly for clarity and guidance could have helped while developing content;
    - ensuring contact is safe to communicate with youth, such as by understanding trauma-informed approaches to working with youth;
- More opportunities to get to know other groups of youth;
- more social gatherings, more time for ice breakers, and socializing at conference;
- Less time constraints between travel to and from venue taking away from social time;
- More opportunity to bring youth leaders together to work in-person;
- Greater support for partner organization YACs at conference;
- ensuring all youth are present during their presentations;
- ensuring they felt comfortable accessing the youth lounge;
- More prevention planning for moments of crisis at conference;
- appropriate trigger warnings;
- more wellness supports available in the room at all times;
- a universal code system for youth to subtly identify needing support;
    - ex. using sign language;
    - prevention and support planning for youth with chronic physical pain;
        - ex. such as having a wheelchair on standby;
    - additional supports available and back-up plans for instances of multiple crises;
        - ex. having a designated support person for each youth they are acquainted and comfortable with prior to event;
    - More support for Youth Leaders and Project Coordinator after staff turnover;
    - ex. hiring a new Peer Navigator or Admin Assistant to assist;

Photo: Light The Way Youth Homelessness Conference, September 2023, Richmond, BC



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